

**Life After Harm: Exploring the Impact of a Restorative Justice Peer Support Group for
People Who Have Sexually Offended**

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

In recent decades, restorative justice approaches such as victim-offender conferences and circle processes have emerged as a response to people who have caused sexual harm. The traditional legal responses to sexual offending are designed to deter, incapacitate, and rehabilitate. Restorative justice, conversely, is fundamentally concerned with fulfilling obligations, meeting needs, and repairing relationships. Relative to other offending populations, people who have sexually offended face numerous challenges including intense feelings of shame, stigma, and isolation. A restorative justice approach, which values respect and advocacy for all persons and prioritizes community, can help reduce negative emotional states, build accountability and prosocial skills, and insulate people who have caused sexual harm from risk factors that could otherwise contribute to the maintenance of offending behaviour. Although a wealth of literature on Circles of Support and Accountability exists, there is limited research on other community-based transitional restorative justice approaches; particularly non-encounter programs that do not directly involve victims of sexual harm. Additionally, there is little research that describes the impact of spaces involving peer support within non-custodial settings for this specific offending population. This case study seeks to address these gaps by capturing the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated group members involved in a community-based, restorative justice-focused peer support group for people who have sexually offended. This study relies on semi-structured interviews with five support group members and two service coordinators from a grassroots restorative justice organization in Ontario, Canada, as well as an observation of a support group session. Specifically, this thesis connects its findings to broader RJ ethos by exploring the effectiveness of the support group in helping group members fulfill their obligations, meeting their needs, and repairing their relationships. Three main findings are revealed. First, the support group provided a safe passage through which group members were able to create accountability. Restorative justice values and norms were mobilized to help group members understand and address the contributing and resulting harms of their sexual offences to prevent further harm. Second, peer interactions in a positive social space facilitated the development of social capital, which helped group members navigate various emotional and structural challenges associated with their reintegration, as well as cultivate a sense of community. Finally, the support group provided an avenue for healing after experiencing a carceral pipeline of marginalization. The criminalization faced by the participants was antithetical to the conditions required for them to prevent further offending. Group members found solace in RJ and through continued participation in the support group, they were able to realize a fulfilling life after harm was possible. Finding hope led them down a journey of personal transformation which positively impacted their relationships outside of the support group and strengthened their ties to their communities. This study concludes with several considerations for policy and practice as well as recommendations for future research.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my dear friend, Kristin Legault, who died in 2022 after a fearlessly fought battle with depression. Kristin was a Western University alumnus and social work student at the University of Windsor prior to her suicide and aspired to become a lawyer. Kristin advocated tirelessly for affordable and accessible mental health care in Ontario. She went beyond simple acts of kindness to provide meaningful and tangible support to those around her. Her happiness when I was accepted into the MA program was genuine and her celebration of my successes and emotional assistance through my own mental health struggles will always be an echo in my ear. While the world may have lost Kristin, her beautiful spirit lives on in the hearts of those who loved her. I am committed to carrying on her legacy of bravery, strength, and unbridled care for others.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In *The Little Book of Restorative Justice for Sexual Abuse*, authors Judah Oudshoorn, Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz, and Michelle Jackett wrote, “to commit a sexual offence takes a certain amount of brokenness” (2015, p. 30). To many, people who have caused sexual harm are wholly monstrous, morally polluted, and threatening to society. Indeed, the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual effects of sexual harm in both the short and long term are devastating. When sexual harm occurs, people are wounded and relationships are broken (Ruth-Heffelbower, 2010). When we think about justice in these cases, images of interrogation rooms, courtrooms, and prisons often come to mind. A challenge would be to think of justice as opportunity, meeting needs, and overcoming our deeply instilled beliefs and attitudes about those who create these wounds.

This thesis explores a creative way in which communities can respond to the issue of sexual harm through a restorative justice (RJ) approach. This study works on the assumption that if we are interested in helping people live crime-free lives, we need to be open to learning from people who have managed to put their lives of crime behind them (Farmer, McAlinden, & Maruna, 2015). As such, this study captures the experiences of five formerly incarcerated members of a peer support group organized by a grassroots RJ organization in Southern Ontario, Canada. Furthermore, this thesis examines how the support group has impacted their lives post-offence. It was guided by the following research question:

How effective is a restorative justice-focused peer support group in helping group members fulfill their obligations, meeting their needs, and repairing their relationships?

Restorative Justice

The presence of harm implies that some form of restoration is warranted. As a definition of RJ, Howard Zehr (2015) offers, “restorative justice is an approach to achieving justice that

involves those who have a stake in an offence or harm to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations in order to heal and put things as right as possible” (p. 48). Whereas the traditional goals of the criminal justice system are to deter, incapacitate, and rehabilitate offenders, the goal of RJ is to repair the harm created by crime and to heal human beings, relationships, and communities (Oudshoorn et al., 2015). The continuous mobilization of RJ, from micro-level disputes between neighbours to macro-level conflict as severe as war, has led to a robust field of scholarship on RJ approaches in a variety of contexts. More recently over the last two decades, academics and practitioners have shown how this approach can be used in cases of sexual harm. Specifically in response to people who have caused sexual harm, the overarching goals of RJ are to fulfill obligations, meet needs, and repair relationships.

Through the literature, we can understand the different types of RJ approaches used to respond to survivors of sexual harm, people who have sexually offended, and communities affected by sexual harm; we can analyze the effectiveness and utility of RJ for these populations; and we can recognize the scope of RJ’s potential and where it might not be so helpful. In relation to RJ approaches for people who have caused sexual harm, the literature has placed heavy emphasis on evaluating and assessing the impact of various RJ approaches, often through a quantitative lens with a focus on reductions in recidivism. There is little qualitative engagement with the voices of people who have caused sexual harm and their experiences with RJ.

Peer Support

Aside from one mixed-methods study by Rye, Hovey, and Waye (2018), the literature has not sufficiently explored the role of peer support in RJ transitional programs—those that transition people who have caused sexual harm from prison into their communities by offering networks of social support. “Peer support” is regarded as a process that involves people, often in recovery,

offering support to others in the same situation (Walker & Bryant, 2013). There is a wealth of literature on Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), a widely known and successful RJ transitional program (Bohmert, Duwe, & Hipple, 2018; Clarke, Brown, & Völm, 2017; Elliot & Zajac, 2015; Höing, Bogaerts, & Vogelvang, 2013; Höing, Vogelvang, & Bogaerts, 2017; Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009). However, circles involve only one person who has caused sexual harm. Aside from studies on group therapy and virtual support groups, there is little information about the ways members of this population can support each other in non-custodial settings.

The act of people who have sexually offended coming together to talk about sexual harm undermines the shame and secrecy of belonging to this social category. Inclusive and supportive relationships are important for those living with a “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1963) but are simply not common for this particular population (Tewksbury, 2012). Therefore, the ability to interact with peers who understand what it is like to navigate life with an undesirable and marginalized social status can be helpful in managing the effects of stigma in a positive way. For instance, a study by Evans and Cubellis (2015) reports that people who have caused sexual harm experience a level of equality and reassurance by talking about comparable experiences without fear of judgment. My thesis provides an in-depth exploration into how people who have caused sexual harm experience peer support in a social space shaped by a RJ normative framework.

A Note on Terminology

In this thesis, the terms “people who have caused sexual harm” and “people who have sexually offended” will be used interchangeably in lieu of the term “sex offender.” This label has been socially constructed to refer to a homogenous group that are depicted as “monsters” and “predators” (Lowe & Willis, 2020) with those who have harmed children being perceived as particularly evil (Gavin, 2015). Spencer (2009) illustrated how Giorgio Agamben’s concept of

homo sacer can be deployed to understand the regulation and treatment of the “sex offender.” Moreover, they are seen as non-citizens with no value, are excluded from the community through notification systems and civil commitment laws, and are exposed to sovereign violence such as GPS monitoring, chemical castration, and vigilante groups (Spencer, 2009). The social location of a person who has sexually offended is influenced by the media, public discourse, and crime prevention strategies largely based on myths about sexual violence (Lussier & Mathesius, 2019).

People who have caused sexual harm have complex and varying early life experiences that have shaped their adult behaviour. Sexual harm is not random. It is a choice that is often informed by unhealthy attachment bonds, poor social and decision-making skills, and unresolved trauma in early life. Researchers have expressed concern over the use of the “sex offender” label in public policy and research (Harris & Socia, 2016). A move toward person-first language combats the overly simplistic understanding of people who have caused sexual harm as being defined solely by their offence. Referring to people who have caused sexual harm as people acknowledges that harm has occurred, while recognizing their full identities. In this thesis, I explore the ethos of RJ which further shapes my language choices. Being intentional and mindful of the language we use can contribute to a culture of care and instill hope for people who are viewed as unchangeable and disposable. Furthermore, this thesis fundamentally rejects the ostracizing “sex offender” label because it does not capture my participants’ diverse human qualities and personal growth. Instead, it recognizes that my participants are people who have created harm and continue to do everything in their power to never make those same choices again.

Contributions

Although this thesis connects its findings to concepts and ideas within the broader RJ literature, the language used reflects the voices of the five men who volunteered their experiences

for this research. The symbolic interactionist approach that this study employed was concerned with presenting their stories to illustrate how they see meaning in the support group and RJ more generally. I followed the insight offered by McAleese and Kilty (2019) who argued that research, particularly the interview, can be a symbolic space for people with lived experiences of punishment to share their stories, which can ultimately help them feel less ostracized. Therefore, I included lengthy quotations to bring their voices to the forefront of this work. Silencing the voices of justice-involved people is normalized in society, yet it is imperative that attention is brought to their experiences of offending and reintegration. This study contributes to the field of criminology by identifying a unique community-led approach that aims to positively reintegrate members of this population, drawing from the lived experiences of those on the receiving end of the approach.

In addition, this study contributes to the existing criminal justice literature that explores the effectiveness of RJ. It offers a thorough discussion of a non-encounter transitional RJ program for a population that has long challenged researchers, clinicians, and criminal justice professionals (Höing et al., 2017). Specifically, it showcases how RJ can be operationalized in a support group setting. It also illustrates how RJ can play a role in helping people who have caused sexual harm develop personal agency and learn to govern themselves effectively if they have meaningful support to lean on. As such, this thesis offers insight into the ways that communities can respond to a population that has been constructed as uniquely dangerous and requiring special management.

My research aims to make a sociological contribution by exposing the reality of what it is like to move through the social world as a person who has sexually offended. My participants frequently spoke about how stigma was a significant barrier for them upon being charged and convicted as it contributed to feelings of shame and isolation. Throughout this thesis, I refer to Goffman's (1963) conceptualization of stigma to make sense of my participants' experiences. This

study, therefore, adds to the existing literature on offenders' perceptions of stigma and collateral consequences, while contributing information on how RJ and peer interactions can help mitigate the negative effects of stigma.

Finally, the methodological choices I made throughout the research process contribute to our understanding of ways to conduct emotionally-demanding qualitative research with vulnerable populations. In chapter three, I discuss the RJ approach I took to conducting this research which involved acute awareness and sensitivity to accountability, power, and relationships. In addition to the aforementioned theoretical contributions, I aim to make a methodological contribution by showcasing how an explicit RJ approach can be mobilized to facilitate a safe and ethical research process for qualitative researchers and their participants.

Roadmap

First, I present a review of the relevant theory and literature needed to contextualize the background, purpose, and importance of this study. The two objectives of this chapter are to present a theoretical framework of RJ and a snapshot of how RJ has been used in cases of sexual harm with people who have offended. The second is to introduce the existing research on support groups for people who have caused sexual harm. I conclude this chapter with an overview of the gaps in the literature, how my study is situated within it, and how it fills the identifiable gaps.

Chapter three presents an in-depth explanation of my methodological approach. It includes an overview of the symbolic interactionist (SI) lens and grounded theory approach I used, the context of this case study, and the RJ approach I relied on. Moreover, chapter three highlights my positionality as a researcher, justifications for my selected research site and sampling procedure, and my data collection and analysis processes.

Chapters four, five, and six are analytical in nature and present my findings by thematic area. First, chapter four presents the role of the support group in creating accountability. This chapter discusses how group members carried out their obligations within the support group by engaging in the mental and emotional work of understanding and addressing the harm they caused and by challenging each other to prevent the harm from reoccurring. Next, drawing from a social capital perspective, chapter five presents my participants' perceptions of the value of peer interactions in helping them navigate some of the emotional and structural challenges associated with reintegration.

Then, chapter six delves into my participants' experiences with the criminal justice system and RJ interventions. It illustrates how carceral forms of punishment were ineffective in promoting their re-entry, healing, and personal transformation. The support group, however, was a space where a future after harm could be realized and true healing could occur as a result. Ultimately, the personal transformation they experienced had a positive impact on their relationships external to the support group and their ties to the larger community. Finally, the last chapter provides a discussion on the key findings and discusses two important implications for practice and policy: 1) RJ processes as a space for symbolic reparation to victims; and 2) questions about the power of RJ in a culture of risk management and preventative governance. This chapter wraps up by presenting the limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2

Theory and Literature Review

In this chapter, I outline the relevant theory and literature necessary to understand the context of group members' experiences in a RJ support group for people who have caused sexual harm. I begin by outlining a brief historical background of RJ. Next, I provide a conceptual framework of RJ as fulfilling obligations, meeting needs, and repairing relationships. While outlining this framework, I introduce some of the barriers that people who have caused sexual harm often confront which can prevent them from having their needs met. I also clarify the use of the term "healing" which is often seen in the RJ literature.

Following this clarification, I introduce some limitations and constraints of RJ. I then move into a discussion that focuses on how RJ has been practiced within custodial and community-based settings with people who have sexually offended. I then approach the topic of support groups and the role of peer support, as well as review the relevant empirical studies that have been done on this topic to date. To conclude this chapter, I address the limitations of the existing literature and how my study addresses these limitations.

Historical Background of Restorative Justice

RJ is a broad concept that seeks to address and prevent harm while moving beyond punishment to view crime as harm done to people and communities. Leung (1999) explains that the North American RJ movement was influenced by four main sources: Indigenous teachings, faith communities (particularly North American Mennonites), prison abolitionists, and the alternative dispute resolution movement. Looking back further, the principles and approaches that are now being used under the RJ umbrella are grounded in ancient codes of conduct and practices used by many religions and ethical traditions (Bazemore, 1998; Van Ness, 1993; Zehr, 1990).

In nearly all acephalous societies, there were two primary responses to crime: vengeance and dispute resolution practices. The former was associated with combating harm with further harm; the latter involved efforts to repair the harm, which today might be considered restorative (Bazemore, 1998; Weitekamp, 1999). Prestate societies preferred reparative responses to crime that aimed to restore community and harmony (Weitekamp, 1999). Restorative principles and community control over justice processes can also be traced back to Indigenous communities (Tauri, 2017) such as the First Nations people of Canada and the United States and the Māori of New Zealand.

RJ in the colonized Western world, however, was not born until the 1970s. Kitchener, Ontario is thought to be the birthplace of the modern RJ movement. As a probation officer at the time, Mark Yantzi arranged for two young men to engage in face-to-face dialogues with people they had victimized, through property damage, as a result of their drunken rampage through Elmira, Ontario. What was an unconventional response to vandalism at the time transformed into a wider movement that proliferated across North America. Today's field of RJ, as Weitekamp and Parmentier (2016) outline, can be differentiated into four main areas: victim-offender mediation, conferencing, peace circles, and large-scale societal conflict.

A Conceptual Framework of Restorative Justice

Since the 1970s, RJ has been extended to more intimate offences such as sexual harm. While we are still learning about how to “do” RJ (Zehr, 2015), evidence points to how valuable RJ approaches can be in these cases. The first RJ initiative that explicitly addressed sexual harm was the Victim-Offender Reconciliation (VOR) Program established by Mark Yantzi shortly after the Elmira Case. VOR programs bring together stakeholders impacted by crime (victims, offenders, community members, police, lawyers, etc.) to meet with trained mediators, where they

discuss their experiences and strive toward reconciliation (Yantzi, 1998; Zehr, 2005). In VOR, all parties have an opportunity to heal through empowerment, truth-telling, answering questions, recovering losses, and reassurance (Zehr, 2005). With that said, RJ approaches are not limited to an encounter between a victim, the person who has offended, and other stakeholders (Zehr, 2015).

In cases of sexual harm, a conceptual framework of RJ involves three central tenets: a) fulfilling obligations; b) meeting needs; and c) repairing relationships. These three areas are discussed below in more depth.

Fulfilling Obligations

A fundamental belief of RJ is that crime creates obligations (Zehr, 2005). The primary obligation is on the part of the person who has caused the harm. They must come to *understand* and *address* the harm they caused to *prevent* the harm from ever happening again (Zehr, 2005). This can also be thought of as the creation of accountability (see more under Meeting Needs). Crime also facilitates obligations on the part of the community. Zehr (2015) defines “community” as places where people live near and with each other, but also as networks of relationships that are not geographically defined. Yantzi (1998) wrote that crime causes disruptions in the community and it should be responded to in three ways: first, by helping restore people who have offended in their communities; second, to restore a sense of community for victims; and third, to repair the damaged community fabric. The community itself must take responsibility by upholding its obligations to help victims receive the support they need and provide a supportive environment for people who have offended to carry out their obligations. Overall, the community’s responsibility is to “attend to the needs to which individuals alone cannot attend” (Zehr, 2005, p. 199).

Some of the discomfort around RJ as a response to sexual harm is that it requires the acceptance that people who have caused sexual harm are not inherently monstrous and we cannot

avoid the problem of sexual harm through humiliation and exclusion (Douard, 2009). We must recognize that they are able to engage in self-reflection and restraint. Retributive justice, which emphasizes individual punishment, is appealing because punitive sanctions affirm community disapproval of harmful behaviour and provide harsh consequences to the lawbreaker (Bazemore, 1998). RJ also emphasizes the community's disapproval for sexual harm. However, it provides an opportunity for accountability. In other words, the person can understand the human consequences of their actions and rectify these actions even if they are incomplete or symbolic (Zehr, 2005).

Yantzi (1998) articulates some RJ principles that are important to rely on when helping people who have caused harm fulfill their obligations. First, people who have caused harm should be treated with *respect*. It is important to value their worth as human beings and respect their rights because they are more likely to acknowledge their wrongdoing if they are treated with respect. Second, the principle of *democracy* rejects labeling, condemning, and authoritarian controls. It encourages voluntariness and empowers people who have caused harm to develop their own goals and internal controls. Third, there must be *advocacy* for everyone in the justice process, including the person who has caused sexual harm. Finally, the person who has caused harm must be *honest* with themselves if they are to work toward a better future.

Meeting Needs

The ability to rectify sexual harm requires people who have caused sexual harm to experience a sense of "justice." RJ seeks to provide a better balance in how all stakeholders of crime experience justice and this includes justice for the person who has offended (Zehr, 2015). It is worthwhile to mention that the term "justice" is inherently subjective. In their work doing victim-offender conferencing and vicarious RJ processes, Sardina and Ackerman (2022) cite that people who have caused sexual harm tend to feel a sense of justice when their needs are met. That

is, when they have opportunities to create accountability, support in reintegrating into the community, and encouragement to experience personal transformation.

It is important to recognize that individuals are capable of sexual harm, and it is equally as important to recognize that those who have caused sexual harm are capable of change if they are given access to justice (Oudshoorn et al., 2015). Addressing sexual harm is challenging because it requires direct confrontation of the root causes of sexually harmful behaviour (Sardina & Ackerman, 2022). RJ provides an opportunity for this because it allows people who have caused sexual harm to unpack their experiences and explore the harm they caused. Furthermore, while there are many factors that contribute to sexual offending, they are not excuses or justifications.

Most of the literature focuses on early childhood experiences as catalysts to adult offending. There is considerable research that suggests people who sexually offend are more likely than their counterparts to have experienced childhood sexual abuse. These authors contend that childhood sexual and emotional abuse are significant risk factors in the likelihood of sexual offending and the development of paraphilias (Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto, 2009; Lee, Jackson, Pattison, & Ward, 2002; Maniglio, 2011; Marshall, Serran, & Cortoni, 2000; Romano & De Luca, 1996; Simons, Wurtele, & Durham, 2008). Moreover, research suggests that early traumatic experiences may lead to debilitating mental states and the use of harmful sexual behaviours to temporarily avoid or reduce them (Maniglio, 2011).

Along with abuse, insecure parental attachment bonds are commonly seen in their developmental experiences and have been linked to ineffective adult coping (Marshall et al., 2000; Simons et al., 2008). Those who face insecurity in early interpersonal relationships tend to evaluate themselves negatively and manage their emotions in defensive or avoidant ways instead of seeking support (McCormack, Hudson, & Ward, 2002). It is not surprising, then, that research reveals how

people who have caused sexual harm are often socially anxious and emotionally lonely (Marshall, O'Brien, Marshall, Booth, & Davis, 2012). The literature shows how people who have caused sexual harm may have been socialized to satisfy their needs of intimacy and sexuality through maladaptive means in the absence of effective coping strategies (Maniglio, 2011).

Whether one's perpetration of sexual harm stems from their own experiences of harm, inability to cope with stressors, or even societal-level messages about sexuality and masculinity, sexually harmful behaviour does not exist in a vacuum; there are always variables that can help us understand their behaviour and needs (Sardina & Ackerman, 2022). Robbers (2009) discovered that of the 153 people who caused sexual harm that she surveyed, 87% expressed a desire to "recover" from their "sex offender" status, which they saw as a condition or illness. According to RJ, it is imperative that we meet their needs in order to help them recover. Below, I outline three needs discussed by Sardina and Ackerman (2022), while integrating a discussion on some of the barriers faced by people who have caused sexual harm that prevent their needs from being met.

Accountability. RJ is an invitational process for people who have caused sexual harm to break the sexual offence cycle. RJ provides an opportunity to help them understand the life stressors and unhealthy coping mechanisms that have contributed to and maintained their offending behaviour. An individual must realize, however, that sexual offending is a harmful choice one makes and that justifications and denial of responsibility are incompatible with change. The invitation to participate in a RJ process is a difficult one to accept because it demands clear boundaries, behavioural expectations, and true acceptance of responsibility for the harm caused (Oudshoorn et al., 2015). The act of taking responsibility is often referred to in the RJ literature as "accountability" and aligns ideas of justice in Indigenous cultures: to reconcile the person who has offended with his or her own conscience (Baskin, 2002).

A misconception of RJ is that it is an easy route to addressing crime. Ironically, the traditional retributive justice process permits the person who has offended to legally agree to a charge without actually taking any accountability (Yantzi, 1998). In addition, punishment through the criminal justice system prevents the offender from focusing on the victim because they are often too devastated over their own plight (Zehr, 2005). Denial of the harm becomes a defense mechanism, which is a significant barrier to building accountability (Blagden, Winder, Gregson, & Thorne, 2014). In essence, RJ strips away an individual's protective armour to see the real human costs of what they have done. RJ is always voluntary because no one ought to be forced into accepting responsibility.

Research has found that forcing accountability is confrontational and unhelpful (Ware & Mann, 2012). Instead, RJ can be thought of as a process that guides offenders to acknowledge the harm they caused and see themselves as responsible for changing their own behaviour for the better (Ware & Mann, 2012). RJ asks people who have caused sexual harm to look inside themselves to discover what drove their offending behaviour, which requires facing their own trauma in addition to the tremendous harm done to their victim(s). RJ must also view offenders as victims because they often feel a sense of victimization due to trauma in their own lives and the way they have been treated by the criminal justice system. Offending behaviour is difficult to stop without recognizing this sense of victimization (Zehr, 2015).

Reintegration. People who have sexually offended are more likely to be incarcerated than people who have committed non-sexual violent crimes (Kong, Johnson, Beattie, & Cardillo, 2003) and it is almost inevitable that they will return to their communities post-offence (Evans & Ward, 2019). The reintegration of people who have offended is a key aim of both RJ and criminal justice policy (Brown, Spencer, & Deakin, 2007). From a RJ perspective, communities must make the re-

entry process from prison as safe and meaningful as possible to reduce the chances of recidivism (Tewksbury & Connor, 2012). Braithwaite's (1989) widely applied theory of shaming posits that "disintegrative" or stigmatizing acts of shaming are ineffective. "Reintegrative" forms of shaming, where society expresses disapproval over offending behaviour but affirms the offender's membership in society, can contribute to reductions in negative feelings such as stress, loneliness, and fear, and in turn, recidivism. Many RJ programs for people who have caused sexual harm include aspects of reintegrative shaming, including the peer support group in this study.

Access to social capital is imperative to a successful reintegration experience. As theorized by Bourdieu (1986), social capital is the aggregate of social relationships and resources accumulated through relationships that allow people to achieve their goals. Put simply, social capital describes the value that social networks provide (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008). Maximum access and use of social capital are encouraged through social situations where there is a high level of interaction and bonding (Coleman, 1988). Unfortunately, people who have caused sexual harm often have problems accessing and participating in social networks with these characteristics due to feelings of shame and embarrassment stemming from their offence(s) (Meloy, 2006).

Personal Transformation. "Transformation" in the context of RJ for people who have caused sexual harm can be thought of as the rectification of the multi-layered harms associated with their offences. That is, they become more consciously aware of their habits, triggers, and behaviours that have contributed to the cycle of offending. As Zehr (2005) wrote, RJ aims to transform and not perpetuate patterns of offending. Therefore, transformation also involves integrating new views of themselves and the harm they caused. In my study, my participants often associated transformation with "moving beyond" the offence, becoming a "better version" of themselves, or feeling "healed" and "whole."

Barriers to Meeting Needs. Research has illustrated the negative consequences of the way people who have sexually offended have been socially constructed. Strange (2020) explains that Canada and the United States were battered by a post-war wave of sex crime between 1945 and 1952, prompting the implementation of indeterminate sentencing and sexual psychopath laws, accompanied by a wave of “stranger danger” campaigns, sensationalized news coverage child sexual abuse, and chronic moral panic. Cohen (1972) argued that moral panic is characterized by widespread irrational fear of a looming threat to the well-being of society. The societal reaction that is created through moral panics results in views that are not always reflective of the nature of the problem (Kruse, 2007). For example, it is commonly believed that people who have caused sexual harm are highly recidivistic. In reality, sexual recidivism rates have dropped by more than 60% since the 1970s and the recidivism rate within studies of Canadian samples is slightly above 10% (Lussier, McCuish, Proulx, Chouinard Thivierge, & Frechette, 2022).

Over time, however, these myths have become more pervasive through the media and internet. The emergence and continued public support for punitive sex offender policies (see de Vel-Palumbo, Hawarth, & Brewer, 2019; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Pickett, Mancini, & Mears, 2013) is a result of this population being portrayed as a never-ending social problem. The collateral consequences of punitive policies are vividly clear. Tolson and Klein (2015) argue that among these consequences include unemployment, housing issues, and isolation. In addition, studies by Rydberg (2018) and Brown et al. (2007) highlight that people who have caused sexual harm are more likely than other offending groups to be released from prison without basic necessities, employment opportunities, a clean bill of health, and secure housing, all of which are linchpins to reintegration success.

Stigma. Stigma is a highly common experience in the lives of those who have caused sexual harm. Goffman (1963) referred to stigma as an attribute that is “deeply discrediting” (p. 3) that makes an individual different from others and tainted in our minds. Further, he argued that attaching stigmatizing stereotypes to certain groups can impact the way individuals within these groups see themselves and the way society responds to them. Indeed, how society labels this population makes their reintegration process complicated and stigmatizing (Bohmert et al., 2018). As I briefly touched on in chapter one, stigma is a common obstacle that people who have caused sexual harm are faced with if/when their criminal history is revealed. Goffman (1963) articulated that a person with a stigma is seen as less-than-human and subject to various forms of discrimination. Further, shame becomes central to a person’s reality as they are alienated and realize that society does not accept them for who they are or what they have done.

Tewksbury (2012) discovered that people who have caused sexual harm are aware that they are socially stigmatized and this produces shame, hopelessness, and fear. Upon community re-entry, many individuals report experiencing ostracism, a recognition of being negatively labeled, an increased sense of vulnerability, and fear of violence (Tewksbury & Copes, 2012). Unfortunately, they are typically released from prison with maladaptive techniques on how to manage the stigma they will face in the community (Rydberg, 2018). The literature shows how stigmatic perceptions of people who have caused sexual harm contribute to failures in reintegration (Willis, 2018) because the social, psychological, and emotional consequences of stigma can contribute to continued criminal behaviour (Tewksbury, 2012).

Additionally, their relationships often remain strained and unstable as they express concerns that people will reject them or view them negatively (Tewksbury & Copes, 2012). Ultimately, this causes them to isolate themselves from potential support systems, which shows

how the cognitive dimensions of stigma can shape micro-level social interactions. This is concerning, as Baker, Zgoba, and Gordon (2021) suggest that people with strong support systems may be more insulated from stigma and negative consequences associated with their criminal history. People who have caused sexual harm often remain cautious of pursuing relationships because of stigma and move through the social world seeing themselves as rejects. They develop a negative “looking glass self” in that they will construct a pessimistic personal identity based on what society has labeled them (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902).

Permanent vigilance can also prevent them from becoming involved in routine activities that could reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Rydberg, 2018). Loneliness and social isolation produced by stigma have been linked to the maintenance of offending behaviour and higher levels of aggression (van den Berg, Beijersbergen, Nieuwbeerta, & Dirkzwager, 2018; Tolson & Klein, 2015). In a qualitative study that examines how people who have caused sexual harm cope with stigmatization, Evans and Cubellis (2015) demonstrate that their participants managed their “spoiled identities” (Goffman, 1963) through honesty, concealment, and isolation. In their study, several respondents spoke about the importance of honesty and disclosing their criminal history despite the difficulty in being vulnerable.

The authors expressed that honesty requires trust facilitated through meaningful relationships which many offenders do not have (Evans & Cubellis, 2015). Other identity management strategies included concealment and isolation. The former involves purposely avoiding revealing information about their status to others, the latter being much more extreme, to the extent that a person will conceal their status by avoiding social encounters entirely (Evans & Cubellis, 2015). This research found that denial of responsibility was much less common.

Nonetheless, denial sometimes occurs and reduces accountability, which can contribute to the maintenance of offending behaviour (Schneider & Wright, 2004).

Repairing Relationships

A relationship is broken whenever harm occurs, whether that be the breakdown of a relationship between two individuals or a rupture in the relationship with oneself or their community (Sardina & Ackerman, 2022). In a paper prepared by Llewellyn and Howse (1999) for the Law Commission of Canada, the authors articulate that RJ is fundamentally concerned with repairing relationships. After wrongdoing has occurred, RJ demands that attention is brought to the nature of relationships between individuals, groups, and communities.

These authors write that RJ and the criminal justice system's version of "justice" (also commonly referred to as retributive justice) are both committed to establishing social equality between the person who has been harmed and the person who has caused the harm. In other words, both restorative and retributive justice seek to restore the balance that has been thrown off by wrongdoing. While retributive justice aims to restore this balance through individualized punishment, RJ strives to acknowledge the victim's harms and needs and identify ways to restore the person who has caused harm, while encouraging them to take responsibility.

Put simply, retributive justice is most concerned with what happened and less about what must be done to address it. Johnstone (2011) arguea that when harm has been done, the principal question is often "what should be done with the offender?" It assumes that punishment is required to restore social equality. Instead, RJ prioritizes asking the question of, "what do the victim and the person who has caused the harm both need to heal?" Although RJ looks back at the past, much of its focus is on the future and repairing the relationships that have been damaged. RJ also prioritizes restoring dignity, respect, and concern, and not simply establishing guilt (Llewellyn &

Howse, 1999). RJ therefore challenges the idea of justice prevalent in the Anglo-European justice system, which focuses on the public dimension of crime (the government or society's interests) while ignoring the relational aspects of crime (Zehr, 2015).

Defining Healing. The notion of “restoration” implies that some type of wrongdoing has occurred which needs to be healed. The term “healing” is often seen in the literature on RJ, but it can be hard to define and consequently misunderstood. There is also ambivalence around the term because of the sense of finality it connotes (Zehr, 2015). Discerning what this term means is important in this study because of how frequently it came up in the interviews. Phillips (2007) defines healing as a spiritual process that includes therapeutic change and cultural renewal. It is important to locate this term within Indigenous history and context as well, since my participants often referred to healing as developing a sense of “wholeness.”

The idea of arriving at a sense of “wholeness” reflects the aim of Indigenous healing, which in combination with its spiritual and cultural effects, is to promote wholeness and connection to move beyond the harm that has been done (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009). Alt (2017) writes that it is impossible for a person to heal in isolation. Moreover, they can only heal with the support of loved ones, friends, and community. From an Indigenous perspective, Field (2022) states that “physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual healing exists through relationships which occur alongside the healing journey” (p. 123).

Yantzi (1998) argues that healing begins when a person genuinely acknowledges the harm caused by their actions, accepts responsibility for those actions with feelings of remorse and personal responsibility, and changes their behaviour so that they gain a greater understanding of themselves and so that no further harm is done. People who have caused harm are often left in limbo by disciplinary bodies without a clear healing journey to pursue (Yantzi, 1998). RJ provides a clear

process for people who have caused harm to find healing for themselves (Ruth-Heffelbower, 2010) where they can address the multi-layered pain of the harm they created. It also opens avenues of healing for community members through active engagement in the RJ process.

Limitations and Constraints

It is important to acknowledge the scope of RJ, as well as how and where it might not be helpful. Below, I explore three problems with applying RJ particularly in cases of sexual harm.

Restorative Justice in Individualistic Societies

Many advocates see RJ as a method of restoring hope and community in our world as it provides a positive value system that assumes all humans are interconnected (Zehr, 2015). This view of interconnectedness is often absent in individualistic societies as the idea of “community” has eroded over time (Zehr, 2015). This is arguably one of the reasons why RJ seems so foreign and almost in direct opposition to the way people in Western societies think about justice. In Braithwaite’s (1989) thesis of disintegrative and reintegrative shaming, the ability for reintegrative forms of shaming to function as instruments of crime control and reintegration is principally found in communalistic societies (London, 2011).

Reintegrative shaming is complementary to RJ in that it emphasizes the power of relationships to deal with harm (Walgrave & Aertsen, 1996). Japan, for example, is a developed society with a heavy reliance on reintegrative shaming as an alternative to stigmatizing and outcasting wrongdoers. Societies that prioritize reintegrative shaming have cultural scripts and rituals for ending stigmatization with ceremonies of apology and forgiveness, which emphasize the importance of community (Braithwaite, 2000). The difficulty with most advanced liberal societies is that they do not have the same types of norms and rituals and tend to be individualistic.

Thus, it is worthwhile to consider whether RJ approaches, such as reintegrative shaming efforts, can successfully function since the idea of “community” has essentially eroded.

Additionally, the concept of “community” is becoming utilized as a form of neoliberal governance rather than the way RJ envisions it. That is, in advanced liberal societies, “community” is largely conceived of as an instrument of government—as a tool to effect government policy or implement the values and goals of another institution. This act of “responsibilizing” the community (Garland, 1996) to act upon crime is representative of a new form of “government at-a-distance” (Hannah-Moffat, 2000, p. 516). Conversely, RJ mobilizes community to generate a sense of interconnectedness that is absent in individualistic societies.

RJ assumes that harm stems from unmet needs, which requires that harm be addressed by the community rather than by individual acts of punishment. This reflects the collectivist nature of Indigenous communities, where the foundations of RJ can be seen. However, the assumptions of RJ run counter to those produced by neoliberal forces that stress the use of punishment to increase individual responsibility for offending (Garland, 2001). Ultimately, it is important to consider how individualistic tendencies and neoliberal rationality can impact the way RJ approaches are received and implemented in advanced liberal societies.

Politics of Restorative Justice and Risk

Woolford and Nelund (2019) describe RJ as a political process. These authors contend that RJ is political in four senses. First, RJ exists in a socio-political context that is often indifferent to its practice which influences its conceptual development. Second, the political context of RJ is structured in that there are persistent social patterns or tendencies that shape people’s dominant ways of both thinking and acting. Third, RJ is a form of governance in that it strives to change

behaviour, heal individuals, and restore communities. Finally, RJ must mobilize politics to achieve its broader social justice and transformative goals.

A central theme in discussions on the politics of RJ is that the process of implementing this approach is complicated under difficult political conditions (Woolford & Nelund, 2019). The politics of RJ are those of responsibility, inclusiveness, reparation, and restoration in relation to criminal offending, the administration of justice, and penology (Cornwell, 2007). As Cornwell (2007) states, RJ sits uncomfortably with prevailing images of contemporary justice, particularly in cases of sexual harm. Some of my findings illustrate the politics of RJ, especially in the conversations I had with the service coordinators. It is important to recognize that the politics of RJ directly impact the people on the ground; those who routinely engage and work with RJ.

Another issue with the implementation of RJ for people who have caused sexual harm is that there is reluctance to use this approach in reintegration efforts. Traditional criminal justice responses of enhanced restrictions and supervision can hinder rather than facilitate the reintegration of people who have caused sexual harm (Fox, 2017; Keenan, 2012). Yet, it is difficult to change the way we reintegrate this population partially due to the correctional mandate to assess and manage “risks” (Fox, 2014). As Fox (2014) argues, the politics of risk shadow the true needs of people who have caused sexual harm. While the risk model recognizes the importance of social support, for example, treatment interventions that rely on this model to varying degrees do not address this deficit. Many interventions also do not address the needs of compassion and community that RJ initiatives like Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) strive for (Hannem, 2011). The dominant paradigm of cognitive-behavioural therapy, for instance, primarily targets thinking patterns and habits. While this can be helpful in some ways, it focuses on a person’s risk rather than their essential value and what they need to feel like they belong in their

community (Fox, 2012). In sum, another limitation of RJ is that it must contend with the politics of risk embedded in conservative penal policy.

Feminist Critiques

Many women and victim's rights advocates argue that there needs to be more criminalization of sexual crimes (Ilea, 2018). Feminists highlight that sexual violence is gendered because it is predominantly perpetrated by men against women and children, and therefore it should be taken more seriously than it has been (Hudson, 1998). Ilea (2018) shows that as a response, the anti-violence movement primarily consisting of White feminists, has advocated for more state intervention and punitive measures to eradicate sexual harm in society. In doing so, they have ignored the impact of repressive policies on people from marginalized and racialized backgrounds. Still, academic feminists have responded to a call for more RJ initiatives toward gendered violence with skepticism, concern, and caution (Curtis-Fawley & Daly, 2005). Using RJ in cases of sexual violence in Indigenous and racialized communities adds another layer of fear, as the needs and interests of these communities are often dismissed in general, making a RJ process potentially unsafe and retraumatizing for them (Stubbs, 2009).

Feminists' primary concerns, as Curtis-Fawley and Daly (2005) highlight, are that informal processes like RJ can revictimize victims or jeopardize their safety, RJ will appear to be a "soft" approach to addressing sexual violence, and that RJ may reprivatize gendered violence in harmful ways. It is generally agreed by feminists that a generic RJ process, as in a victim-offender encounter, is usually unsuitable for sexual crimes (McGlynn, Westmarland, & Godden, 2012). As Johnstone (2011) articulates, it can be particularly dangerous to use RJ approaches in patriarchal communities in particular as it can lead to sexual assault and domestic violence cases being handled as trivial misdemeanours. The critical feminist literature has focused heavily on the

problem of applying RJ in cases of domestic violence. While sexual assault does occur in the context of domestic violence, many assaults are isolated and discrete events in that they occur outside of an entrenched pattern of cycles (Curtis-Fawley & Daly, 2005).

Of course, there are some situations where RJ would be inappropriate, specifically in cases where there is patterned violence and significant power imbalances. Many RJ initiatives, however, use RJ with people who have caused sexual harm and do not require the victim to be immediately present. Arguably, “non-encounter” RJ programs more closely align with the wishes of feminists in that more people who have caused sexual harm are held accountable and safely reintegrated, and the likelihood of preventing recidivism is increased through supporting individual offenders and increasing community awareness and education about sexual harm (Hopkins & Koss, 2005).

Restorative Justice Approaches in Practice

Despite RJ’s limitations and problems, using RJ in cases of sexual harm when it is safe to do so comes with many possibilities. Oudshoorn et al. (2015) argue that RJ provides people who have caused sexual harm with an opportunity to have their needs validated, make decisions, engage in dialogue, and promote hope and inclusion. There is a small but growing area of research on RJ approaches for this population. While these programs differ in their structure and aims, there is no “one size fits all” approach or pure model of RJ that can be seen as ideal (Oudshoorn et al., 2015; Zehr, 2015). The overarching goals of any RJ program are to put key decisions into the hands of those affected by crime, make justice more healing and ideally more transformative, and reduce the likelihood of future offences (Zehr, 2015). Programs for people who have caused sexual harm aim to provide the necessary support and encouragement needed for them to fulfill their obligations and meet their needs. They also strive to provide a forum for repairing relationships and overcoming barriers that typically prevent them from meeting their needs.

Zehr (2015) explains that RJ can be seen as a river, where there are feeder streams of practical programs. He states that there are three models commonly used with people who have caused harm. First, alternative or diversionary programs aim to divert cases from or provide alternatives to the criminal justice system. Second, healing and therapeutic programs include victim-offender reconciliation or dialogue conferences. Lastly, transitional programs are designed to help people who have sexually offended understand victim impact, develop accountability, and safely reintegrate. In this section, I will focus on non-encounter transitional programs where victims are not directly involved.

Restorative Justice in Custodial Settings

The most common spaces in which RJ is operationalized in custodial settings is in group therapy and support groups. Research suggests that shaping a group environment as a “restorative” space where members are humanized helps them authentically engage in emotionally challenging activities such as victim-offender role-playing exercises to increase victim empathy (Blagden, Winder, & Hames, 2016; Grady & Brodersen, 2008). Research findings have shown that those incarcerated for sexual offences value the role of group therapy in developing accountability, victim empathy, and relapse prevention skills (Levenson, Macgowan, Morin, & Cotter, 2009). For example, Beech and Chauhan’s (2013) study examines a RJ program delivered in seven prisons across the UK, which used victim-offender role-plays in group-work settings, as well as individual exercises to encourage empathy. Their results demonstrate that the program increased offenders’ empathy, inspired motivation to change offending behaviours, and helped them become more willing to take responsibility for their actions (Beech & Chauhan, 2013).

A popular theoretical framework underpinning custodial treatment programs for people who have caused sexual harm is the Good Lives Model (GLM) which focuses on risk reduction

and well-being enhancement (Willis, Ward, & Levenson, 2014). The GLM can be conceptualized as a “strengths-based approach.” Strengths-based approaches create competencies in people who have caused sexual harm and reduce risk more indirectly as opposed to risk management approaches which directly detect and modify dynamic risk factors (Walgrave, Ward, & Zinsstag, 2021). While the GLM promotes rehabilitation and not necessarily restoration, there are several common threads shared by the GLM and RJ.

For example, Willis et al. (2014) provide an overview of how the GLM promotes prosocial attainment of primary human goods. These include, among others, life, knowledge, independence, friendships, and experiencing a sense of community, all of which closely resemble RJ norms. Researchers have theorized how the GLM and RJ approaches can be complementary and successful as a combined approach to justice, rehabilitation, and healing (Keenan, Ward, & Zinsstag, 2022; Walgrave et al., 2014). So far, however, there is no research on the utilization or efficacy of a combined framework (Keenan et al., 2022).

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), typically known as a community-based program, can also be operationalized in custodial settings. CoSA is a well-known and highly successful RJ initiative that began in 1994 as an ad hoc response by the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario (MCCO) to assist in the reintegration of a high-risk individual who had no supervision or support in the community (Clarke et al., 2017). As a result of the pilot project’s success, the MCCO partnered with Correctional Services Canada to implement CoSA more broadly within Canada (Duwe, 2018). I come back to CoSA in a community context later, but it is important to highlight that CoSA is used in prisons in many countries such as Canada, the US, and the UK. Circles involve one person who has caused sexual harm, identified as the “core member,”

an “inner-circle” consisting of three to six trained volunteers, and an “outer-circle” made up of professionals who are involved in the core member’s re-entry process (Höing et al., 2017).

In the prison model of CoSA, volunteers visit the core member while they are incarcerated, typically on a weekly basis for approximately three months before they are due to be released (Kitson-Boyce, Blagden, Winder, & Dillon, 2019). After their release, the individual will typically be involved in CoSA in their local community. Research suggests that prison models of CoSA are beneficial for participants since they know they will have support upon release and have established a set of prosocial skills prior to release (Kitson-Boyce et al., 2019). This particular study found, however, that involvement in the prison model of CoSA did not decrease their fear and anxiety around community re-entry (Kitson-Boyce et al., 2019). This finding indicates that more post-prison programming that directly targets fear around re-entry is necessary.

Non-Custodial and Community-Based Restorative Justice Programs

Community-based practices are essential as they often work successfully in conjunction with traditional criminal justice responses or as an alternative to these responses entirely (Oudshoorn et al., 2015). Community-based programs need to be accessible, available, and responsible for supporting people who have caused harm in their re-entry into the community (Bingham, Turner, & Piotrowski, 1995). The community itself also benefits from community-based programs. RJ approaches facilitate reduced fear, safer neighbourhoods, and an increased sense of agency for community members by allowing them to participate in reintegration and crime prevention efforts (Bazemore, 1998; Ruth-Heffelbower, 2010).

The most well-developed research area on community-based RJ programming is CoSA. Trained volunteers commit to meeting with the core member regularly in his or her local community to offer emotional and practical support while holding the individual accountable for

their attitudes and behaviours (Bates, Macrae, Williams, & Webb, 2012). Circles are designed for high-risk individuals with little to no community support during the early stages of reintegration, with the goal of complete desistance and the development of a prosocial lifestyle (Höing et al., 2017; Elliot & Zajac, 2015; Wilson et al., 2009). CoSA provides an opportunity for redemption under the care of a concerned community (Petrunik, 2002).

Multiple studies report that involvement in circles helps individuals transition toward desistance from sexual offending (Bates et al., 2012; Duwe, 2018; Höing et al., 2017). Other studies explore how CoSA can help reduce the emotional and structural barriers associated with reintegration. For example, Bohmert et al. (2018) found that those who participated in circles reported gains in moral and emotional support, friendship, and employment assistance. Other studies show how CoSA provides an opportunity for social inclusion (Höing et al., 2017) and diminishes the effects of rejection, social isolation, and loneliness (Duwe, 2018). Höing et al. (2013) argue that circles allow the core member to build social capital. CoSA allows for the development of social capital by providing a surrogate social network for the individual that lends assistance and external resources (Höing et al., 2013). Another key function of circles is that they provide a space for belonging (Höing et al., 2013). Belongingness and the desire for interpersonal attachment is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The most obvious difference between CoSA and other interventions that involve social support (for example, group therapy or support groups) is that each circle centers around one person who has offended. As such, the individual is not able to draw from other offenders' lived experiences or "give back" in the form of emotional and moral support, which other research suggests leads to positive outcomes (Grady & Brodersen, 2008; Perrin, Blagden, Winder, & Dillon, 2018). Another limitation of CoSA is that they are not designed for long-term involvement.

Circles are typically structured around a 12–18-month timeframe. As such, core members do not necessarily experience the stability and longevity of a social network.

A similar RJ initiative to CoSA, established by the Corrections Victoria Sex Offender Programs in Australia, was known as Support and Awareness Groups (SAAG). A SAAG comprised people nominated by the person who has caused sexual harm who assisted them in implementing a healthy lifestyle and managing risk factors (Braden, Göbbels, Willis, Ward, Costeletos, & Mollica, 2012). The individual would be asked to nominate three to eight individuals from different areas of their life, including intimate partners, family members, friends, and colleagues. The idea was that involving different types of support offers the offender global feedback regarding appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in various domains of their life (Braden et al., 2012). Unlike CoSA, SAAG was less structured and took place on an informal basis (Bartels, Walvisch, & Richards, 2019). While SAAG seems useful in theory and the literature supports the rationale behind this program (Hawkins & Eddie, 2013), groups have not been run since 2017 and there is no literature that demonstrates their efficacy (Bartels et al., 2019).

In another study, Roseman, Ritchie, and Laux (2009) illustrate the success of a RJ program at a community-based mental health treatment agency in the US. Participants were introduced to a sexual assault victim by three levels of exposure: a letter, videotape, or live interaction. All three levels of exposure elicited an increase in guilt across participants. The authors argue that guilt is an integral component toward empathy development. This study shows how RJ approaches may be effective in increasing victim empathy (Roseman et al., 2009).

People who have caused sexual harm may also participate in self-help groups that embody RJ values, such as Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA), which relies on the 12-step program developed by Alcoholics Anonymous. A qualitative study indicates that SLAA is an

invaluable resource for people with compulsive sexual behaviours, particularly due to the constant support available (Fernandez, Kuss, & Griffiths, 2021). However, this program is not exclusive to people who have caused sexual harm and has not been researched in terms of its efficacy for this population specifically. Another important study, conducted by Rye et al. (2018), shows how a RJ-focused psychoeducational group run by community volunteers had a significant impact on group members' development of accountability, self-awareness, and healing.

Support Groups and Peer Support

Support groups are used to respond to the needs of people dealing with various crises, transitions, and conditions; and can be a forum for emotional support, guidance, and information for people who are faced with similar lived experiences (Galinsky & Schopler, 1995). Criminologists such as Francis T. Cullen posit that social support is a precondition for effective social control. Further, Cullen (1994) argues that the experience of supporting others, especially similar others, can foster moral purpose and lower one's criminogenic risk. In this chapter, most of the RJ approaches I highlighted involve varying degrees of social support, but I will now focus on reviewing the small body of literature that focuses on support groups designed for people who have caused sexual harm.

In recent years, studies have emerged that focus on social spaces dedicated to people who have caused sexual harm or know someone who has caused sexual harm. Kavanagh and Levenson (2022) explore how a trauma-informed support group for family members of offenders helped them process shame, stigma, loneliness, and powerlessness. This study reveals similar themes as Sample, Cooley, and ten Bensel (2018) illustrate in their study of a peer support group for offenders and their family members called "Fearless." These authors saw increases in members' friendships, employment opportunities, and self-confidence, as well as reductions in stress and isolation.

Ultimately, they consider how people who have caused sexual harm need support groups just as people with depression or substance abuse disorders do (Sample et al., 2018).

The power and influence of people who have caused sexual harm in supporting one another is not unknown to researchers. In fact, early research highlights the emotional isolation that arises from not being able to exchange feelings and confidences seems to play a role in developing inappropriate sexual behaviours (Gutiérrez-Lobos, Eher, Grünhut, Bankier, Schmidl-Mohl, Frühwald, & Semler, 2001). A study conducted nearly two decades later, by Perrin et al. (2018), found that people incarcerated for sexual offences who engaged in a variety of peer support roles (mentors, listeners, etc.) in prisons across the UK, experienced reduced isolation and better reintegration outcomes by “doing good” in prison and “giving back” through helping their peers. Their study is influential in that it introduces research on the impact of peer support on people who have caused sexual harm. It illustrates that offenders’ ability to support one another can have a positive impact on the way they see themselves and their lives beyond prison (Perrin et al., 2018).

Kernsmith and Kernsmith (2008) observed an online support group facilitated by two people who have caused sexual harm. The group used an asynchronous format where members could post messages to the discussion board for other members to respond to later. A disadvantage to this, however, was the lack of immediate support if a member was in a crisis state (Kernsmith & Kernsmith, 2008). The authors found that the discussion posts largely focused on attempts to change their fantasies and cognitive distortions. Their posts were responded to with empathy and positive confrontation from other members. A similar but more recent study on an online peer support forum for people sexually attracted to minors found that it helped them cope with their attractions and manage the stigma associated with their sexuality (Pedersen, 2022).

The findings from these two studies bring forward two major considerations. First, support groups provide a safe space for people who have caused sexual harm to talk about sensitive and difficult feelings associated with sexually harmful behaviour, which helps them feel heard and understood. Second, members explicitly talk about the lack of social support and isolation in their own lives. Kernsmith and Kernsmith (2008) discuss that members expressed negative experiences in traditional counseling sessions and participation in SLAA. Therefore, the discussions they witnessed underscore research findings that illustrate the lack of social support opportunities for people who have caused sexual harm or those who are at risk of offending.

As I mentioned above, psychoeducational groups offered at a RJ organization were impactful for people who have caused sexual harm. Specifically, Rye et al's (2018) survey findings articulate that the seven-week psychoeducational group helped members gain an understanding of their triggers, what led them to sexually offend, the differences between healthy and unhealthy sexuality, victim impact, and accountability. Another survey was disseminated by the researchers to thirteen members of a support group at the same RJ organization. They wanted to gauge the impact and outcomes of members' year-long progress in the group.

Overall, participants felt increased victim empathy, self-understanding, and hope for the future. They also expressed satisfaction as the restorative nature of the group facilitated safe discussions and a non-judgmental space (Rye et al., 2018). This is the only existing study I found that focuses on a RJ support group in the community designed for people who have caused sexual harm. This exploratory study is significant because it sheds light onto how RJ principles are enacted with this population and how they positively impact outcomes which are thought to be linked to reduced recidivism and successful reintegration (Rye et al., 2018).

The existing studies I highlighted in this section share several conclusions. With the exception of the study by Perrin et al. (2018), they illustrate the value of social support in non-custodial settings, whether that be face-to-face or virtually. All of them highlight that people who have caused sexual harm are capable of supporting each other without the direct involvement of professionals. They also show that honesty and offence disclosure is possible and can be a positive experience if it occurs in a safe environment.

The studies mentioned do not include much information about the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants involved, which limits our understanding of how peer support and RJ approaches more generally are received by individuals from various social locations. In addition, all of these studies include only male-identified people. Calls for more research on women who have caused sexual harm have emerged in recent years (Zack, Lang, & Dirks, 2018), but there remains little research that has documented female offenders' reintegration and treatment experiences. In addition, there is a need to better understand women's experiences of RJ since their pathways into crime and the way they are treated by the criminal justice system and society differ significantly from their male counterparts (Österman & Masson, 2018).

Limitations

In *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, Zehr (2015) highlights that there remains some uncertainty as to whether RJ programs provide adequate support in helping those who have caused sexual harm carry out their obligations. He also questions if RJ programs adequately address the harms that may have contributed to their offence. In addition, he asks whether the community is adequately involved in RJ programs. Emerging studies suggest that community-based RJ programming can be successful in helping people understand and address the harms that may have

contributed to their offending behaviour. Additionally, studies such as those focused on CoSA highlight the meaningful role of community volunteers.

However, I have identified only one study on a community-based RJ program that does not directly involve professionals and is led by community members and people who have caused sexual harm (Rye et al., 2018). Thus, most research on RJ approaches implicitly suggests that people who have caused sexual harm require the active presence of professionals to monitor, supervise, and assess their progress in these programs. My study will address this limitation by exploring in-depth a RJ approach in which professionals are not immediately present, community volunteers facilitate the space, and people who have caused sexual harm work collaboratively to lead the discussions, take ownership over their own goals, and hold each other accountable.

Despite knowing that social support is a key contributor to positive outcomes for people who have sexually offended, there is very little research on the incorporation of peer support in transitional RJ programs. This is another major limitation of the existing literature because we know that people who have caused sexual harm face exacerbated levels of stigma and isolation, and often carry significant emotional difficulties and trauma. Receiving support from peers who share similar feelings may prove beneficial.

The topic of support groups for this population has been greatly overlooked and understudied, but researchers in this field are not at fault. After extensively searching, I came across little to no information about support groups for people who have caused sexual harm. Some of them, however, may be hidden from standard internet searches due to the stigmatized nature of the topic. People interested in this type of support, then, might need a direct referral from a professional to an organization that offers them. As such, these support groups remain relatively unknown to researchers and the public.

With that said, the research conducted by Rye et al. (2018) is particularly influential to my study. Their aim was to evaluate the impact and outcomes, through survey feedback, of two programs at an organization that provides support to people who have caused sexual harm. It is important to mention that my study was conducted at the same organization, which occurred by happenstance rather than intentionally, since this RJ organization is the only one I found that offers support groups specifically for people who have caused sexual harm (Rye et al., 2018). Rather than conduct another evaluation, however, I utilized a fundamentally different research design to explore in more depth the effectiveness of the support group specifically. As such, I was able to gather rich qualitative data that builds off of Rye et al's (2018) preliminary quantitative and qualitative survey findings which articulate the outcomes of the support group.

Levenson et al. (2009) argue that it is essential to explore the treatment experiences of people who have caused sexual harm. Fox (2017) also contends that there needs to be more investigation into re-entry programs that address the lack of social support faced by people who have caused sexual harm. Engaging with qualitative methods to discern the lived experiences of this population can help us better understand the approaches they perceive to be valuable in meeting their needs. The support group I explored in this study differs from other custodial group therapy programs and support groups as well as other transitional community-based programs like CoSA. This support group encourages voluntary long-term involvement; is facilitated by community volunteers and does not directly involve professionals in the space; emphasizes the value of peer experience; does not focus on assessment or evaluation but rather encourages members to develop their own goals; and is built on an explicit RJ normative framework.

Interestingly, most studies in this field are quantitatively geared toward measuring the outcomes of treatment programs. My study took a different direction in that I was less concerned

about evaluating the outcomes of the support group program, and more focused on gaining a rich understanding of how this type of program is effective in meeting the needs of a population that requires a high level of care from their community. I wanted to understand how RJ feels for them, how they describe their experiences of supporting and being supported by their peers, and how this has impacted their journey toward a future free of sexual harm.

Chapter 3

Methodology

To explore the effectiveness and impact of a restorative justice (RJ) peer support group for people who have caused sexual harm, I conducted a qualitative study that utilized semi-structured interviews and participant observation at a single organization. A case study design provided me with an opportunity to holistically explore one program with the purpose of shedding light on the larger under-explored phenomenon of RJ community-based transitional programs for people who have sexually offended (Gerring, 2017). According to Yin (2003), a case study design should be used when the focus of the study is to understand “how” and “why” questions and when a researcher wants to uncover and clarify the boundaries between the context and phenomenon. I chose to pursue a descriptive case study because the goal was to describe a phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003).

While findings derived from case studies cannot be generalizable, the thorough examination of a single case can be used for theoretical analysis and filling the gaps within existing knowledge (Bryman & Bell, 2019). A case study is compatible with the grounded theory approach I used. Case studies and grounded theory share a goal of collecting in-depth information or rich descriptions of subject matter (Bryman & Bell, 2019; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The objective of grounded theory, as an inductive method, is to reveal themes and categories that are grounded in the emerging data.

My study embraced a constructionist/symbolic interactionist (SI) perspective to understand the meaning my participants placed on their experiences in a RJ support group. In particular, my study placed emphasis on identifying the elements of a RJ framework that were the most meaningful to them. Through a SI lens, “meaning” is a social product or creation that is formed “in and through the defining activities of people as they interact” (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). Blumer

(1969) theorized that a person uses their meanings alongside a process of interpretation. That is, the person must first point out the things that have meaning. Then, through communication with oneself, the meanings are transformed into interpretations through a process of using and revising the meanings as “instruments for the guidance and formation of action” (p. 5). Put simply, SI is a framework for understanding the meaning people assign to things and how they interpret them. Pairing the SI sociological orientation and grounded theory as a tool for discovery allowed my participants’ interpretations of their experiences in a support group to be central to my analysis.

Restorative Justice Approach

Since I collected data from human participants, my study required approval from the University of Waterloo’s Office of Research Ethics. I received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (ORE #44027). *The Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (2018) highlights respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice as the core principles of ethical research. Because the ethics approval process might not be able to identify and prevent all of the risks associated with sensitive research (Agllias, 2011), I approached this study through a RJ framework which involved acute awareness and sensitivity to accountability, power, and relationships.

Accountability

To hold myself accountable in this research meant to engage in reflexive measures and remain aware of my responsibility to protect my participants. The concept of “reflexivity” entails a deliberate and conscious effort by the researcher to be attuned to their own reactions, self-knowledge, beliefs, and personal experiences (Berger, 2015). Being reflexive means to ensure that one’s own values are present but not restrictive (Bryman & Bell, 2019; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Qualitative research has been accused of lacking rigor and not measuring up to the standards of

reliability, replicability, and validity in positivist research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). However, it is argued that the criteria for evaluating qualitative research should look much different (Bryman & Bell, 2019). The control of researcher bias has since been regarded as a way to ensure rigor, usually through reflexivity (McCabe & Holmes, 2009).

Qualitative researchers tend to agree on the significance of “value-laden” research, which from a positivist canon might be considered biased. Ellingson (1998) demonstrates the utility of value-laden research in the form of a “confessional tale,” in which she reflects on her cancer survivorship to show how this created empathy and understanding with patients in an oncology clinic during her fieldwork. Pillow (2003) explains that researchers like Ellingson accept that knowing oneself as a researcher will aid in knowing and understanding others. Noting the distinction between reflexivity and reflection, Finlay (2002) writes that reflection entails merely “thinking about” whereas reflexivity involves a dialectic between lived experience and awareness.

Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) recognize the importance of “critical reflexivity” in research with marginalized populations. While their theoretical piece focuses on refugee populations, their stance is that critical reflexivity is a key approach to “decolonizing research.” That is, for researchers to reframe their positionality from discoverers of community knowledge to learners (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021; Datta, 2018). I aimed to do this through Thambinathan and Kinsella’s (2021) recommendation to pay attention to my assumptions going into the research and my situatedness with respect to the research topic. Thus, it is important to me that I reflect on my positionality.

First, I have written this thesis as a childhood sexual abuse survivor. It is important to my healing for me to convey my position as a “survivor scholar” (Sardina & Ackerman, 2022), as my experiences have informed the way I conducted this study and my wholehearted belief in a

restorative solution to sexual harm. I leaned toward qualitative methods so I could personally connect and deeply empathize with people who have also been affected by sexual harm, even if their experiences looked different from mine. It turned out to be incredibly healing for me and my participants to be able to smile, laugh, and cry together as we shared our experiences.

In addition to being a survivor, I was introduced to this research topic through my experiences as a volunteer facilitator in RJ support groups for people who have caused sexual harm. My journey as a survivor changed for the better when I decided to approach my abuse with curiosity rather than fear. My pathway into the RJ field began when I started researching ways to become involved in my community as a RJ volunteer and came across the organization where this research was done. I soon after discovered my interest in RJ and my calling to support people who have caused sexual harm as a way to prevent further offending. I volunteered as a facilitator in RJ support groups for two years until I stepped back to pursue my graduate degree. Being reflexive about my motivations and interests in this research has allowed me to interrogate what direction I might have been driving this project.

My commitment to accountability involved maintaining a research journal. Tracy (2010) contends that qualitative research should involve sincerity. Therefore, I needed to be honest and transparent about my biases and goals and how they continuously played a role in my methods. The research journal was ultimately a tool for self-reflexivity and transparency, as it provided clear documentation of all my research activities (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Journaling was a useful exercise as it helped solidify my ideas for subsequent research steps. In total, I had fourteen journal entries, seven of which were after each interview. These entries were completed approximately four to five hours after each interview once I finished transcribing the audio recordings. I also journaled immediately after the observation.

The other entries were written as I worked through the more onerous stages of data analysis. I initially planned to use the journal as a bridge to link my findings with concepts from the literature, but it turned out to be a reflection of my personal transformation during the fieldwork process (Annink, 2016). It allowed me to process the emotions that threatened the progress of my research, it crystallized my feelings and thoughts, and acted as a melting pot for the ingredients of my project: prior experiences, observations, and ideas (Annink, 2016; Browne, 2013).

Overall, my goal was to uphold the trustworthiness of my study despite my closeness to the topic. In qualitative research, “trustworthiness is established when findings as closely as possible reflect the meanings as described by the participants” (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006, p. 444). I aimed to establish trustworthiness by being reflexive, writing journal submissions after every step of the research process, briefing with my supervisors when needed, writing memos as I was transcribing, and consulting with my participants so they could review the themes I identified after analyzing the interview transcripts. Receiving feedback from my participants allowed me to ensure that the themes I discovered spoke true to their subjective interpretations.

In terms of upholding my responsibility to protect my participants, I remained consciously aware that they could face severe social and psychological risks, such as a loss of privacy or reputation if their stigmatized identity or “hidden status” was disclosed through participating in my study (Ellard-Gray, Jeffrey, Choubak, & Crann, 2015). My prior RJ training and experience in supporting this population facilitated a heightened awareness of the risks involved through their participation. I was accountable to myself and my participants by being transparent about the risks throughout the research process and by keeping an “open-door” policy, where they could contact me at any point with questions or concerns about the study and their involvement.

Power

Although accessing participants seemed promising for me given my history as a volunteer at the organization, it was important for the organization to fully understand the benefits associated with my research before they agreed to be involved. Broadhead & Rist (1976) argue that a major concern for gatekeepers is reciprocity. In other words, they must assess the benefits that the research can offer the organization. As Michel Foucault (1998/1984) put it, research is a “field of experiences” (p. 460) that transforms the subject (researcher) and object (research problem). My role as a researcher was not only to interpret the phenomenon at hand, but also to mobilize the power afforded to me, through my education, to transform communities by advocating for more resources being put toward the implementation of support groups and other RJ approaches for people who have caused sexual harm. Further, my study holds the possibility of gaining more public awareness, trust, and support for RJ approaches designed for this population.

Since interviews were a primary method of data collection, it was critical to acknowledge that an interview enables a productive power that transforms the participant because they acquire new knowledge of themselves as they examine their own behaviour and beliefs (McCabe & Holmes, 2009; Weberman, 1995). I took the time to interrogate the power I held in the researcher-participant relationships I established so that I was aware of how the research may affect them (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Despite the risks involved with their participation, vulnerable populations may experience great benefit from being involved in research. For example, the interview process can help alleviate the sense of isolation they experience (Opsal, Wolgemuth, Cross, Kaanta, Dickmann, Colomer, & Erdil-Moody, 2016).

People who have caused sexual harm often want to remain invisible, because of stigma, yet still feel heard (Waldram, 2007). Addressing the need for them to feel simultaneously

anonymous and heard was a strength of my study. It is a researcher's job to find space for storytelling (Waldram, 2007), so I was intentional about giving my participants control over the interview by leaving room for extensive self-reflection and feedback (Opsal et al., 2016). Thus, another way I upheld my commitment to RJ was by providing my participants with a sense of power and ownership over the research process.

Relationships

To gain access to participants, I required the help of a gatekeeper, which in this case was the Director of Programs of the organization and the lead service coordinator of the sexual harm program. It is argued that a researcher, in most cases, must take years to build rapport prior to recruitment. My prior volunteer experiences in the program allowed me to develop strong rapport and personal relationships with staff. Because of these relationships, they felt assured that my RJ approach to this research would be done with care and would protect both the participants and the organization. This made data collection a relatively seamless process. In fact, three of my participants conveyed to me, at the end of their interviews, that they would not have agreed to be interviewed or felt comfortable participating in a research study if they had not known me prior. This relational component to research is critical when conducting fieldwork with participants who are vulnerable. In general, gatekeepers of these communities are typically protective of the people they serve (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). I am confident that this research would not have produced the same meaningful outcomes or would have been possible had it not been for my positionality.

Research Site

I chose to conduct this case study in a program at one of the largest RJ organizations operating in North America. This organization is in Southern Ontario and one of the several programs they offer centers around supporting individuals who have been affected by sexual harm.

The program's goal is to provide free support, through a RJ approach, to sexual harm survivors, people who have offended, and their families. In addition to support groups, staff members provide educational programs and community workshops to increase understanding in the community of the micro- and macro-level impacts of sexual harm.

Currently, all the participants involved in the support group for people who have caused sexual harm identify as male and are generally in their mid-40s to 60s, white, cis-gendered, and heterosexual. Prior to joining the support group, the men engage in a seven-week psychoeducational group at the organization. The organization also offers a cyber-psychoeducational group for people who have perpetrated sexual harm on the internet. The psychoeducational groups are a stepping stone for them to gain an understanding of the impact of sexual harm, the root causes, and the sexual offending cycle. Participants are also able to speak with someone who has sexually offended and a survivor who has experienced sexual harm. Having the opportunity to listen to a survivor through a live interaction is an important step in their journey toward victim empathy. Ultimately, the psychoeducational group gives the participants language around RJ principles such as accountability, victim empathy, and the ripple effect of sexual harm.

The purpose of the support group is to create a space where people can have conversations about the sexual harm they caused. Like the psychoeducational group, the support groups are supervised by trained community volunteers. The difference between the support group and the psychoeducational group, however, is that the former is led by the group members who come up with the discussion content. The discussion topics vary but they typically revolve around accountability, needs, and relationships. The support group runs from September to June, and the summer months allow for group members to practice their coping skills without the consistent support of the group and to decide if they would like to return. With that said, the organization

offers a “drop-in” support group that meets less frequently in July and August for group members who still require ongoing support.

Sampling Procedure

For this project, I chose a snowball sampling procedure, which is argued to be the only feasible method for research on hard to reach, hidden, and vulnerable populations because no sampling frame exists and access is limited (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Jeffords, 2007). During my first conversation with the lead service coordinator of the sexual harm program, we scheduled a time for the observation. I asked the service coordinator to forward a recruitment email to the facilitators and group members of the support group I was going to be observing (Appendix A). I attached an information letter to this email outlining the details of my study (Appendix B) and a separate consent form for them to sign.

A few days later, I sent a recruitment email to the service coordinators asking if they would agree to be interviewed (Appendix C). I also sent them an information letter with information about the study and details specific to their interviews (Appendix D). Once these interviews were scheduled, I sent a recruitment email to the lead service coordinator to forward to the current support group members (Appendix E) with an attached information letter (Appendix F). I was able to schedule these interviews after the interviews with the service coordinators and the observation.

Participants

I interviewed five members of the support group, all of whom have sexual offence convictions, were previously incarcerated, and had no pending criminal charges. Two of them were in their 30s, one in his 40s, and two were over the age of 65. Their length of involvement in the support group varied, however, it ranged between two to seven years. In addition, their pathways into the support group varied, but most of them heard about the organization and the support group

through word of mouth by speaking with a lawyer, parole officer, or family member. All of the group members I interviewed were white, cis-gendered, and male-identified. The participants included in my study were representative of the organization's client base in terms of demographics.

I also interviewed two service coordinators. They were both white, cis-gendered, and female-identified. The service coordinators provided useful contextual information on the organizational structure and purpose of the support group. In the support group session I observed, there were nine individuals present. This session included two trained volunteer facilitators (one female and one nonbinary) and seven male group members.

Data Collection

Interviews

The interview portion of my data collection process took place over a month and a half. During this time, I conducted seven semi-structured interviews. The interviews with the two service coordinators lasted approximately one hour in length, whereas the interviews with the group members lasted, on average, one and a half hours. I used semi-structured interview guides (Appendices G and H), but they remained flexible so that I could reformulate propositions, probe if necessary, and allow participants leeway in their responses (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Moreover, the interview guides were regularly modified to allow for further exploration of themes that arose from each interview. This iterative process of continuously refining and restructuring during the data collection stage added depth to my growing understanding of my participants' experiences.

The interviews were conducted on Zoom, a virtual meeting platform. Although face-to-face interviews are preferred when exploring sensitive issues (Dempsey, Dowling, Larkin, & Murphy, 2016), I was mindful of the changing COVID-19 public health recommendations and

restrictions that could have prevented in-person interviews. In addition, virtual interviews allowed my participants to speak with me in a space that was comfortable for them and provided more anonymity. They also did not need to worry about transportation to get to a specific interview location. Each interview was audio recorded with permission from the participant and then transcribed immediately after when the discussion was still salient and so I could vividly remember their emotions and my thoughts at each point in the interview.

The participants verbally conveyed their informed consent immediately before the interview started. Their consent was documented in a consent log which I kept in a password-protected document in an encrypted folder on my computer. In addition to obtaining consent, I distributed a list of mental health resources to the group members since the interviews touched on sensitive and difficult topics related to their sexual offences. Concerns for my participants were maintaining anonymity and navigating confidentiality. Because of this, I assigned pseudonyms to each participant that were created through a random name generator and used throughout the entire research process. I confirmed with each participant if the generated pseudonym was appropriate. I made sure not to include any identifying factors (name, specific age, occupation, religious affiliation, or highly specific offence details) in the transcripts of my recorded interviews. However, due to the nature of a case study, I explained to my participants that others at the organization might be able to identify them by context, which none of them were concerned about.

The interviews with the service coordinators supplemented the group member interviews by providing me with contextual information to help me understand the support group process and the RJ framework it uses. Conducting these interviews at the beginning of data collection facilitated an iterative process of reframing my research questions and interview guide for the group member interviews, because the purpose of the group and its RJ approach became clear. In

addition, the service coordinators helped me understand the history of the support group, the intake process for group members, and how the support group differs from other therapeutic modalities and RJ approaches. Therefore, these initial interviews helped me discern what makes the support group unique and what specific elements of RJ are present and absent. Interviewing a second service coordinator, as opposed to one, allowed me to hear a different perspective as well as clarify some of the information and themes that emerged from the first interview (Lietz et al., 2006).

As for the group member interviews, it was important for me to recruit people who had been in the support group for at least two years because they would have experienced the cycle of the support group twice with potentially different peers. My decision to cap the number of interviews with group members at five was because I was cognizant of the risk of developing compassion fatigue. Brannan's (2014) conceptualization of research as an "emotional journey" recognizes that emotional processes are inevitably involved in the research process.

As a woman and childhood sexual abuse survivor, I embarked on this research journey knowing that conversations about sexual harm might exacerbate post-traumatic stress symptoms. Given my training and background in the RJ field, I knew what self-care strategies would effectively soothe me and how to spot my early warning signs of emotional distress. Ultimately, conducting all five of my interviews within one month was difficult but it allowed me to condense the emotional impact of the interviews within a relatively short time frame. Because I followed a strict timeline, I was able to take three weeks off from my study after data collection so that I could regulate myself before returning to the data to analyze it.

Participant Observation

In addition to the seven interviews, I observed one two-hour long support group session that took place virtually on Zoom. I aimed to be as unobtrusive as possible so that distraction to

the group members and facilitators was minimal. I briefly introduced myself at the beginning of the session and then turned my audio and video recording functions off. The facilitators were able to hide my Zoom profile from the screen entirely. During the observation, I typed notes into a password-protected document. I relied on an observation protocol (Appendix I) to help guide my note-taking process. The purpose of integrating an observation into my methods was to witness first-hand the support group's RJ approach and the interactions between peers and facilitators. I was also able to see participants' emotions and body language, which ultimately showed how RJ values like empathy and democracy influenced their physical display.

My observation was largely unstructured, meaning that I entered the observational setting without a list of predetermined behaviours that would occur in a structured observation (Mulhall, 2003). Unstructured observations align with a constructionist research orientation because the goal is to uncover idiographic explanations and understand the subjective meaning of people's actions and the social world from the actor's point of view (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Furthermore, unstructured observations work well with grounded theory because they emphasize the discovery of emerging patterns and themes. An observation has the unique advantage of capturing data in more natural circumstances as opposed to an interview (Mulhall, 2003). However, observations introduce wider issues concerning validity because people are aware they are being studied (Mulhall, 2003). An advantage of observing a virtual support group session was that I was able to maintain a passive role which helped prevent disruptions in the natural rhythm of the group.

Data Analysis

To remain consistent with my symbolic interactionist theoretical orientation, I used a grounded theory approach to guide the data analysis process. I began the initial phase of data analysis during the data collection stage. While I was transcribing the interviews, I familiarized

myself with the data and reflected on the meanings my participants were conveying. The research journal played a huge role in this phase. I was able to be reflexive about what data was standing out to me due to the values, assumptions, and biases I hold as a woman, survivor, and RJ facilitator.

Transcription

I transcribed the entire conversations in my interviews from the audio recordings without cutting out any details. Bird (2005) argues that the transcription process should be faithful to the original communicative event. Therefore, including all of my participants' stories and the informal dialogue we engaged in showed me what my analysis should focus on as opposed to remaining stuck on the things I was specifically trying to understand. I included their speech fillers, grammatical errors, and conventions to capture their tone, humour, and pauses. After transcribing, I would turn to my research journal to clarify important moments in the interview and create detailed descriptions so that I could remember the experience as clearly as possible.

Coding and Memos

I transcribed the interview audio recordings during the same time period the interviews took place. Once I returned to my study after a few weeks off, I entered phase one of the grounded theory coding process: initial/open coding. During this phase, I allowed myself to be open to allow new ideas to emerge. Charmaz (2006) states that initial codes are provisional, as they can change depending on emerging themes and ideas. In this phase, I used a line-by-line coding method to establish codes that best fit the data I had and then progressively followed up on the codes that looked like they fit the data (Charmaz, 2006). NVivo facilitated the coding of my interview transcripts, observational notes, and memos. The memos contained brief information about my thoughts and questions I had about particular instances in the data. They also helped me connect

what I was reading to existing theory and literature and discover the tensions between them. At the end of the open coding stage, I identified thirty-four unique codes.

In the second phase of analysis, I organized the initial codes I developed, identified which codes were most important to my analysis, and built on pre-existing memos to explore the relationships between the codes. During this process, I refined my initial codes, combined many of them, and then elevated them to the status of a larger category. I created four “core” categories based on the interactions between the initial codes: 1) the needs and harms contributing and resulting from sexual harm, as told through my participants’ stories; 2) the RJ principles and values that were most visible in the support group; 3) the aspects of the support group the members deemed to be most meaningful; and 4) the impact the support group has had on their healing and reintegration outside of the group, within the community.

The third and final stage of data analysis, where I introduced a “selective coding” process, allowed me to engage with the categories I identified on a more theoretical level. Instead of constructing a theory through my analysis, which is common when using a grounded theory approach, I wanted to create a comprehensive image of the impact of the RJ support group since it is a phenomenon that is not widely understood.

The core themes presented in the next three chapters emerged from my participants’ discussions of their experiences in a RJ support group. I relied on RJ theory to help make sense of the large amount of rich data I collected (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Rather than impose a theoretical lens on my participants’ perspectives, however, I bridged their constructions of meaning with concepts in existing RJ theory. Ultimately, the existing theory was a guide that assisted in data coding and interpretation. Taken together, my methodological choices throughout this research were done with the overarching goal of highlighting my participants’ narratives.

Chapter 4

A Space for Doing the Work: Creating Accountability

My interviews and observation revealed how the support group effectively employed a restorative justice (RJ) approach to sexual harm. Through a symbolic interactionist lens, I discerned how my participants interpreted the support group's RJ approach and how it positively impacted their lives post-offence. The next three chapters present three thematic areas that emerged from the data. First, my participants conveyed that the support group was a safe space for them to fulfill their obligations and create accountability. Second, the support group facilitated the development of social capital which assisted them in their reintegration. In addition, they expressed that being immersed in a group of peers dedicated to preventing further harm cultivated a sense of community that they once lost or never had prior to the support group. Finally, the support group provided group members with a meaningful avenue for healing in which they experienced a profound sense of personal transformation. Ultimately, group members shared that the support group was effective in helping them repair the relationships that were important to them.

This chapter specifically discusses how accountability was effectively created in the support group. Moreover, I present three restorative values (understanding, honesty, and voluntariness) which my participants described as being central to a safe space where they could come to understand and address the harm they caused. I then describe how my participants found it meaningful to be challenged and to challenge their peers, as well as the role of the facilitators in supporting group members on their accountability journey.

My participants characterized creating accountability as work because it requires determination, mental strain, and commitment over time. Penny, a service coordinator, helped contextualize accountability:

The key aim of any restorative approach is to address the harm that has happened and prevent it from happening again. When it comes to working with PWOS [people who have offended sexually], it's supporting them in understanding why they've caused the harm and helping them figure out how to prevent it from happening in the future. There's a lot of layers to that and root causes of sexual harm. To help them figure that out for themselves. Our group is a space for people to do that work and do that work with other peers. (Intv, May 24, 2022).

According to Eugene, a group member, people who have caused sexual harm need to create accountability. This requires asking the individual, "why did you do that?" For Lawrence, another group member, accountability meant "making sure I don't cause more harm, that I don't offend again, and doing whatever I can to prevent other offences from happening, whether it's helping other group members, or the community as a whole understand ways that we can prevent sexual harm from happening." This exploration into understanding and addressing harm was not something that either of these interviewees experienced prior to the support group despite it being a pressing need.

Eugene stated that while he was incarcerated, "there were no discussions of the reasons why things happened. It was simply about 'we have a big stick and we're going to keep hitting you with it.'" After becoming involved in the support group, Marty, another group member, described a sense of hope that "at least there is somebody to be accountable to." Similarly, Ian said that "having the support upon release made that transition easier so that I could continue to practice being a new person." He expressed that it is "naïve" to think that people who have caused sexual harm will never reoffend because they got caught and have been punished. He stated that the support group has helped him acknowledge that "I'll never do it again, because I've learned and am practicing all these coping mechanisms and tools, leaning on support systems."

The service coordinators emphasized the importance of the psychoeducational group that the organization provides, which group members are required to attend before entering the support

group often soon after they have been charged or released from prison. The service coordinators explained how the education group provides members with the necessary language and understanding to meaningfully partake in challenging discussions, particularly about accountability. After an individual completes the education group, they can decide whether they would like to be placed in a support group. As such, all of the group members who participated in my interviews were previously involved in an education group at the organization. Although I did not explore the impact of the education group in-depth, the group members mentioned how being involved in the education group was pivotal for them because it introduced the topic of accountability for the first time in most cases. The way they talked about their experiences in the education group echoes Rye et al.'s (2018) findings. Joining the support group allowed them to explore accountability in much more depth through sharing and listening to their peers.

Accountability is a core need for people who have caused sexual harm and is critical in preventing further sexual harm (Sardina & Ackerman, 2022). Schneider and Wright (2004) explain that people who have caused sexual harm often engage in three levels of diminished accountability: refutation (complete denial), minimization, and depersonalization. These authors argue that these types of cognitive distortions promote and maintain offending behaviour. Further, diminished accountability impedes constructive work with people who have caused sexual harm (Blagden et al., 2014). It is important, however, to consider that their experiences of isolation and stigma may encourage them to deny and resist the label of “sex offender” (Blagden et al., 2014). Thus, it is imperative that they have a non-judgmental environment where they can explore accountability.

Values

My participants spoke about what made the support group a safe environment where they could freely explore accountability. Moreover, three RJ values appeared particularly vibrant

throughout my participants' narratives in the interviews and my observation of the support group. The RJ values of understanding, honesty, and voluntariness facilitated a safe passage through which group members could create accountability. These values are also explicitly embedded in the support group's guidelines as an affirmation of shared values (Coates, Umbreit, & Vos, 2003).

Understanding

In the support group, "understanding" is characterized by unbridled acceptance of a group member's full identity; the understanding that they are not wholly defined by the forensic and legally imposed label of "sex offender." Lisa, a service coordinator, explained that the role of the support group is that "we are holding someone accountable for their actions, but we also understand that that's one part of who they are." This understanding, that their offence is not the only aspect of who they are, was meaningful to my participants as expressed through the detail and emotions in their responses to my interview questions. They shared that the understanding nature of the support group created a sense of humanization which fostered authenticity. Encouragement to be authentic was what the group members needed to open up about the harm they caused. Ultimately, feeling understood helped group members better understand themselves and the harm they caused.

During the interviews, my participants said that they appreciated experiencing the "lack of judgment, there's acceptance for me and who I am," "openness about being able to share anything, and not being afraid," and having "a safe space where someone can feel like they can be real." In the words of Richard, "the way they [the facilitators] get involved with us, the way they speak to us. [...] They handle us with compassion, with understanding, with care and concern. They treat us like human beings." Ian stated that this sense of understanding is essential: "I think it's just

everywhere, in all the conversations. [...] Having the compassion and the understanding, and the will to listen and want to learn about each of our backgrounds, about our struggles and challenges.”

In our interview, Richard shared what it was like having his trial widely publicized in the media. He expressed that he felt “accosted” and “socially isolated.” When I asked if the support group helped alleviate those feelings, he said that the understanding nature of the support group helped him overcome the sense of isolation he felt. Richard also discussed what he believed were the root causes of his offending behaviour. Namely, his struggles with embracing his sexuality while being immersed in a highly judgmental environment. As a follow-up question, I asked if he had ever discussed his sexuality in the support group. He replied with, “very much so. It’s accepted. The group has allowed for those sorts of discussions to take place.”

During the observation, I witnessed first-hand how the facilitators and group members worked collaboratively to create an understanding environment. During their conversations, all members welcomed each other’s perspectives. After someone volunteered to share, they would be validated through verbal expressions and body language such as nodding and giving a “thumbs up.” At the end of the support group during the “check-out” period, where group members share how they are feeling or what they have taken away from that session, one group member said, “I value this room. I value you all. I hear you.” In my interviews, some of my participants expressed that receiving this sort of emotional validation helped them feel understood.

Honesty

The idea of the support group being a “safe space” came up multiple times during my interviews. My participants identified “honesty” as an important value in the creation of a “safe space.” Richard noted that the understanding nature of the support group facilitated a deep level of honesty. Specifically, he said “there’s a lot of openness allowed because of that compassion,

that empathy.” Lisa shared that honesty is a core value in the group and one’s ability to be honest is assessed during the individual’s intake period where a service coordinator determines if they are “group ready.” In Lisa’s words, “some people do better with individual work, or they need individual work before they’re ready to act in a group. Is the person able to share what happened with us, are they able to share the impact with us? How open are they to take accountability? Are they able to share in a group setting?” The purpose of the group, according to Penny, is to “create a space where people can have conversations about the harm that they’ve caused where they can’t have normally.”

The expectation of honesty is directly contrary to the dishonesty that contributed to one participant’s offending behaviour. In Lawrence’s view, “I was being very dishonest with myself, pretending that what I was doing was somehow not hurting people.” Further, he explained that people who have caused sexual harm sometimes “try to justify [their] actions by pretending it’s not causing harm. If we truly understood or were honest with ourselves about what harm we’re causing, it would be very difficult to live with ourselves.” Ian views honesty as an important step in understanding the victim impact of sexual harm:

I think talking about it is a really important step of accountability and responsibility. Talking about it with honesty, with being honest to myself about my actions, the place where I was in my mind, my state of mind...I guess. It’s really been a forum for allowing me to share a lot and talk, which solidifies those thoughts of me being accountable to myself and those actions...being accountable to the victims. (Intv, June 20, 2022).

The ability to be honest in addressing the root causes of his offending behaviour was not present throughout Ian’s experiences with some aspects of the criminal justice system. He said that his visits with his parole officer, for example, “didn’t necessarily address any of those things.” When comparing the criminal justice system’s goal of creating accountability and the support group’s RJ approach, Ian remarked:

It's one thing to just tell myself, "I've taken responsibility, it's all good. See ya, I'm going to move on." It's another to say, "I have and continue to take responsibility for my actions." I talk about those; I talk about what I did wrong. I listen. [...] Having these groups really allows that to continue to happen and allows me to stay true to my commitment to be responsible and take accountability. (Intv, June 20, 2022).

Through being honest about his offence, Lawrence said, "I teach others about how to prevent harm. Sharing my experiences with the group, helping others to hopefully understand themselves and get to a position where they aren't going to offend again." The conversation about loneliness and isolation I observed demonstrated what Lawrence said about how a member's honest sharing can help their peers understand themselves better. For example, one group member acknowledged that a sudden transition in life that led to feelings of isolation was one of the contributing factors to his offence. Another member expressed that the isolation he felt due to his job and questions around his identity contributed to his first instance of sexual interference with a minor. At the same time, however, he recognized that while this was not an excuse, "it was part of the explanation."

Another member added that he would sexually offend when the sense of isolation became overwhelming for him throughout his unstable marriage. Someone responded saying that the loneliness he felt contributed to his pornography obsession. I witnessed how honesty facilitated a conversation that encouraged members to look inside themselves for answers to their own offending behaviour. The act of looking deeper into oneself is an important step toward accountability because it involves exploring what contributed to their offence, while recognizing that they must act differently moving forward to prevent more harm.

The honesty within the support group also encouraged vulnerability. The term "vulnerable" was brought up often during the interviews and observation. For example, I observed a member who spoke up and said, "a few things said tonight are the true definition of vulnerability: taking a leap of faith and saying what you need to say regardless of how they may react to it." Vulnerability

in this context is illustrated by the way each member breaks through a veneer that in the past has allowed them to distance themselves from the harm. Moreover, the honest atmosphere of the support group fosters the courage to be vulnerable. For example, I observed the group members discussing deeply emotional topics such as addiction, mental illness, and suicide.

At the end of the observation, a group member said “it took courage to take the risk of being vulnerable but the rewards of that have been tremendous.” For Marty, he said that the support group has been “the only space I’ve been able to be completely vulnerable in. I have the odd time elsewhere, but it’s been the safest space I could ever find to be vulnerable. I’ve cried, and I don’t normally cry in front of people.” Furthermore, Ian talked about the impact that the support group’s honest atmosphere has had on him:

Learning from my peers allows me to learn more about the victims, learn more about how harmful my actions were. [...] It allows me to acknowledge my feelings more because I can’t have empathy for somebody if I’m not willing or able to feel that emotion myself. It creates that two-way street of me developing my emotions more and being able to communicate them better. (Intv, June 20, 2022).

Voluntariness

To be involved in the support group, a group member must want to be honest. This is something that both service coordinators emphasized, that group members are not court-ordered to be there or forced to participate. Rather, the group guidelines state that members must agree to participate to the “best of their ability.” Lisa explained that the group is “different from a counseling group because it is a voluntary process for them to engage in. Although some people are advised [to be there], it’s still a voluntary process.” It is important to emphasize that all members must voluntarily choose to be there each week, be willing to be challenged, and have the emotional capacity to volunteer their experiences. As Lawrence put it, “everyone is there to try to become a better version of themselves.” He went on to say, “I don’t see how someone could really

participate in the group...like a RJ group...unless they were willing to take that accountability.” Eugene mentioned that not everyone is ready to create accountability. In his words, “some people get so far and stop. They don’t want to look any deeper.”

For an individual to be “ready” to be involved in a group that places heavy emphasis on accountability, they must truly want to understand and address the harm they caused. In Ian’s experience, he felt a drive within himself to learn from his past so that he could “continue to be a better person” and teach his daughter to “grow up to be a good person.” He conceded, “if I didn’t have that internal drive, it wouldn’t matter what programs are out there.” Lawrence also explained what he thinks it means to be a voluntary member in the support group:

It’s showing that they’re making a genuine effort by attending group and participating in group. They’re making a genuine effort to learn from their mistakes and become a better version of themselves. To learn how not to offend...to learn how to avoid going down that wrong path. (Intv, June 18, 2022).

Simply just showing up is a way a group member can be accountable to themselves, their peers, and as one group member mentioned, accountable to their victims with whom “symbolic” steps of accountability are the only option. Symbolic steps of accountability are important in non-encounter RJ programs where there is no interaction between the victim and the person who has harmed them. A symbolic step of taking accountability, in the context of the support group, is putting in the maximum amount of effort to be present in the space. Richard admitted, “sometimes I come in the group feeling stressed, tired, overwhelmed by what’s gone on in the day...nothing related to group or nothing related to charges...just life in general. Do we really want to be there? But we put the effort into being there.”

To Challenge and to Be Challenged

As Penny put it, “when we’re asking them to be vulnerable, we’re asking them to be less polite.” According to Penny, if a member voluntarily shows up to the support group, they must be

receptive to challenges and provide their peers with challenges. In Lawrence's view, a "challenge" is a push to learn more about himself. He stated, "if you aren't challenged, I don't know that we'd ever really learn. We can make some progress, but we'll need a little bit of push to learn sometimes." Eugene expressed that because the criminal justice system did not challenge his accountability, he did not feel the need to be accountable when he got released:

If there had been no support group, all I was left with was resentment for the system and feeling like I had been a victim. Certainly, no accountability, as far as my understanding of accountability. I just thought, "the hell, I just got beat up." I had emotionally got dragged. I did not feel any need to be more accountable than I already had. I did my time. I had my conditions. I had my restrictions. [...] It's really hard for me to tell you how different it is having been in the group for a few years after and being able to come to terms with accountability. (Intv, June 15, 2022).

As illustrated by the quote above, someone who has just been released from prison may not feel motivated or know how to become accountable. As a result, they risk remaining resentful and stuck in a state of denial. This underscores the belief that criminal justice institutions are not conducive to accepting true responsibility and achieving specific deterrence. The "disintegrative" acts of shaming that occur in the criminal justice system often lead to unresolved feelings or emotions that contribute to diminished accountability (Braithwaite, 1989; Edelman, 2017). The challenges that group members give and receive in the support group closely resemble what Braithwaite (1989) conceptualizes as reintegrative shaming since they are offered with care and out of genuine concern for their peers.

Challenges around the minimization of harmful behaviour often came up in the support group. An interviewee who was convicted of accessing child sexual exploitation material expressed that being challenged in the support group, in his words, "made me realize that the justifications I would use, that I'm not creating victims, I'm not taking pictures, that what someone doesn't know isn't going to hurt them. All those justifications I used were bullshit." Another group

member, Richard, struggled with an overwhelming sense of anger over his victim's allegations. In his words, "I needed help to get beyond my anger because it was causing me to block all that...accepting my responsibility and acknowledging my responsibility." Richard was open with me about his experience of being challenged about his anger:

When I was new in the group, it wasn't appreciated...but by the end of my first year of involvement with the group I came to accept it and would look for it. [...] But initially it hurt...it actually caused me more anger. The more I processed it, the more I thought about it, then of course I came to realize that they're helping. [...] It's not criticism. It's not judgment. They're reaching out and trying to carry me in times that I'm having difficulty. [...] I remember one of them looking at me saying "you know, you're masking." I would say, "what do you mean? What am I masking?" "You're masking your anger, you're still angry. You can't heal if you don't get rid of that." (Intv, June 22, 2022).

Richard told me that the group members were able to detect his anger during his first "peer review." A peer review is an experience undertaken by one group member who talks about their sexual offence and where they think they are in their healing journey. Rather than it being an evaluation or assessment, the peer review, according to the support group's guidelines, "provides an opportunity to celebrate accomplishments and strengths, and to reflect on areas of continued growth." All group members are assigned a date for their peer review over the course of the support group year. After the group member is done speaking during their peer review, the facilitators and other group members are allowed to ask questions and provide challenges to that group member.

Lisa views the peer review as a beneficial tool in creating accountability and said people are often surprised when they hear about it. She stated that many people view the support group as a "soft approach" to sexual harm because they believe the group is not challenging for the members. This reflects the concern that many feminists and the general public have about RJ (Curtis-Fawley & Daly, 2005). I sensed the frustration in her voice when she talked about how people tend to think of the word "challenging" as being related to acts of punishment, degradation, and dehumanization. She said that the peer review can be an emotionally difficult albeit important

part of being a group member as it “helps them be challenged by others if they’re maybe not taking full accountability or minimizing in any way.”

The peer review provides an opportunity for group members to hear different perspectives. In Marty’s words, “even just hearing other peer reviews, I go ‘oh you know what, that relates to my story and how I’ve been doing things differently than I should have. I have to change before I do something bad again.” Likewise, Eugene told me, “often I leave [the peer review] thinking wow, that really opened my mind up to something I had not considered. Or, what I heard was something I need to think about and put some time into thinking about that aspect of my own accountability.”

Penny noted that “when people are saying things that are challenging accountability it can bring up conflict.” Lisa mentioned that sometimes group members compare the severity of their offences which can bring challenges into the group. Penny laughed and said, “it’s a good thing when there’s challenges, if everything is going too steady then there’s something wrong.” The reason why these challenges appear to be a healthy part of the group is because it gives group members exposure to conflict that is dealt with in a healthy way. As Lisa highlighted, “many of our group members have never had a healthy conversation or exchange with others or they have never seen a respectful exchange when there’s been conflict.” When conflict arises in the support group, it is necessary for a group member to openly acknowledge that they may have erred in their thinking. Ultimately, acknowledging their mistakes builds their capacity to take accountability.

Learning about their critical thinking errors was described by the interviewees as a valuable aspect of the support group. Eugene admitted, “when they [the police] came and arrested me I had no idea I had offended. I didn’t realize what I had done was an offence.” Lawrence also mentioned that initially he did not have much knowledge of his emotions or the root causes of his offence

because they were hidden behind a veil of justifications. In the beginning of his involvement in the support group, he told me that he often did not know the answer to some of the challenging questions posed to him by his peers. He recognized that group members at the beginning of their journey may not have all the answers to questions regarding their critical thinking errors because, as he said, “they may have never been asked that question before.” Lawrence followed up by saying, “that’s fantastic because that’s an opportunity for growth.”

The value of understanding was vividly clear in my participants’ responses to my questions about being challenged. For example, Lawrence acknowledged that it is important to understand where someone is in their journey, that they may not be at a point where they can fully understand their behaviour. Because of the restorative framework of the support group, a challenge is never posed in a harmful way that degrades someone’s character. It is always offered with care. For Marty, a challenge in the support group is “not having someone turn around and say, that is wrong, you’re not allowed to do that. Instead, it’s just, ‘okay, well what about from this perspective, or that perspective?’” To challenge someone with care, Lawrence argued that “we all appreciate some degree of challenge, but not an attack. One of the key things that we look at is not trying to make too many assumptions. [...] Basically using “I” statements to say, ‘okay, I hear you saying this. That makes me think of this. This is my experience with that.’”

During my observation, the facilitators used probing strategies, such as validation and reframing, which helped group members reflect on their experiences. I witnessed the facilitators politely interrupt group members when they would generalize their feelings instead of using “I” statements. For example, a newer group member talked about how much human beings rely on other people, and how people can become “neurologically impaired” without interaction. A

facilitator followed up with his statement by saying, “do you feel this way, with a lack of connection?”

The group members were frequently reminded to use “I” statements as outlined in the group guidelines. When reminded, a group member would apologize, rephrase their statement, and thank the facilitator for the reminder. The subtle reminder to use “I” statements is another way for group members to learn accountability, which is a critical step in RJ. They recognized when they have strayed from group guidelines, corrected their responses accordingly, and were acknowledged for doing so. At one point, a group member acknowledged the newer member’s rephrasing of their statement, smiled, and said “that was growth.”

The group members appeared to be extremely respectful and understanding in their challenges. Lisa illustrated a scenario that demonstrates how challenges in the support group may be received and how this differs from challenges given to the members outside of the group:

If somebody is sharing “I don’t think I need my counseling support” or “I don’t think any of this is an issue for me anymore,” somebody that also has walked in that past challenging that and saying, “what makes you think that?” [...] Because the group members really have respect for each other, hearing a challenge from a group member who also may have experienced the same concern is different from hearing it from a parole officer, social worker, or counselor they’re meeting with. It brings a different layer. (Intv, May 25, 2022).

In my observation, I witnessed a disagreement over the meaning of the word “genuine.” Group members openly expressed their opinions in a respectful way by using “I” statements while using a calm tone of voice, without shutting down their peers’ perspectives. Not only were group members generally accepting of the challenges they received, it also appeared that they were not afraid to challenge one another when they deemed it necessary. The interactions I observed reflect RJ dialogic principles. For example, respectful listening and sharing is central to the RJ process, as “I” statements and directed questions to one another guide the movement of dialogue (Coates et al., 2003). Being challenged means to engage in dialogue toward reconciliation with oneself. In

the context of the support group, it meant that a group member must accept that they have caused significant harm and withstand the pain of that reality. Ultimately, engaging in challenging dialogue with their peers is important to right the wrongs they have created (Arkwright, 2010).

The Role of the Facilitators

The process of creating accountability is largely guided and supported by the support group facilitators. The support group uses a co-facilitation model where two trained community volunteers facilitate the environment for the group members to choose and lead the discussions. In our interview, Penny spoke about the importance of the facilitators:

As there are conversations happening, there are some perspectives missing in the conversations, then they can bring that in. Which enriches the conversation. It could be less of an echo chamber that way, especially if everyone is seeing something from a certain perspective because there's a reason why they're there. Bringing in other perspectives can help challenge those thoughts. [...] In our current groups, they're all male-identifying folks, so when we have a female facilitator in the co-facilitation team, that can be helpful to remind the guys that other people have experienced different things, and this might impact them differently. (Intv, May 24, 2022).

Having a female facilitator in the co-facilitation team can be impactful in many ways. McCallum (1997) highlights that female facilitators in groups for men who have caused sexual harm can help them build healthy relationships with women and teach them how to use more acceptable language when speaking with women outside of the group. Ultimately, Lisa said that the facilitators are primarily “there to challenge if people are not participating or need to be challenged in some way to ask questions about their accountability, or things about the impact of the harm that has been caused.” Lawrence discussed how the facilitators provided him with a regular “check” into how he responded to challenging questions about his accountability.

The acceptance and care offered by the facilitators is echoed in the feedback the organization receives from the group members. In Lisa's words, “what we often hear from our clients is that there are two community members that are volunteering their time and are willing

to sit in that space with them and hear what they're experiencing and they're on that journey of their growth with them." Lisa continued, "volunteers become advocates for them receiving support out in the community." Like Lisa, Penny emphasized that the facilitators are representatives of the community in the support group space. This gives the group members proof that people in their community believe in them and their ability to grow.

Lisa mentioned that having community volunteers guide the support group adds a unique layer to the support group that would not be seen in staff-facilitated groups. Bringing trained volunteers into the space satisfies a core principle of RJ: that it is the community's obligation to address the needs of people who have caused sexual harm and to support them in their reintegration (Johnstone, 2011; Van Ness & Strong, 2015). Penny argued that allowing community members to engage in this space is "building that capacity in our community around having these conversations so that it's not only professionals who can have these conversations with people." Many Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) volunteers, for example, report that being part of a community-driven reintegration framework opened the door for discussions about sexual offending as a community issue (Lowe, Willis, & Gibson, 2019). By engaging in constructive dialogue, volunteers are undermining the secrecy of sexual harm simply by talking about it openly.

The service coordinators also talked about how the volunteers continuously demonstrate what accountability looks like, showing that it is not solely reserved for "the worst thing someone has done." Penny said:

If a facilitator makes a mistake, which they do because they're human, they're accountable. It's demonstrating being vulnerable and sharing pieces of yourself that might be uncomfortable. Everything that the group members are asked to do, the volunteers are asked to do within their boundaries. That's a big part of how things are set up. There's no "you need to do what I tell you to do because I'm the facilitator and you're the group member." (Intv, May 24, 2022).

This role-modeling aspect of the support group is something that Marty appreciates, as he stated that “even though they’re [the facilitators] not here for what we’re here for, it’s still nice to understand that they’re also human. It helps bring humanization from them to know their lives and struggles.” Role-modeling allows the group members to witness alternative models of behaviour and learn new language around accountability. That it is normal, for instance, to acknowledge that one has made a mistake while recognizing that they are still worthy of respect.

To summarize, this chapter’s analysis illustrates how the support group effectively facilitated an opportunity for the group members to fulfill their obligations. This meant that group members successfully came to understand and address the harm they caused in order to prevent the harm from reoccurring. The RJ values of understanding, honesty, and voluntariness worked together to make the space conducive to conversations about accountability. As my participants expressed, creating accountability was strenuous work but required for them to better understand themselves and the harm they caused. Creating accountability necessarily involved each group member to accept challenges and provide challenges to their peers which sometimes felt painful at first. The discomfort that some of the group members experienced initially was mitigated by the community volunteer facilitators who offered care and displayed what accountability looks like. In the end, the group members’ need to become accountable was met through participation in the support group. Developing accountability over time allowed group members to integrate new perspectives of sexual harm and healthy sexual behaviours into their lives. Not only that, but remaining accountable to their peers by choosing to be an active presence in the support group every week encouraged each group member to continue on their path to harm prevention.

Chapter 5

Feeling at Home: The Value of Peer Experience

Access to social support is imperative for people who have caused sexual harm as they will inevitably face stigmatization and social isolation upon being charged, convicted, sentenced, and eventually released from prison. Along with creating accountability, people who have caused sexual harm need to experience a positive re-entry from prison to their communities (Sardina & Ackerman, 2022). This chapter analyzes how social support from peers positively impacted the group members' reintegration experiences, particularly through generating social capital. In addition, the support group fostered a profound sense of community for the group members which helped mitigate the negative effects of stigma and isolation. In this study, reintegration meant the physical act of reintegrating—finding employment, building relationships, etc., but for my participants, it also represented a larger symbolic process of (re)acceptance into the community as a law-abiding member (Braithwaite, 1989). As Penny stated, reintegration largely centers around “how they see themselves and their identity.”

Both Penny and Lisa argued that having free, accessible, and long-term support in the community is vital. I found that the support group being free and structured to support group members in the long-term was impactful, particularly because “reintegration” is a long-term process with little to no room for error. In Penny's view, “our system is not good at telling people as they're going through it what's going to happen and how it works.” Yet, society places the burden on people who have caused sexual harm to not reoffend despite many areas where they could fail and few opportunities for support. Hattery and Smith (2010) write that social capital is one of the most important factors that shapes a person's reintegration experience because it helps individuals attain resources from networks of social support that can aid greatly in the re-entry

process. Previous studies on Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), for example, have shown their value in reintegration because participants can build social capital (Höing et al., 2013).

Penny stated that the support group is meant to help group members navigate social reintegration and the difficulties associated with having a sexual offence on their criminal record. I probed deeper in my interviews with the group members to explore the role that the support group played in their reintegration from prison to the community. They discussed three general areas in which they needed support during their reintegration process, which were also mentioned by the group members during my observation: a) managing grief; b) navigating structural challenges; and c) finding a community. First, the research illustrates that the group provided them with a space to process and work through grief that stemmed from the harm they caused and initially hindered their ability to reintegrate successfully. Second, their peers helped them navigate structural challenges associated with reintegration by offering guidance on how to maneuver legal processes and employment barriers. Finally, the support group cultivated a sense of community which helped combat the stigma and isolation they felt upon being released from prison.

Enfranchising Grief

People with criminal backgrounds experience “disenfranchised grief,” meaning that the type of loss being grieved, the person being grieved, or the griever themselves are classified as socially unacceptable (Doka, 1989). While they grieve the life they once had prior to offending, people who have caused sexual harm are disenfranchised through social rejection and neglect because they are viewed as outsiders undeserving of anything but moral condemnation (Douard, 2009). Consequently, they may experience amplified and extended grief because of their inability to resolve their emotions (Bailey, 2018). Unlike other community-based transitional RJ programs like CoSA, the support group provides a space for people who have caused sexual harm to speak

with others who have lived experiences of sexual offending. The group members told me that it was important for them to have a space where they could talk openly about their grief with those who would understand them and where their grief would not be rejected.

In our conversation, Eugene talked about his experiences in prison and how he needed to understand the emotions that contributed to his offence and those that arose throughout the criminal justice process. While he was incarcerated, his emotional needs were neglected and as he remarked, “there is no addressing the issues. There is none of that. They [other inmates] are all there for a reason, but none of that is being addressed. The reason it all happened is because the problems that they were living with were not addressed.” Eugene talked about how working through emotions is an essential part of life. Therefore, he found it troubling that there was no attempt by the criminal justice system to ask him what happened in his life that may have contributed to his offence. Furthermore, he contended that the public attitude toward people who have caused sexual harm as being “unacceptable” is a significant barrier that prevents them from engaging in meaningful conversations about their emotions and grief.

Penny mentioned that when someone has caused sexual harm, they “must reconcile the fact that they have a vision of who they are that doesn’t usually match with the narrative of who a sex offender is.” This narrative is evident in studies on public perceptions which indicate that members of the public believe people who have caused sexual harm are highly recidivistic, threatening to communities, and untreatable (Levenson et al., 2007; Socia & Harris, 2016). Most of my participants stated that they were highly aware of the public’s mythic narratives and beliefs even before they were officially sentenced. While they were incarcerated, they ruminated about how they were going to be treated upon release, but most of them did not have an opportunity to talk about the grief surrounding this new part of their identity.

My interview with Lawrence illuminated the importance of talking about grief and how the support group provided a forum for him to talk about the grief that resulted from stigma. He said:

The stigma is something that we all have, that we all deal with. We've committed a sexual offence...that carries a lot of stigma with it. [...] I felt like I had to watch my back everywhere I went. In reality, that wasn't true. It was just the impression that I was going to get beaten in the corner in some dark alley by some stranger who just knew that I committed an offence. That wasn't reality...but a lot of other group members have experienced similar things. (Intv, June 18, 2022).

With ongoing support from his peers, Lawrence was able to address his grief and overcome his fear of violence. He gained a better understanding of himself, as the support group gave him the chance to interrogate why, after over thirty years of his life, he chose to cause sexual harm. His peers helped him work through the grief in unpacking "how he got here." This required him to develop a better understanding of his emotions and how to work through them. He shared how his fellow group members, who had been addressing their grief for multiple months or years, taught him how to work through his own. This is an example of how group members engage in a collaborative process of leveraging or "giving and taking" each other's lived experiences.

As Lawrence put it, leveraging experiences involves "bouncing ideas off one another and contrasting our experiences." Interestingly, group members generally refrained from giving advice and specific recommendations and instead provided guidance, considerations, and validated each other through "I" statements. Richard expressed that he values this transactional element of the group, where he could receive support and share his experiences to help others. He also mentioned that his peers provided emotional support over issues unrelated to his offence. He said that his peers supported him when he would simply recognize that "this has been a shitty week...I can't tell you why...but I'm just feeling shitty."

The support group helped members navigate daily or recurring emotions, including the grief that resulted from the trauma of being incarcerated. Conversations in the support group

helped members learn about maladaptive coping mechanisms they used in response to this grief, which may have also played a role in their offending. Lisa said that the support group assists members in identifying “that there were things happening in their life and they weren’t coping with it, and that’s what led to offending, and they know they’re going back to that pattern.” As such, group members often found themselves contributing to discussions about alcohol misuse, addiction, and pornography. In Lisa’s words, “another benefit of the group being available is that they’re able to get questioned, feedback, or support.” She shared that if the group members did not have this kind of support, they could have progressed into a situation where they may have reoffended. This statement is supported by studies which demonstrate that emotional loneliness and deficits in social support are factors in the continuation of sexual offending (Marshall, 2010).

A core aim of RJ is to restore relationships that have been ruptured because of harm (Llewellyn & Howse, 1999). It was clear through my interviews that repairing their interpersonal relationships was important to the group members. My participants experienced a significant amount of grief resulting from the embarrassment, shame, and guilt of being caught by the police which negatively impacted their interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, their sexual offences caused severe ruptures in their relationships which aroused grief. Ian explained that after he was arrested, he wanted to focus on coping with ongoing struggles and becoming a better person. For him, this meant strengthening his relationship with his wife and daughter after he was arrested.

The support group allows members, according to Penny, to acquire the necessary language to engage in conversations with their loved ones about the harm they caused. For example, how to disclose their charges and how to discuss the root causes of their offence without minimizing or justifying their actions. Lisa stated that group members can help each other establish boundaries and learn how to respect other people’s boundaries. In addition, group members often discuss the

topic of victim empathy. Lawrence told me that conversations about victim empathy have had a ripple effect on his relationships. For example, an increased understanding of empathy has allowed him to be more empathetic toward his former significant other. Lawrence went on to ponder:

How is she dealing with this? That empathy allows better understanding of what is real, what's really going on here, what's really the impact. I found learning some of that has been really helpful in totally unrelated situations to sexual harm. I'm trying to apply this a lot more to just day to day life. (Intv, June 18, 2022).

Ian also talked about how he applies what he has learned in the support group in his marriage and fatherhood. He expressed that feeling useless is a major trigger for him but he has been able to receive support around this emotion from his peers:

Conversations about spouses are really important because part of me thinks that I failed being a husband and a father. Being able to learn from other people...how to become a better father and husband is really important to me. Getting support or reassurance that I'm not a bad husband or father. I just made mistakes. (Intv, June 20, 2022).

Ian mentioned that sharing his experiences in the group helped him combat feelings of uselessness because helping others provided him with a sense of satisfaction and mastery. This aligned with what Richard shared, that it was beneficial for him to be able to "pass on" information so it was not just something he was "hoarding" for himself. Ultimately, my participants shared that their emotional needs were met and the grief that was once unresolved and neglected was enfranchised. In other words, the support group was a space where they had the freedom to express their grief and have it be accepted with open hearts. An environment to meaningfully unpack grief helped alleviate burdensome emotional weight so that they could experience life in its fullest.

Navigating Systems

Although the organization lacks the funding needed to provide group members with practical support to overcome structural challenges associated with reintegration, the group members themselves often step up in this area. Specifically, my participants needed help

navigating the criminal justice system and finding employment. I discovered that the social interactions between group members acted as “information channels” where concerns, ideas, and goals were received and transmitted (Tolson & Klein, 2015). Penny explained:

People are needing support around how to maneuver post-incarceration as well as pre-incarceration, because we have folks who come to us before their sentence and incarceration or come to us without any charges at all. For those who are within the justice system and they’re pre-sentence, they don’t know what’s happening. (Intv, May 24, 2022).

Eugene expressed frustration over the ambiguity that was present during and after his sentencing. He said, “there were all these terms, but nobody seemed to have any definition, ‘what does that mean, you say I can’t do this, well what does that mean?’ [...] Even my lawyer didn’t really have any answers for me about anything...it was all uncertain.” These “terms” that Eugene referred to are the restrictions he was given upon being charged and eventually convicted, which outlined a set of parameters around who he could talk to, where he could go, and who he could be around. Some scholars argue that Canada’s risk management strategies, particularly Section 161 of the *Criminal Code*, are ambiguous and sometimes erroneously prohibit people who have caused sexual harm against children from engaging in certain behaviours (Handlarski, 2021; Knack, Blais, & Fedoroff, 2021). This context certainly rang true in some of my participants’ responses, as some of them reported that they faced uncertainty about the law. However, the support group provided them with access to peers who have also had to navigate various orders and restrictions.

Marty talked about how he experienced support from his peers about sentencing options. He was unaware of intermittent sentences and he said, “when one of the group members talked about how they were currently doing weekends, and how it worked, I mentioned it to my lawyer, and it helped me out in that aspect.” Intermittent sentences are prison sentences that do not exceed 90 days and include conditions prescribed in a probation order for when the individual is not in confinement (Dombek & Chitra, 1984). Individuals may spend the week living at home and going

to work each day but then are imprisoned on the weekends. Because of the guidance provided by his peers, Marty was able to serve an intermittent sentence which allowed him to maintain his job and relationships. He explained that this made his reintegration experience less complicated. Lawrence also discussed how he received support from his peers regarding other legal issues pertaining to the family court system and visitation rights with his children. This peer support helped Lawrence feel more confident in seeing his children, which has made a positive impact on his healing journey, and reflects a previous study that suggests that offenders who maintain quality relationships with their children may be less likely to reoffend (Ganem & Agnew, 2007).

One group member was able to secure an employment opportunity with a peer's help. Ian mentioned that someone guided him toward an employment opportunity in a different field since his previous field requires strict background checks. The anxieties that employers experience upon finding out that a job applicant has a sexual offence conviction poses a barrier to employment in numerous fields (Brown et al., 2007). As such, being a registered sex offender required Ian to "come up with a different solution to finding a job and income," which a group member helped him accomplish by advising him on what steps and equipment he needed. By his peer leveraging their own knowledge from working in various fields while on the sex offender registry, Ian was able to eventually pursue a new career path. This example is similar to how Richard reported witnessing group members helping each other navigate their fears around criminal record checks.

A Continuum of Experience

Eugene reflected on his experiences of giving and receiving emotional and practical support from his peers. He explained that a valuable aspect of the support group is that it involves a "continuum of experience." In his words:

When you go in, first you are the new kid. You see others who are farther on their journey. You learn by example...you learn by what they say. [...] Then as you move along, others

come in behind you. You can share...and you learn. It's that continuum of experience that was very valuable to me. [...] You can't isolate a group of new offenders, people newly out of prison, or only people that are 10 years out. If there's just those groups, there's no growth. When you put them all together, there's that continuum of experience that helps people. [...] It's all about working together that makes it happen. (Intv, June 15, 2022).

I found that group members continuously build social capital because of this continuum of experience. As new members are brought into the space, they are exposed to a variety of resources provided by longer-term members which they can mobilize to support the early stages of their reintegration, such as finding a job or building a relationship with their parole officer. As someone moves along their journey, new needs will arise and they know the support will be there. For example, as one begins to seek new relationships, they can find support from their peers around offence disclosure. As Lawrence said, "having people in different stages of recovery, different stages of the legal system, is important to be able to provide that support that we all need. It validates or solidifies my characteristics or my thoughts or my stage that I'm at in recovery."

When Lawrence became a member of the support group, it was important for him to witness members who were "ten years down the road from their original offence." The group members I interviewed all expressed that they needed to see proof that they could successfully reintegrate. Knowing that the support group would be there as their needs evolved and changed was comforting, as Lawrence said, "what I need for support now is not the same as what I needed four years ago." In fact, the group members expected that support to be there in times of need. As Ian remarked:

There are times that I need to speak up and share those wisdoms and give direction or guidance to people. I also expect that from other people, that if their experiences could lend a hand to me at times, then it's their responsibility to do that, obviously as long as they're comfortable doing it. (Intv, June 20, 2022).

This continuum of experience reflects a fundamental goal of RJ to identify and address the needs of everyone affected by harm, especially the needs to which individuals alone cannot attend

(Zehr, 2005). Overall, my participants appreciated how the new group members provided the “veteran” (longer-term) members with a sense of validation of how far they have come, an opportunity to spot areas of further improvement, and a sense of satisfaction in being able to lend their knowledge and lived experiences to others. Simultaneously, veteran members supported new members in navigating the early stages of their reintegration and challenging them to reflect on their thinking errors and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Uniquely, I found that peers can support each other when they have anxiety about the future.

Richard shared that sometimes those who are newer to the group will ask if the feeling of “hopelessness” will ever lift. Richard told me, “we who are a bit more seasoned can say, over time, and with a lot of work, a lot of struggles, yeah...that feeling will dissipate. You’ll overcome it and you will find that sense of peace. You know...the newness of life once again.” Having members at a variety of different points in the re-entry process was extremely meaningful for Ian. In his view, “if we were all on the same stage in this process of recovery, we wouldn’t be able to share our wisdom as much.” Richard shared similar feelings. He emphasized the importance of having people at different stages in the group, even citing an example to illustrate his point:

If they’re all at the same level, then they don’t have a whole lot of experience of the process and how can they help one another? They can to a degree...but not fully, whereas certain seasoned members can offer up what worked for us. For example, in our group the other night, we had somebody whose court appearance was delayed. He wondered what it would be like once he appears in court, and he’s sentenced. [...] People that went through that shared their experiences from when they were sentenced and what happened to them physically, mentally, and emotionally. He found that really helpful. [...] It has given him something to be aware of when the time comes. (Intv, June 22, 2022).

A few participants also disclosed that they appreciated the continuum of experience because it provided a unique dynamic that other groups they have been involved in or inquired about (i.e., probation support groups, SLAA, or CoSA) did not include.

Cultivating Community

Being convicted of a sexual offence not only introduces grief and new challenges in maneuvering unknown systems, but it also places a person into a new social category. As the literature highlights, people who have caused sexual harm are seen as a unique subset of criminals that are pushed to the margins of society (Douard, 2009; Pickett et al., 2013, Werth, 2022). As such, the sense of belonging to their community that they may have once experienced has essentially eroded. Sardina and Ackerman (2022) discuss how a person who has caused sexual harm often faces significant disruptions in their relationship with the community in a geographical sense but also their networks of relationships that they define as “community” (Zehr, 2015). For example, one of my participants discussed how he was outcasted from his place of worship and other Christian churches he attempted to join after he was convicted. Although some people who have caused sexual harm can find healing in religion, church members who are particularly strong in their religious beliefs and ethical positions struggle to accept “unworthy” individuals into their congregations (Dum, Socia, Long, & Yarrison, 2020).

A common finding that arose in my interviews and observation was that the social distance between the individual and their community generates a sense of isolation and despondency. As Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue, the need to belong is a fundamental human need. A lack of belonging, often facilitated by stigma, has been shown to contribute to failures in reintegration and increases in recidivism (Clarke et al., 2017; Tewksbury, 2012; Willis, 2018). It is therefore critical that there are avenues for people who have caused sexual harm to establish belonging and connect to a community (Fox, 2012). My findings revealed that the support group nurtured a shared sense of belonging to a group of individuals who are committed to positive change. This shared sense of belonging allowed group members to feel more connected to a community which generated a sense

of intimacy and optimism about the future. As Lawrence mentioned, at the foundation of this community is the fact that everyone “wants some kind of outcome, being a better version of ourselves and not causing more harm.”

My participants identified comfort in being part of a motivated group of people who have voluntarily chosen to be in the support group. A major part of cultivating a community is for each member to accept why they are present in the space. The first step, as I mentioned in chapter four, is taking the leap to voluntarily show up. Then, accepting why they are there involves the ability to be honest. Acceptance was difficult at first for some of my participants because of stigma and a general lack of trust in others. As Lisa noted, the group members often come into the group with trust issues because “the support they had around them before being incarcerated are not always there for them when they are reintegrating.” In fact, some group members I spoke with talked about how their relationships were not maintained because their loved ones could not see past their offence which fostered a sense of abandonment.

Richard shared that a major challenge for him was a lack of trust in others, which stemmed from inconsistent support and being “shunned” by his communities of care (workplace, friends, and family). Lawrence also explained how some of his friendships faded away because he did not trust that they would accept him. He told me he that has never disclosed his offence to some of his friends because, according to him, “it wouldn’t have gone well. It would have resulted in the end of a friendship anyway.” For Ian, the lack of judgment in the support group made it easier to be honest with his peers and accept himself. He stated, “especially to newcomers, having that acceptance just creates a platform for removing vulnerabilities and being able to share, being able to be honest, and really grow and listen.”

As group members immersed themselves in the support group, they became accustomed to this acceptance, which helped them view the support group members, including the facilitators, as trustworthy. In addition, the decision-making process in the support group strengthened their trust. Penny discussed that when issues arise in the group and they must collectively decide how to resolve them, the facilitators provide the group members with space to share their opinions. In Penny's words, the way decisions are made in the support group "lets them have a voice and ownership over their space." This sense of democracy, where every voice matters, ultimately solidified group members' trust that they would be heard and valued if they showed up.

During my observation, a group member affirmed that trust is vital in building a community, as he shared his story of how he took the risk of trusting his peers by saying things he never thought he could say to anyone. Although some of the group members were able to maintain their relationships after they were arrested, they explained that talking about sexual harm still at times felt unsafe and unaccepted in those relationships. As Richard mentioned, "they [his family and friends] don't want to be talking about issues that you're going through all the time. [...] You don't want to talk about your sentencing or incarceration." My interviewees conveyed to me that not having an outlet to release their emotions was isolating regardless of the quantity or quality of the relationships they had. Richard said that compared to his other relationships and support networks, the support group involved "a lot more sharing and we really come quite close to one another." The fact that the group met on a weekly basis to "lift one another up and out of the fire" was very important for Richard.

Being part of a group of recovering offenders, who shared a common goal of becoming better people, helped the group members not feel like "monsters." Lisa acknowledged that this "is what they're often treated as in communities." Richard admitted that he felt embarrassed, fearful,

threatened, and inhibited when his offence was made public. He said that he experienced “not wanting to go anywhere, confining myself to home. Even with court, hounded by the press. They would hound me as I left court with a camera and microphone in my face.” Richard said that he remained in a state of fear after he was incarcerated. However, participating in the support group helped him grapple with his criminal record because he realized that his offence did not define his whole identity and he should not have to spend his life in hiding.

By becoming close to one another, the group members not only come to accept why they are there, but they also begin to embrace their role as mentors. The group members talked about the importance of “authenticity” and defined it as the act of being “genuine,” where a person does not hold back their ideas or silence themselves. The group members shared that learning to be authentic boosted their self-confidence. Being authentic, according to Eugene, helped him not feel like a “pariah” which helped him accept himself. Seeing his peers who were “further down the trail” was a reminder for him that “life still goes on.” Being authentic feels safe once group members have practiced removing their vulnerabilities and have learned to trust others. Penny highlighted that “most offenders talk about not being able to be their authentic self when they were offending. A big part is learning that they can.” The support group was, in essence, a space where they could strip away the layers of themselves that society made them feel shameful about.

My discussion with Richard illustrated that if a group member fails to remove their vulnerabilities, the group will be negatively impacted. Richard expressed frustration about a former group member who never accepted the challenges his peers gave him and was never willing to participate. In Richard’s words, “he didn’t let himself be part of the group.” He emphasized that a group member must be authentic or else they will not “transform the group,” thereby illuminating the power of authenticity in the individual and the collective transformation of the group. Richard

went on to say that an individual's failure to authentically contribute "hacks on the group." To add to this, Richard revealed that months later, members of the group found out that this individual eventually reoffended. He said, "it took us two or three meetings to move through that and discuss the grief we were feeling...the anger we were feeling. The despair."

This powerful story told by Richard illustrates the profound sense of belonging the group members feel in the support group. The fact that one member contributed to such significant emotional upheaval demonstrates the deep level of "camaraderie" in the group, as Eugene mentioned. Eugene said that the support group is a space where members have an equal share, where valuable friendships can blossom through authentic sharing with "people who know the worst parts about you." As Lawrence stated, "there's not many outlets to speak openly and honestly, just in our general world. Let alone anything that may involve sexual offences."

Eugene told me that he has never been a "group person." Coming to the support group for the first time was eye-opening, as he said that nobody appeared shocked by the details of his offence. This helped him feel less isolated because he finally found a community of people who could truly understand and relate to the darkest side of his past. Once he removed his vulnerabilities, in Eugene's words, the support group "made me feel like I was at home. It felt safe." He compared this feeling to how he felt while he was in prison, where he was treated as less-than-human and simply "took up space." As a long-term group member, Eugene now feels like he plays a mentor-like role in the group and continues to experience a tremendous sense of belonging. He expressed that, "if the support group wasn't there, I would have been in a very different place. I'm not sure I can imagine where I'd be. I'd be isolated."

Feeling "at home" in the support group and feeling like he belonged somewhere helped Eugene, similar to Richard, go from feeling hopeless and "in hiding" to feeling a renewed sense

of worth and reduced fear of engaging in his community. For instance, Eugene explained how he began to engage in clubs and activities in his community once again which has helped him reintegrate. Earlier in his journey, paying visits to his probation officer was a “constant reminder” of his sexual offence which lowered his self-worth and isolated him after each visit. The stories he heard of people who have sexually offended getting “beat up” was what he described as mentally limiting” as it made him not want to “go out anywhere or do anything.”

The observation allowed me to witness how the group members see themselves as a community. The discussion topic of the group I observed was focused on loneliness and how the support group has helped combat this feeling through cultivating a sense of community. Right from the start, I noticed how the group members’ body language appeared very relaxed yet attentive. Although the support group was held virtually, each member had their camera turned on, appeared to have zero distractions around them (for example, no cellphones), engaged in direct eye contact with the screen, and validated other members when they spoke by nodding their heads repeatedly and giving hand gestures such as a thumbs up. Additionally, the check-in period of the support group was very conversational and the group members appeared to have a vested interest in how everyone was doing. If a group member acknowledged that they had a particularly bad day or week, their peers would give their undivided attention to this group member by recognizing their feelings and asking them if they needed space to talk about it.

In the observation, also, a group member shared that the sense of belonging he derives from the group helps him feel less lonely because he has learned through his peers’ sharing that his struggles are not unique to him. Instead, he sees himself as a member of a community with similar struggles. Another group member shared that although he is surrounded by dozens of people every day, he is not connected to them like he is connected to the people within the support group. He

elaborated that the sense of belonging in the support group is more than just “generally relating to one another.” Moreover, his fellowship with other members of the support group builds a sense of unity. He continued to reflect on this unity, noting how a community can be built despite significant age differences between members.

The group members all came to an agreement that despite differences in their personal characteristics, the support group provides a sense of community through the authentic sharing involved. The ability to help one another maintain a life of desistance forms a special bond. As one group member said, he values this bond because it promotes authentic sharing that “gives direction and reassurance.” During the observation, I noticed how frequently the group members overtly regarded the support group as a “community,” which strongly suggests that they feel a high degree of connectedness in this space. The shared sense of belonging nurtured by the support group is embodied in the way each member identified themselves as being accepted and important to the overall functioning of the support group.

The purpose of this chapter was to demonstrate how the RJ-focused peer support group helped group members process complex grief and navigate structural challenges associated with reintegration. Moreover, their post-incarceration experiences were positively impacted by having access to social capital and building relationships in a positive social space. Participation in the support group cultivated a sense of community which was important given the isolation they experienced after being arrested and even prior to their interactions with the criminal justice system. A key finding in this chapter was the “continuum of experience” that my participants described as being central to the support group. Furthermore, having exposure to peers at various stages of community re-entry granted them access to different perspectives, making them feel like their needs were continuously being met.

As the findings have illustrated, reintegration is not simply the physical act of transitioning from prison to society. Reintegration, for my participants, meant being able to overcome emotional challenges and structural barriers that stood in the way of them feeling accepted and connected to their neighbourhoods and communities of care. The support group was effective in providing the group members with a space to confront difficult feelings and situations that in its absence would have left them feeling scared, hopeless, and isolated. Furthermore, peers provided insulation from the negative effects of stigma, optimism in managing obstacles, and social bonds characterized by reciprocity, safety, and unwavering love.

Chapter 6

A Pipeline of Marginalization to a Renewed Sense of Life

The traditional criminal justice experience—being arrested, sentenced, and sometimes incapacitated, facilitates a new life where one becomes a perpetual outsider. A person who has sexually offended is regarded as a homo sacer (Spencer, 2009) or a monster that haunts—a spectral figure (Werth, 2022). In their study of parole personnel, for example, Werth (2022) found that these professionals treat people who have caused sexual harm as ghostly figures that are difficult to locate or contain. As a result, they see the commission of future sexual harm as pervasive and nearly inevitable. Further, Werth contended that these pessimistic views regarding recidivism "intensifies the fear, revulsion, and monstrosity of the dangerous sex offender" (2022, p. 17).

As Zehr (2005) acknowledges, the criminal justice process compounds the harm that contributed to and resulted from the sexual offence. Instead of helping, the process stigmatizes, labels, and ostracizes criminalized individuals. In the previous two chapters, I highlighted some of the collateral consequences my participants faced due to their criminal histories. They shared how the criminal justice system turned a blind eye to what they needed to transform: the ability to re-enter society and put their lives of crime behind them. Interestingly, despite feeling stigmatized and being treated poorly while in prison, my participants did not internalize these negative feelings or experiences to the point where their attention was diverted away from healing. Ultimately, experiencing the RJ support group supported their re-entry and allowed them to manage the stigmatization that resulted from their criminalization.

A common conversation I had with my participants was around their need to heal from their past and commit to a non-offending life moving forward. Fortney, Levenson, Brannon, and Baker (2007) showed that in some cases, people who have caused sexual harm are so fixated on their resentment for the system that they do not invest energy into healing. Although my

participants harboured resentment toward the criminal justice system, they exhibited a strong desire to heal. In fact, two of my participants stated that being arrested was the “best thing” that ever happened to them because it finally pushed them to confront the cycle of offending.

This chapter illuminates the contrasting impacts of the criminal justice system and RJ interventions on individuals criminalized for sexual offences. I argue that criminalization and incarceration materializes in realities that are antithetical to the conditions required for individuals to overcome stigma, prevent further offending, and reintegrate into society. I draw on my participants’ experiences with carceral and RJ interventions to show how the latter helped them find an avenue for healing after causing sexual harm. I discuss how the support group played a role in repairing my participants’ self-relationship, which had a positive ripple effect on their interpersonal relationships outside of the support group, as well as their sense of connectedness to their communities. Above all, their experiences underscore the ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system in taking measures to prevent recidivism and promote healing post-incarceration.

Experiences of Punishment

When I asked my participants if they had any thoughts or comments at the end of the interviews, most were eager to speak about their experiences of punishment and their frustrations with the criminal justice system. They argued that the system blocks opportunities for people who have caused sexual harm from finding meaningful avenues for healing. In chapter two, I explained that according to Yantzi (1998), “healing” can be thought of as a journey on which a person genuinely acknowledges the harm caused by their actions, accepts responsibility for those actions with feelings of remorse and personal responsibility, and changes their behaviour so that they gain a greater understanding of themselves and so that no further harm is done. Instead of a healing journey, what my participants described the criminal justice system as was a carceral pipeline of

marginalization where a deep level of despondency formed and a loss of courage was amplified. This pipeline of moving from partial or complete incapacitation to ongoing surveillance in the community complicated their ability to heal.

Narratives from interviewees about their criminalization and punishment echo research findings that illustrate the effects of people who have sexually offended being treated as objects of fear and disgust, leading them to being perceived as less deserving of protection, care, and support (Spencer & Ricciardelli, 2017). Participants described how the criminal justice system provided little to no support in navigating the challenges they would inevitably face upon release as they attempted to re-enter society. Marty, for example, stated that he was not given support or any RJ options in combination with his sentence because of the nature of his charges. He stated that he did not find healing in his intermittent sentence, as going to prison on the weekends was simply a “weekend getaway from life” where he did not learn anything meaningful or receive help for the issues that contributed to his sexual offence.

Eugene similarly described the correctional system as a “punishment system,” where there were no opportunities for “correction of any kind.” He shared that his prison experience was terrifying and that he faced physical, mental, and emotional abuse from inmates and prison staff. Eugene’s experiences, unfortunately, are not unique. Multiple studies show that people who are incarcerated for a sexual offence are stigmatized and harassed by fellow inmates and prison staff (Ricciardelli & Moir, 2013; Ricciardelli & Spencer, 2014; Ricciardelli, 2020; Spencer & Ricciardelli, 2017). Spencer and Ricciardelli’s (2017) study on correctional officers’ perceptions of people who have sexually offended found that broader cultural views of this inmate population intensifies within their occupational structures. Moreover, officers’ negative emotions toward these inmates cause them to disengage with them while on duty. The precarity people who have

caused sexual harm face in prison heightens their potential for victimization. Consequently, they remain in a state of anxiety and apprehension where they are fearful of their convictions being exposed (Ricciardelli & Spencer, 2014). A few of my participants shared how they tried to conceal their convictions from other inmates and correctional staff. Additionally, being placed in protective custody (PC), although helpful in theory, felt like they had a target placed on their backs. Eugene shared his experience of being in PC and being allowed into the general population at times:

I was in protective custody. I was put on a range after lockdown in the evening, and when I got up in the morning when we were allowed out, a guy walked over to me and said, “why are you here?” I said, I don’t want to talk about it. He said, “you shouldn’t be right here because you’re not safe. You need to go and ask that guard to take you out of here right now.” He banged on the window and the guard came. The guard swore at me. (Intv, June 15, 2022).

While incarcerated, people who have caused sexual harm do not have a safe space to heal because they are living in survival mode and are constantly navigating ongoing threats and fears of violence (Blagden & Wilson, 2020). Further, the need to constantly monitor one’s immediate social environment creates an individualistic disposition that is regularly reinforced (McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2021). As a result of the prison climate, they do not feel secure enough or have the emotional capacity to develop empathy or accountability. Ideally, exploring their offence from an emotional perspective should occur in the self-reflection process after causing harm because it helps them to think about who they are, where they are, and where they want to go moving forward in life after prison (Blagden & Wilson, 2020). However, it is daunting and often dangerous for a person who has sexually offended to come to terms with the harm they caused while incarcerated.

Lawrence talked about how he felt at rock bottom when he was charged and how he remained at rock bottom while in prison. He stated, “I had absolutely no idea what to do with myself...I was suicidal...I was completely on the break...I didn’t know what was going to happen.” The biggest thing Lawrence needed was to understand the complex emotions that

contributed to his offence. However, while imprisoned, it was hard for him to find motivation to do anything “other than not get beat up.” He explained that he generally felt unmotivated, did not learn anything of value, and was not offered any support in prison. Fortunately, he joined the support group two months before he was sentenced so he was able to receive support from peers while serving his intermittent sentence. He shared:

I feel for the people who were arrested and immediately put into remand. Not out on bail... they went right into prison and sentencing...straight through and just out on the street... at the end of it all. They'd have that whole period of being stuck, in what I said was the lowest point of my life. They would have just been stuck in that for that whole time. Trying to get out of that while in prison, I can't imagine how someone would get out of that. Being able to have that initial support I think was huge...a huge benefit to me. I would think probably to most people who had that option. (Intv, June 18, 2022).

A participant expressed that he was relatively fortunate to have been incarcerated at an institution where he received support, programming, and a sense of community. He described his time spent there as being an important pillar to who he is as a person today. He shared that he learned how to navigate stress and deal with sexually harmful thoughts, urges, and behaviours. At this institution, he was surrounded by numerous other men who had sexually offended which helped him feel less alone. However, this participant's experiences are unique not only in relation to existing research but also when compared to the experiences of the other four interviewees. Their stories were largely negative and consistent with the literature that documents the harm and trauma inmates who have sexually offended experience. In Eugene's words:

My prison time was absolutely of no value to me at all. Society put me in a very dangerous, vulnerable place. I did not appreciate that. There was no benefit to that. I came out relatively unscathed...that's the best I can say. I got lucky that I wasn't damaged further. So many people in the penal system suffer so much harm and trauma. [...] The only thing that happens is those who have been in and out and back in again, they learn new tricks and learn how to manipulate the system better. It's about when they come back, not if. (Intv, June 15, 2022).

The way the group members talked about their experiences of punishment conveyed to me

the profound impact of the support group and how much being involved meant to them. The kind of support and quality of the interactions within the support group was directly contrary to what they were exposed to in prison. To them, prison was a survival mission where all they could focus on was their immediate environment and not the human consequences of the harm they caused or how to build a better future for themselves and others.

Realizing a Future

Research shows that people who have engaged in crime often initially feel hopeless about the future which can facilitate continued offending behaviour (Healy, 2013). My participants showed me that finding hope is possible even in the most desperate moments of the human condition. Seeing that a future was possible after causing sexual harm allowed them to feel like they could heal and move beyond the harm they caused. As Lawrence shared:

Knowing that there is a light at the end of the tunnel is a big thing. Even if there is still prison time in the future, I knew the day I was arrested that there was prison in my future. It was just a question of when I was going to get there and what is it going to look like. Knowing that there was a future after that...was huge. (Intv, June 18, 2022).

The act of “moving beyond” the harm, as my participants stated, does not mean to forget or ignore the harm they created. It means that their offence no longer burdens them or stands in the way of a healthier and more fulfilling life. It means that they are able to recognize their human qualities and actively re-engage in life once again. They conceptualized the act of “moving beyond” as a healing journey where they eventually arrived at a sense of “wholeness.” The way my participants identified themselves as feeling whole was reflective of Cooley’s (1902) theory of the looking glass self, wherein a person’s sense of self grows out of their interactions with others. A more positive sense of self derived from exposure to RJ values and norms, as well as through repeated positive interactions with peers.

The concept of “wholeness” is also rooted in Indigenous ideas of healing. In this perspective, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Carvalho & Platt, 2019). My participants’ perceptions of becoming “whole” meant they were able to recognize how their parts (i.e., childhood, relationships, triggers, criminal record, etc.) were interconnected and understand that the whole of who they are is greater than these parts. Furthermore, my participants shared that the support group provided each of them with an opportunity to explore all aspects of their identity and eventually arrive at a better understanding of who they are as a whole person. In this process, they began repairing their relationship with themselves. Richard shared what this felt like to him:

We move beyond what caused us to act out the way we did, so we become whole. We become healthier, mentally and emotionally. Therefore, physically. We become an active, giving, vital part of the community because we’re no longer haunted by what caused us to act out. We’re no longer pushed, there isn’t that dark cloud around us anymore. We’re not going to act out. We’re not going to sexually assault, sexually interfere, or go on child porn, we’re going to be more positive, healthy members of society. (Intv, June 22, 2022).

To become whole, it was important for group members to see first-hand that healing was possible. The group members shared that proof of healing was uncovered through listening to each other’s stories of healing in the support group. As Lawrence described:

I met other members who had been through the criminal justice system and released 10 years prior at that point. They rebuilt their life, had a good job, nice home, great family, all these dreams. He was showing some pictures of some of the work he was doing in his backyard and all these things he was looking forward to and enjoying in his life. Wow, okay, there is a future here. My life just took a huge turn but it didn’t end. It’s taken a huge turn but I can rebuild and create a new version of myself going forward. In terms of healing that was by far the most important part. Knowing I wasn’t alone...knowing there was a future. (Intv, June 18, 2022).

Richard shared very similar feelings as Lawrence, as he mentioned that gaining a “sense of future” was his most significant need at the beginning of his healing journey. In the previous chapter, I explained how Richard, as a long-term group member, supports newer group members in realizing that there is a future by explaining to them that they will eventually feel a “newness of life.”

Having peers reaffirm that a future after harm is possible is important to combat the myth that people who have caused sexual harm are highly recidivistic and irreparably damaged (Levenson et al., 2007). Additionally, my participants' narratives highlight the importance of personal agency. Simply knowing that there is a future for them, despite pessimistic societal beliefs, creates an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966; Tyler, Heffernan, & Fortune, 2020). People who have engaged in interpersonal violence, such as sexual offending, have been found to possess a more externalized locus of control compared to non-violent offenders (Marsa, O'Reilly, Carr, Murphy, O'Sullivan, Cotter, & Hevey, 2004). This means that they view their outcomes as dependent on forces outside of their control (i.e., societal forces, powerful others, a result of luck) instead of dependent on their own behaviour or personal characteristics (Rotter, 1966).

My participants' internal locus of control seemed to develop and strengthen through their interactions with peers in the support group, which reflects the forensic psychological literature stating that an individual's environment can help build and reinforce a person's locus of control orientation (Rotter, 1954/1966). In Lawrence's perspective:

The day I was arrested, my life as I knew it ended very suddenly. I went from being married, a family man, to being kicked out to the side of the curb and homeless and arrested the next day. It was a total end in about 24 hours, a complete change in my life. Life as I knew it was done and I had no idea how I could possibly make a new life or continue some new version of my life. [...] Being able to see that people who have gone through all this and are building a good life for themselves on the other side, is a huge motivation to say "I can do that too. I don't need to just give up on everything...I can actually learn from this...move forward...take what I need to do and move on beyond that and try to become a better person afterwards." That's an option. Knowing that that's simply an option to become a better version of myself after prison and to build a new life...to continue on with things. It definitely gives a lot of motivation to try. (Intv, June 18, 2022).

Realizing that there was a light at the end of the tunnel was "by far the most important part" for Lawrence. Richard also talked about how being in the support group helped him see that his life was meaningful and that "there is a future." As Lisa mentioned, group members are impacted

by witnessing their peers re-engaging in life and taking risks. In addition, RJ values such as understanding, respect, and advocacy for positive self-change have an impact on the way group members leave the support group each week. In Richard's words, he leaves feeling "a sense of hope, that sense of opportunity. You know...a sense of further change. Just lifted to the point where okay...I can do this...I can go on. I experienced that renewed sense of joy...that renewed sense of life...of life being meaningful."

Personal Transformation

My participants shared that becoming whole involved a great deal of personal transformation. Lawrence reflected, "where I started four years ago to where I am now, maybe it [the support group] was quite transformational. But it's all about the steps...it's not 'oh, all of a sudden after this one evening, I completely transformed.'" Since the support group is designed for longevity, group members can witness change in themselves over time. Lawrence argued that there is a "little bit of improvement each week," and when those moments of improvement are added up over the years, a person can feel personally transformed. Eugene said that seeing new group members come into the support group helped him see his own personal transformation, as he was able to look at them and recognize "that's where I was, and now I see change in myself."

While he was incarcerated, Eugene desired a space where he could talk about his offence and be listened to. When he inquired about the education group and support group, he was worried that there would not be space for him. Eugene openly shared that he experienced suicidal thoughts and a desperate need to understand himself better. He acknowledged that as a man, there were very few spaces where he could be emotionally vulnerable, but eventually finding a space where he could do that was what he described as "freeing." He explained that prior to and while he was offending he did not feel like a "whole person."

Penny and Lisa both explained that transformation is a long-term process, and particularly when using a RJ approach, there is often significant growth in the areas of accountability and victim empathy. Penny described that she has seen group members go through an “awakening around who they are, being able to express things that they never thought they could express, show emotion that they thought they could never show.” She talked about how a member’s peer review over the years will become “deeper” as their self-awareness develops, which she said is a “great reflection of where they’re at.”

Lawrence, for example, told me how over time he was able to see the harm in his actions more clearly. He came to understand that his actions harmed not just his direct victim, but his indirect victims, such as his family members. He mentioned that for people who caused sexual harm on the internet, it might be harder to develop accountability and victim empathy because there is more anonymity and distance from the victims. With that said, one group member shared his experience of developing empathy for his victims in the child sexual exploitation material he viewed. Having his justifications for his behaviour challenged by the group members made him see that he was erring in his thinking. Over time, he realized that although he did not physically harm the children in the images and videos he viewed, he revictimized them by watching their abuse and contributed to the demand for child sexual exploitation material. Becoming personally transformed, for this group member, was a symbolic step of making amends to his victims through a genuine commitment to never access this material again. He explained:

Those commitments result in those actions and behaviours being better, being different, being more aligned with the person I want to be. Less with the person I am and the denials of all those things. Just being more aligned with the characteristics, values, and morals that I want to have. Staying true to that. (Intv, Anonymous).

My participants’ stories of personal transformation involved discussing how they came to see their offence in a different light. Lawrence explained:

Certainly, when I look back at where I was when I was offending, it seems like a whole world away almost. How little I knew of how I was dealing with things, and how my emotions were at the time, and where I was going. It's just such a bad spot in my life and now I can look back at it and start recognizing that, "yes, this was bad because of this situation I was in." Because I wasn't dealing with things and being open and honest with the people around me. It all spiralled together, leading me to a very bad spot and I dealt with that spot very badly by offending sexually. It was an escape mechanism I guess you could say. (Intv, June 18, 2022).

In chapter five, one of the values I highlighted as being central to the support group was understanding, which involved the group members and facilitators treating each other as whole people. Feeling understood contributed to an ongoing process of personal transformation and as Richard explained, created an opportunity for "further change and renewal." He said:

And then we leave [the support group]...we've mentioned...just how much more energized we feel, either how much more energy we have or more at peace we feel. Depending on how the meeting's gone and depending on how things have impacted us, but we always have something more positive to take away from group than when we went into group. For me...it's also that sense of hope. Somebody said something fun, so there's a sense of joy that you take away. There's also that sense of hope, that sense of opportunity. Just lifted to the point where okay...I can do this...I can go on. I'm not going to let the blahs of life hold me down. (Intv, June 22, 2022).

For Lawrence, feeling more at peace with himself and his life involves mentoring others in the group by sharing his experiences to hopefully prevent future sexual offending. The way Lawrence smiled and spoke positively about this illustrated his altruistic personality and genuine care for his peers. He shared that helping others is a way he takes responsibility for the harm he caused.

Although he cannot not undo the harm, he said that he can:

Make sure that I'm staying in a good spot and I'm not getting back to the bad part of my life, where I was offending. Understanding those warning signs of, "if I continue on this slippery slope that leads one way, let's get off that slippery slope and go the other way." That's a big part of the responsibility. (Intv, June 18, 2022).

Taking "symbolic" steps of responsibility for the harm they caused, for example, by helping others and remaining committed to the support group, played a crucial role in Ian's personal transformation and healing his relationship with himself. He shared:

I define transformation in this context of our conversation as actions, as what tangible actions are different now. How are your actions different now than they used to be? For me...I've always been intellectual, but the difference is how do I translate that into a different action or a different behaviour? Having the different behaviours, which are a pattern of actions and responses, how are my behaviours different than what they used to be? It's not just a one-time action or reaction, it's over a long period of time. It's continuously improved actions. Those actions...how are they different or better than they used to be? There are a lot of actions or responses that I've had that are different than what they used to be which is a direct result of learning more about myself. (Intv, June 20, 2022).

Richard similarly explained that he is not the same person as he was going into the support group. He stated that he has been transformed "because there's so many black or negative levels that have been lifted off us. So many stresses, feelings, and attitudes." This "black level" that Richard spoke of was apparent during my observation when one group member talked about how he was "deep" into the offending cycle and riddled with justifications and self-hatred. After his conviction, becoming involved in the support group allowed him to recognize the unconditional love that was around him. While he was offending, he stated that he did not recognize or accept the love that his family was willing to give him. Being treated with compassion by his peers and the facilitators helped him mend his self-relationship. He shared:

There were people out there that I should have trusted and leaned on. I had choices. What I chose to put myself through, what I put victims through. I was so deep in the cycle, that I had justifications and [was not] able to recognize unconditional love. (Obs, June 2, 2022).

The Ripple Effect

As Penny mentioned in our interview, there is an interaction between how a person sees themselves and how they function in their relationships. Interestingly, the personal transformation experienced by the group members positively impacted their relationships outside of the support group and strengthened their ties to their communities. This is reflective of RJ's aim to prevent further disruptions to the community fabric caused by perpetuated harm (i.e., through victimization by the criminal justice system, stigmatization in the community). Fundamentally, RJ not only aims

to restore community members individually, but also strives to restore feelings of cohesion and harmony in society as a whole. While I was not able to explore the perspectives of the group members' loved ones directly, my participants explained how they think their relationships were impacted by their involvement in the support group.

Richard mentioned in our interview how his family is happier because of the strides he has taken to become healthier. For example, his relationship with his wife has been positively impacted by the support group because the group is his primary outlet to release stress. Ian discussed how the support group helps him “propel” forward by giving him the energy to be a better father and husband. For Ian, the support group allows him to slow down, be patient, and have empathy for his wife and daughter. He explained how the group challenges his humility:

[The humility] allows me to apologize to my wife for something I did within the last six days or realize that there's something I need to be doing a little bit better or listen to her more. “Sorry, I didn't understand that might have been something you were feeling. I understand now.” I almost always leave the group feeling like a better person than when I came into the group. (Intv, June 20, 2022).

Some interviewees reported witnessing positive changes in their relationships as their understanding and perception of themselves as unloved, unworthy, and monstrous changed into feeling accepted, human, and whole. As Eugene mentioned, his prison experience affirmed the feeling that he was “no longer human” and that he was simply “taking up space.” Once these types of messages become ingrained they are difficult to dismantle. The ability of the support group to strip away these harmful messages affords members an opportunity to become healthier for themselves and their loved ones.

The support group, however, is not the only way relationships can be transformed. It was important for Lisa to highlight the role of the “partner's support group” that the organization coordinates for individuals who are in an intimate relationship with someone who has sexually

offended. As she mentioned to me, quite a few of the spouses or partners of the offenders involved in the support group also seek support from the organization. Therefore, people who have caused sexual harm and their partners can seek support around relationships separately and come together feeling more restored. The commitment to remain in a relationship with someone who has sexually offended carries stigma. Often, the partners have never disclosed their loved one's sexual harm before. The support group allows them to share what challenges they are facing around their partner's offence. As Lisa explained, the organization uses a RJ lens to provide support not only to victims and offenders, but also to loved ones. The partner's support group is worthwhile to mention because it can complement a group member's work done in their own support group.

A unique finding that came up during my interviews, specifically around the topic of personal transformation, was that after being involved in the support group for a while, sometimes group members will arrive at a point where they feel ready to "move on." As Marty said:

Lately over the past year I've been leaving [the support group] feeling the need for more. But what do I need more of? [...] I needed something different. Becoming a volunteer. That's what I'm working on, is the transition to becoming a volunteer instead. I'm not getting much out of group anymore, sometimes all I'm doing is just "giving" in group, which is fine. When I'm not getting much more out of it because I've gotten what I needed, it doesn't seem like it's fair when someone needs the group more. (Intv, June 13, 2022).

Eugene also explained, "it's time for me to make a change. I'm at that point in my journey. I feel comfortable saying 'I've had enough.'" This recognition of "needing more" not only reflects the group members' self-awareness but also their desire to re-engage with their community through giving back. Richard discussed how the desire to give back is "part of the continuum." In Richard's view, group members move through the continuum to get to a point where they want to "give back in a greater way" than being a group member allows them to. Eugene recognized that "as a facilitator, there's still lots of opportunities for growth."

In my participants' eyes, the continuum of experience reflects the individual stories of transformation that have occurred through their involvement in the support group. It is important to acknowledge that this continuum of experience is not linear nor identical for each member. Group members that have been involved in the support group for long periods of time may still benefit and require ongoing support from their peers. Knowing that there is an opportunity to transition from being a group member to a volunteer facilitator, however, is a goal they can look forward to. As Richard explained, "we can take the compassion that's offered to us, and we can become healthier people so that we can go back into society more whole and healthier."

Lisa talked about how group members can become facilitators or speakers on various panels and in educational groups. As speakers, they can share their experiences with victims and other people who have caused sexual harm, bringing awareness to the causes of their offending and insight into their healing journey. Lisa recognized that they are "able to bring so much into that role." Since all of the support group members were involved in an educational group, they can go full circle by entering a support group as a facilitator or an educational group as a speaker.

The opportunity to give back to the community in this way seems rewarding to group members like Marty and Eugene for many reasons. Among these reasons is a sense of purpose, engagement in community-building efforts, and a sense of togetherness that transcends the organization to find belonging within a much broader RJ community. The group members explained that the feeling of "needing more" from the support group does not necessarily indicate that they are at the end of their healing journey. Rather, it is a sign that they are ready to "pay it forward" in the community by helping others with lived experiences of offending.

This chapter provided an overview of my participants' experiences with the criminal justice system and RJ interventions. These contrasting narratives illuminate the consequences of carceral

forms of punishment, which do little to promote the re-entry, healing, and personal transformation of individuals who are criminalized for sexual offences. The harms of criminalization were vivid in my participants' experiences of punishment, which largely involved stigma, isolation, despondency, and fear of violence. The RJ-focused peer support group, however, elicited opposite outcomes. The relational and transformational power of this RJ intervention helped the participants mitigate the effects of stigmatization, provided a sense of community, and created a safe space for healing and transformation. They articulated that the support group, over time, helped them move beyond the harm they caused to arrive at a sense of wholeness.

The group members' need to heal was pressing and was left unmet throughout their interactions with the criminal justice system. Furthermore, the support group was a space where the group members could realize a life after harm was possible, which was the cornerstone of their healing. The finding that the support group had a ripple effect on their interpersonal relationships and the community is significant. This type of RJ transitional program, as the research demonstrates, plays a role in repairing the damaged community fabric that occurs after sexual harm takes place (Yantzi, 1998). The support group accomplished this, firstly, by restoring the group members to a point where their interpersonal relationships were repaired and/or strengthened. Secondly, participation in the support group provided them with a sense of agency and leadership (for example, by becoming guest speakers and facilitators) which enabled them to use their experiences in volunteer roles where they could actively contribute to harm prevention efforts.

Chapter 7

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter begins with a summary of key findings that emerged from this research, followed by a discussion of two important considerations for practice and policy. This chapter also provides an overview of the study's limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

This thesis highlights the ways in which a community-based restorative justice (RJ) peer support group was meaningful to five male group members who have caused sexual harm. The overarching purpose of this study was to illuminate how a peer support group in Southern Ontario that uses a RJ normative framework has impacted the lives of people with sexual offence convictions and histories of incarceration.

To summarize RJ theory in cases of sexual harm, this framework is fundamentally concerned with three things: a) fulfilling obligations; b) meeting needs; and c) repairing relationships. While I described these in-depth in chapter two, the aims and objectives of RJ can still be perceived as vague, abstract, and/or ambiguous (Robinson & Shapland, 2008). Therefore, through semi-structured interviews with group members and staff, as well as an observation of one support group session, I provided a clearer picture of how the central tenets of RJ were experienced in this setting and how they were carried out effectively to fulfill group members' obligations, meet their needs, and repair their relationships. Specifically, I asked:

How effective is a restorative justice-focused peer support group in helping group members fulfill their obligations, meeting their needs, and repairing their relationships?

First, I found that the support group was effective in helping group members fulfill their obligations—to understand and address the harm they caused in order to prevent it from happening again. The RJ values of understanding, honesty, and voluntariness were embodied and promoted

by the support group, which constructed a safe passage through which members were able to create accountability. RJ values and norms were constantly upheld by the group members and facilitators, which fostered an environment of deeply intimate sharing of the contributing and resulting harms of the group members' sexual offences. Through sharing and by challenging one another, group members felt that they were able to meaningfully address the harm they caused. They viewed their voluntary commitment to the group and the work done within it each week as a way they could prevent further harm from occurring.

Second, the support group provided group members with access to social capital which positively impacted their reintegration experiences. The need for group members to undergo a positive reintegration experience was achieved through consistent support from a positive social network of peers with similar lived experiences. They identified the support group as a tight-knit community in which they could process complex grief and overcome structural challenges associated with reintegration. Being part of this community helped make their reintegration experiences significantly less difficult and complicated.

Furthermore, the support group was a space for group members to heal. The participants all expressed a strong desire to engage in work to turn their lives around (Robinson & Shapland, 2008). Yet, the carceral forms of punishment they experienced did little to promote their re-entry, healing, and personal transformation. Engaging with peers in the support group was an opportunity for the group members to realize that a future after harm was possible (Bazemore, 1998). By committing to the support group each week, group members repaired their self-relationship by becoming more self-aware and able to embrace who they are as whole people. The personal transformation that occurred in the support group had a ripple effect on their interpersonal relationships outside of the group and their ties to their communities.

Ultimately, my findings show how the RJ-focused peer support group was effective in helping group members fulfill their obligations, meet their needs, and repair their relationships. The research also demonstrates the impact of supporting and being supported by peers with similar lived experiences of sexual offending. Group members could relate to each other on a much deeper level than they could with their family members, parole officers, therapists, and other non-offending community members. This finding reflects Braithwaite's (1989) proposition that being challenged by one's community of care is likely to have more of an effect than being challenged by people with whom offenders have little to no personal investment. Moreover, support from peers played an invaluable role in meeting their needs.

This study reported that a "continuum of experience" within the support group, where members were at different stages of their reintegration (newly charged, awaiting sentencing, post-incarceration, etc.), was particularly impactful because they constantly gained new insights from each other. The continuum of experience made it possible for them to access relevant resources and achieve certain needs that in its absence would not have been possible (Coleman, 1988). For example, if the support group only consisted of group members who were recently released from prison, there would have been no opportunity for them to see what life might look like ten years post-conviction. Having a diverse pool of peer experiences to draw from was important to the group members I interviewed because they entered the support group feeling hopeless and pessimistic, desperately needing to see that there was a life for them after causing harm.

Daly (2003) writes that stories of restorative justice "help us to imagine what is possible" (p. 234). In this thesis, I outlined the possibilities that a RJ-focused peer support group can provide for people who have caused sexual harm. By outlining these findings, I am not setting a benchmark for what should be achieved in a support group or any community-based RJ program. Rather, I

illustrated how one transitional RJ program can be impactful in a person's life after they have caused sexual harm. Further, I showed how a RJ framework that is fundamentally focused on obligations, needs, and relationships can be operationalized effectively in a support group setting. This thesis illustrated an example of how some RJ programs do not necessarily conform to "traditional" images of victim-offender conferences or peace circles.

Further, this thesis highlights the usefulness of one type of non-encounter program where victims are not immediately present and the pivotal importance of community engagements in the management of social harm. It illuminates the contrasting impacts of the criminal justice system and RJ interventions for those who have caused sexual harm. The findings underscore the significance of social capital in reintegration, particularly for a population that experiences heightened deficits in social support and resources upon being released from prison. This study also illustrates how peer interactions can aid community re-entry. Peers are often viewed as catalysts of deviant behaviour (Mowen & Boman, 2018) but my participants' interactions with their peers showed how these interactions can contribute to desistance from sexual harm. The support group's mobilization of RJ values shaped these positive interactions which were characterized by reciprocity and mutual respect.

Considerations for Practice and Policy

My findings prompt two considerations for practice and policy: (1) creating spaces for symbolic reparation to victims, and (2) implications surrounding restorative justice, risk management, and preventative governance. I expand on each of these below.

(1) A Space for Symbolic Reparation to Victims

A large body of literature and practice of RJ focuses on victim reparation and involvement (Bazemore, 1998). In addition, some experts believe victim-offender conferences come the closest

to achieving RJ ideals (Dignan & Cavadino, 1996). Focusing on the experiences of people who have caused sexual harm, as I have done, may seem contradictory to the goals of RJ: to balance the needs of victims, offenders, and the community, and to restore social equality between them (Llewellyn & Howse, 1999). The consensus among RJ scholars and practitioners is to involve victims in any RJ process whether actively or symbolically. Symbolic involvement means that while the victim may not be immediately present, their needs are always considered by the stakeholders that are present. During my interviews and observation, I noticed that victims were symbolically involved during peer reviews, general discussions, questions posed by facilitators, or in the experiences of group members who had also been victimized. In other words, the silhouette of the victim was always present.

Additionally, while there was no material reparation occurring in the support group (i.e., engagement in some form of settlement) like in a victim-offender conference, there was symbolic reparation taking place which was less visible (Barton, 2000). In the context of this study, symbolic reparation to victims was characterized by group members' strong commitment to creating accountability. Symbolic reparations typically refer to forms of reparation designed to recognize and acknowledge the harms done to victims (Gallen & Moffett, 2022). Accountability necessarily involves recognizing harm, increasing empathy, and preventing future harm. There are many reasons why victims might not be involved in a RJ process: a) they do not want to be involved; b) it is unsafe for them to be involved for a variety of reasons; and c) there was no immediate victim, as in the case of accessing, possessing, and distributing child sexual exploitation material. Although there are a variety of circumstances that would prevent a victim from meeting face-to-face with the person who harmed them in a RJ process, it is vital that the victim is not forgotten.

As described in the previous three chapters, my participants viewed their commitment to the group as a way they could symbolically take responsibility for the harm they caused. None of my participants had direct access to their victim(s), so being part of the support group was the most effective way they could make reparations. Symbolic reparation, for them, was made through an active effort to live crime-free lives moving forward. This aligns with the aims and objectives of other RJ approaches like Circles of Support Accountability (CoSA)'s mandate of "no more victims" (Hannem & Petrunik, 2007). As such, it is important for practitioners who work with people who have caused sexual harm to either find or create avenues where individuals can have the opportunity to make symbolic reparations. A RJ approach, one with an explicit focus on accountability, might prove meaningful for individuals who cannot come face-to-face with their victim(s). For my participants, making symbolic reparations helped them heal.

Having safe spaces to make symbolic reparations is particularly important for individuals convicted of internet-based sexual offences since there is often no direct contact with victims. Some research supports the finding that people who have caused sexual harm on the internet, as opposed to those who have directly harmed people, are more likely to use cognitive distortions (denial, minimization, etc.) to justify their behaviour (Aslan, Edelman, Bray, & Worrell, 2014; Howitt & Sheldon, 2007). A major aspect of the support group was having peers and facilitators challenge each other to break down these justifications. Therefore, while deeply rooted cognitive variables can be targeted through treatment programs such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a RJ approach focused on building accountability could be used in combination or as a next step. Rather than thinking about RJ as another "intervention" it can be seen as an opportunity to facilitate a desire or consolidate an individual's decision to desist from sexual offending (Robinson & Shapland, 2008) which can be an avenue of symbolic reparation to victims.

However, an important question remains: how can we facilitate a desire for people who have caused sexual harm to voluntarily engage in a RJ process? More research needs to be done on the “motivational postures” (Braithwaite, 2003) of those who are willing to take part in RJ (Robinson & Shapland, 2008). In the current study, it was their overwhelming sense of loneliness and desire for support that drew my participants toward RJ. Sardina and Ackerman (2022) emphasize that there are some people for whom a RJ approach will never be the right option. It is up to practitioners to assess the readiness of a person who has caused sexual harm. Fundamentally, they must express openness to let themselves be touched by conversations around victim suffering and to authentically share information with others about their offence and personal life. Education groups, as seen in research by Rye et al. (2018), might be an effective prerequisite to other RJ approaches like support groups or victim-offender conferences, as they help to improve self-understanding and victim empathy as well as expose participants to RJ more generally.

(2) Restorative Justice, Risk Management, and Preventative Governance

Social problems are conceptualized as “risk” in advanced liberal societies (Beck, 1992; McAlinden, 2022). In a “risk society” (Beck, 1992), people who have sexually offended are governed through formal social control mechanisms including convictions, placement on a registry, and forced compliance with the legalities of the registry (Tolson & Klein, 2015). Communities and family members of people who have sexually offended are afraid that these individuals will reoffend (Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Sun, 2008). Researchers have outlined the unintended consequences of registries, specifically, which are used as a risk management and preventative governance tool (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Tolson & Klein, 2015). Tolson and Klein (2015) contend that the consequences of current risk management and preventative governance strategies diminish offenders’ access to social capital, thereby

exacerbating the minimization of trust, low expectations for reintegration, limited contact from role models, increased access to criminal capital, and loss of sanctioning power from communities.

Coleman (1988) suggests that RJ offers opportunities for the development of social capital and human capital which introduces change in people and skills that make them able to act in new ways. As discussed in chapter five and shared by Côté (1997), social capital enables offenders to anticipate and overcome obstacles as well as capitalize on personal growth opportunities. Social capital combined with the development of self-esteem, internal control, empathy, emotional stability, and purposiveness endow individuals with the capacity to interact agentially with their environment (Côté, 1997). The support group provided members with opportunities for the development of social capital and a positive internal locus of control, bringing attention to if RJ can be operationalized as a tool to effect personal agency in people who have caused sexual harm.

Robinson and Shapland (2008) found strong support for RJ as a vehicle for reducing recidivism. Additionally, McAlinden (2006) argues that the criminal justice system fails at effectively managing risk and calls for the integration of RJ to better manage the risk presented by people who have sexually offended in communities. The way we currently govern this population obscures their ability to be agentic. Therefore, there must be more candid discussions amongst researchers, crime prevention practitioners, and policy makers about the impact of this type of governance on offenders, the community and its members, and the governmental authority responsible for protecting society (Tolson & Klein, 2015). At the same time, it is vital that unnecessary barriers are removed while equipping reintegrating offenders with resources, which ultimately provides protection to the public (Brown et al., 2007). There is currently little balance between allowing people who have sexually offended to reintegrate and protecting the public.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study joins Rye et al. (2018) as a first step toward understanding the value of community-based RJ-focused peer support groups for people who have caused sexual harm. In addition, this study went on a quest for qualitative information on how people who have caused sexual harm can support one another in an in-person setting outside of prison. As such, since this study focused on one support group, I am unable to draw any generalized conclusions about the impact and effectiveness of RJ-focused peer support groups for this population. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate similar support groups in Canada or elsewhere in North America.

The findings of this study are therefore preliminary as it is difficult to assess the impact of support groups, on a larger scale, when they are difficult to identify. However, longitudinal studies and self-reports with larger sample sizes would be useful in evaluating the outcomes of non-custodial support groups in terms of effectiveness in reintegration and promoting recidivism. It would be worthwhile to establish a study for three or more years in duration that could map out the trajectory of the program and provide more insight into the “continuum of experience” that my participants described as being particularly important.

As mentioned by Robinson and Shapland (2008), safe spaces where people who have offended can come together to talk to others about their future lives are rare but important. This study reveals multiple questions, for example: who should facilitate these spaces and where should they occur? Where should funding for these spaces come from? How can we implement a RJ support group model and RJ approaches more generally? There is certainly room for research on the implementation of and funding for transitional community-based initiatives for people who have caused sexual harm. In 2017, the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness announced that \$7.48 million in federal funding was being made available to expand and evaluate CoSA (Public Safety Canada, 2017). Five years later, the Mennonite Central Committee released

a statement about a “funding crisis” for CoSA, which put 25% of the fifteen CoSA sites across Canada at risk of closure (Mennonite Central Committee, 2022) as reliance on finite reserve funds will not sustain the program long-term (Lapierre, 2022). The staff members interviewed in this study also reported that their program continuously faces financial hardship and funding insecurity.

Therefore, data collected from evaluation reports and crime prevention projects could provide a better understanding of the implementation issues for programs targeting people convicted of sexual offences. Examining the implementation process could outline the common challenges associated with program implementation and maintenance for this population. Implementation science provides an opportunity to gain insight to adapt evidence-based practices and improve the quality and effectiveness of crime prevention programs (Public Safety Canada, 2021), which is important because community-based interventions are ostensibly designed to reduce recidivism and are successful in achieving this goal (Harper & Hicks, 2022).

It is equally important to consider the attitudes of crime prevention practitioners and policy makers that may hinder the implementation and funding of community-based programs, considering there is widespread public support for punitive policies for people convicted of sexual offences (Brown, Deakin & Spencer, 2008; Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013). Ultimately, community-based programs provide resources to a group for which there is little tolerance but it is more efficacious to provide resources than to provide nothing at all (Brown et al., 2007).

The trend toward support for punitive policies brings up the issue of reconciling the RJ movement and fortified public attitudes and beliefs about people who have caused sexual harm. A study by Richards and McCartan (2018) found public resistance toward CoSA in Australia and advocated for more qualitative research about public opinions on this topic to complement existing

quantitative research. It would be helpful to update our current knowledge of public attitudes and beliefs to build off existing Canadian studies conducted over the years (see Corabian & Hogan, 2015; Olver & Barlow, 2010). Therefore, cross-sectional surveys, content and media analyses, and interviews could assess public attitudes and beliefs across Canada.

More specifically, research would be useful in determining a) where the public currently stands on their knowledge of people who have caused sexual harm; b) what exactly has informed their knowledge and resulting attitudes and beliefs; c) what approaches they think would be suitable for responding to this population; and d) if shown evidence of its effectiveness, whether they would support more widespread RJ community-based programming. Data for various demographic variables (i.e., sex, parental status, political affiliation, education background, geographic location, experiences of victimization, etc.) would also increase our understanding of the relationship between public attitudes and certain demographic characteristics. These studies should refrain from employing a broad singular definition of “sex offender” given the heterogeneity of this population and the possibility that attitudes could vary based on offender type (Olver & Barlow, 2010). The findings could shape our efforts to bring awareness and education to communities about the possibilities and outcomes of using RJ in cases of sexual harm.

Another limitation of this study is the possibility of selection bias. People who are more willing to talk about their experiences or more interested in a topic are more likely to participate in research (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). This may have led to distinct differences in the people who chose to participate in this study and those who did not. My study did not include the experiences of people who are no longer in the support group or those who left the support group for various reasons. As such, my study largely showcased stories in which the support group was positively impactful and did not highlight the experiences of former group members who may not have found

the group to be effective or meaningful. It also did not include participants with less than two years of involvement in the support group or those who had not been incarcerated. To add to this, the group of participants that I interviewed were homogenous in their sex and race. Further studies on transitional RJ programs should look at a broader set of identity characteristics.

Admittedly, my research prompts more questions about the role of peers in sexual harm prevention than it provides answers. Content analyses of virtual support groups for people who have caused sexual harm, joining existing studies by Kernsmith and Kernsmith (2008) and Pedersen (2022), would build on our knowledge of the role peer interactions play in sexual harm prevention. To enlarge the scope of research on this topic, academics could explore the social bonds between inmates with sexual offences and investigate whether these relationships formed in prison continued in the community, and if they have, what role they play outside of prison walls.

In addition, research could explore how people who have caused sexual harm perceive the differences and important qualities of various domains of support during their reintegration. For example, family members, friends, therapists, parole officers, or other people who have caused sexual harm (if these relationships are present in their lives). Ultimately, social support is important upon reintegration because it emphasizes the use of networks and resources to address a variety of issues and challenges (Colvin, Cullen, & Vander Ven, 2002). While we know some information about the impact certain relationship dynamics have on reintegration (see Kras, 2019; Lytle, Bailey, & ten Bensele, 2017) we know virtually nothing about the impact of peers.

Concluding Remarks

The limitations and proposed avenues for future research signal that there is a considerable amount of work that needs to be done in practice, policy, and research. Specifically, qualitative researchers need to take the reins by examining in-depth the treatment and reintegration

experiences of people who have caused sexual harm. More insight into what approaches are effective and meaningful, coming from the perspective of the target population themselves, is necessary to determine where we should go from here. This study provides a glimpse into how a RJ-focused peer support group can be a useful tool in helping people who have caused sexual harm fulfill their obligations, meet their needs, and repair their relationships. It has contributed information to the RJ “river” of feeder streams and practical programs (Zehr, 2015) that can be used in cases of sexual harm.

Discourse surrounding RJ in cases of sexual harm is growing and calls to use this approach with people who have caused sexual harm are becoming stronger. With that said, Zehr (2015) emphasizes that RJ is not a panacea—it is not the answer to all situations nor is it a fit for everyone. My participants, as well as many other men I have encountered during my time as a RJ facilitator, were willing to expose themselves to a RJ approach and commit to a life of desistance. In other words, they walked into the organization wanting to learn the language of responsibility, accountability, and victim empathy. While most people who have caused sexual harm will never sexually reoffend, there will always be a small group who will continue to cause harm. In these cases, it is important to balance their needs with community safety through incapacitation.

This thesis may have prompted readers to challenge their assumptions and attitudes about people who have caused sexual harm. It is important that society re-orient the view that people who have caused sexual harm are untreatable, unchangeable, and disposable. My study drew from the lived experiences of five men who are deeply committed to life after sexual harm and use the support group as a tool to live crime-free lives. As they expressed in the interviews, they would have remained lost and isolated without this support. Since we can anticipate the barriers faced by people who have caused sexual harm that complicate their ability to desist from crime, it is

imperative that we help address these barriers by increasing access to support in the community to reduce recidivism and strengthen public safety.

Taken together, community-based programs that support the reintegration of a person who has caused sexual harm are invaluable. Most of them will not be incarcerated for life and will eventually need to re-enter their communities. While the criminal justice system should assume responsibility in helping them overcome the structural aspects of re-entry such as employment, housing, and registries, the longer-term symbolic process of becoming restored from sexual harm occurs in the community. Therefore, their restoration ought to be put into the caring hands of community members who are concerned about sexual harm prevention.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Observation Recruitment Letter

Appendix B: Observation Information Letter

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Appendix D: Staff Interview Information Letter and Consent Form

Appendix E: Group Member Interview Recruitment Letter

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Appendix G: Staff Interview Guide

Appendix H: Group Member Interview Guide

Appendix I: Observation Protocol

Appendix A – Observation Recruitment Letter

Hello,

This email is being sent to you on behalf of the researchers in a study on restorative justice-based support groups.

My name is Mackenzie Leclaire, and I am a MA student working under the supervision of Dr. Christina Parker and Dr. Rashmee Singh in the Department of Sociology and Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo. I am interested in understanding how restorative justice-based support groups are utilized and experienced by people who have offended sexually, and how their involvement in these groups potentially contributes to their reintegration and aids in long-term healing. This research is being funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

As one of my data collection methods for this study, I would like to observe the support group session scheduled on June 2nd. The observation will focus on the discussion topics and interactions that normally occur during support groups. The purpose of the research is not to identify the actions of a group member or facilitator, but to better understand the way restorative justice is utilized and experienced in this setting by witnessing it first-hand. In order to observe the session, I would ask group members and facilitators, who plan to be present during the observation, to carefully read the information letter and send a signed electronic copy of the informed consent form to me prior to the observation.

During the session, I will be taking observational notes. These notes will not include any information that could identify any members of the group (e.g., direct identifiers such as name, indirect such as employment history, religious affiliation). The observational notes will be written in a password-protected Microsoft Word document, in an encrypted folder, on a password-protected fingerprint ID enabled iPad.

To ensure your privacy, I will keep your identity and information confidential among conversations with others within the...community. However, I cannot guarantee the confidentiality of any comments made in the presence of other group members or facilitators as they will have heard your remarks. Since this is a case study, there is a possibility that the...executive director, staff, and volunteers could identify group members and/or their comments from the study findings, quotations, etc. To minimize this possibility, I will remove any information that could potentially be linked to your identity and emphasize the importance of following the...Program's confidentiality guidelines around not disclosing, outside of the group, members' comments made in the support group session. Additionally, for the purposes of this study and to further protect privacy of participants...will remain anonymous and be generally referred to, in any thesis, paper, or publication resulting from the study, as a "community organization."

Please find attached a detailed letter of information and consent form that outlines the purpose of the study, the procedures involved in the observation, your rights as a participant, and the risks/benefits of participating in the study.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics board (REB [44027]). If you are attending the support group session on June 2nd, please contact me by email at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca with a signed copy of the informed consent form. If you have any questions or concerns, I would be more than happy to address them.

With sincere regards,

Mackenzie Leclaire, MA Candidate

Appendix B – Observation Information Letter

Project Title: A Case Study Exploration of Restorative Justice-Based Support Groups for People Who Have Offended Sexually



Research Method: Participant Observation

Researchers:

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To help you make an informed decision regarding your participation, this letter will explain what the study is about, the procedures involved in the observation, and your rights as a participant. If you do not understand something in the letter, please ask one of the investigators prior to consenting to the study.

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Mackenzie Leclaire in the Department of Sociology & Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo. The objective of this study is to explore how restorative justice-based support groups are utilized and experienced by people who have offended sexually (PWOS), and how their involvement in these groups potentially contributes to their reintegration and aids in long-term healing. The findings will be used to identify the unique reintegration needs of PWOS, demonstrate the utility and value of restorative justice-based programs for individuals who have caused sexual harm, and illustrate how support groups for PWOS can foster safe communities for all. This research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).



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Purpose of the Study:

In recent decades, there has been greater support for the use of restorative justice as an approach to respond to sexual harm. Restorative justice searches for restoration, healing, responsibility, and prevention following incidents of sexual harm. Restorative justice has been found to give people who have offended sexually (PWOS) the opportunity to understand the harm they have caused, a chance at meaningful community reentry (reintegration) post-offence, and a space to focus on their healing. Research on this topic shows three important findings: 1) PWOS face barriers to receiving support within the community, which often impacts their ability to reintegrate into society post-offence; 2) restorative justice approaches have been introduced and recognized as a promising method to support the unique needs of PWOS; and 3) PWOS experience benefits by participating in activities that involve social support.

It is clear that opportunities for social support, driven by a restorative justice approach, need to be better understood so that the healing and reintegration needs of the PWOS population are acknowledged and supported. Although it has been found that people with criminal histories benefit greatly from social support, research on restorative justice in the context of support groups for PWOS has not been sufficiently explored. Yet, support groups developed through the restorative justice model have the ability

to help individuals with complex lived experiences, such as those who have caused sexual harm and have potentially ruptured the relationship they have with themselves, their loved ones, and their community. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the influence of restorative justice-based support groups for PWOS, and how they are used, structured, and facilitated. This research will be done at one of the largest operating restorative justice organizations in North America.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will allow the researcher (Mackenzie Leclaire) to observe a support group session occurring on Thursday, June 2. The data collected will be used for the researcher's Master's thesis, as well as to provide groundwork for academic publications and conference presentations. The thesis will be made available to the organization following its defence, and you are also welcome to request a copy from the researcher at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca. The thesis is anticipated to be completed and ready for dissemination in March 2023.

Procedures Involved in the Observation:

Observational notes. During the session, the researcher will take notes of the observations in a password-protected Microsoft Word document, in an encrypted folder, on a password-protected fingerprint ID enabled iPad. These notes will not include any information that could identify members of the group (e.g., name, employment history, religious affiliation). If you are concerned that any observational notes may include confidential information, you can inform the researcher and they will remove those comments from the observational notes. The researcher will assign you a participant ID at the time of being emailed the signed consent form. The ID will be a random number, and the list that will link your name with your participant ID will be stored in a password-protected Microsoft Word document, in an encrypted folder, on a password-protected computer only accessible to the researcher.

Directives to the researcher. In order to minimize any disruption to the meeting and to ensure that my presence does not negatively affect the support group environment, you can at any time direct me (the researcher) to leave the meeting. A facilitator may also terminate the observation without any negative repercussions by notifying the researcher.

Your Rights as a Participant:

Is participation in the study voluntary?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to leave the meeting and stop taking part in the support group session at any time. It is not possible to remove your specific contributions from the observation after the fact due to the interconnected nature of a group discussion. Please note, however, that any information that could be linked to your identity will be removed from the observational notes, regardless of whether you withdraw from the observation or not. If you decide to withdraw from the study, your name and participant ID will be deleted immediately.

What are the possible benefits of the study?

Although there is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study, the results from this study will be of benefit to researchers and society. *First*, participation in this study will ensure that the voices of PWOS are considered in discussions within social scientific research on ways to best reintegrate and support them, with the awareness that most PWOS will eventually return to their communities post-offence. *Second*, this research will show the ways in which restorative justice can help PWOS overcome challenges and barriers to reintegration and healing. *Third*, the findings of this study will be important to restorative justice practitioners who wish to implement support groups or other restorative justice-based initiatives to support PWOS. *Fourth*, the findings of this study will reveal how support groups for PWOS can lessen the impact of the severe stigmatization (public disapproval) and isolation that this population experiences. *Fifth*, the results of this study will help the organization better articulate the influence of the support group programming they provide for PWOS, which will help overcome resistance, reluctance, or

lack of readiness exhibited by the public. *Sixth*, participation in this study will help advocate for the implementation of restorative justice-based support groups for PWOS on a wider scale.

What are the risks associated with the study?

There are no known or anticipated risks associated with participating in this study. The observation will focus on the discussion topics and interactions that normally occur during support groups. The purpose of the research is not to identify the actions of a group member or facilitator, but to better understand the way restorative justice is utilized and experienced in this setting by witnessing it first-hand. To protect you further, the researcher will keep your identity confidential among conversations with others at the organization.

Privacy, Data Storage, and Retention:

Your identity is considered confidential and identifying information will be removed from the data that is collected. Your name will not appear in any thesis, paper, or publication resulting from the study. However, anonymized quotations may be used in the study results and you will be referred to only generally (e.g., ‘Support Group Participant’ or ‘Support Group Facilitator’). Collected data will be encrypted, and securely stored on a password-protected computer for a minimum of 1 year and may be used in future academic work on this topic.

Your identity is considered confidential and will not be shared with other members at the organization. However, the researcher cannot guarantee the confidentiality of any comments made in the presence of other support group members or facilitators as they will have heard your remarks. Since this is a case study, there is a possibility that the organization’s executive director, staff, and volunteers could identify group members and/or their comments from the study findings, quotations, etc. To minimize this possibility, I will remove any information that could potentially be linked to your identity and emphasize the importance of following the program’s confidentiality guidelines around not disclosing, outside of the group, members’ comments made in the support group session. Additionally, to further protect your privacy, the organization will remain anonymous and be generally referred to, in any thesis, paper, or publication resulting from the study, as a “community organization.”

Upon reading this information letter, if you agree to be observed, please email me a signed copy of the Informed Consent form which is secured with a password. The password has been given to you verbally by the facilitators. Please send me this form no later than four days prior to the observation. If you send me a signed Informed Consent form, but you no longer wish to be observed, please email me and your form will be destroyed immediately. If you have any questions or require more information, please contact Mackenzie Leclaire by email at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB [44027]). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or reb@uwaterloo.ca.

I would like to express my utmost gratitude and thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

With sincere regards,
Mackenzie Leclaire

Appendix C – Staff Interview Recruitment Letter

Hello,

My name is Mackenzie Leclaire, and I am a MA student working under the supervision of Dr. Christina Parker and Dr. Rashmee Singh in the Department of Sociology and Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo. I am interested in understanding how restorative justice-based support groups are utilized and experienced by people who have offended sexually, and how their involvement in these groups potentially contributes to their reintegration and aids in long-term healing. This research is being funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

I have chosen your program and organization as the research site in this case study because:

1. Your organization remains one of the largest and most renowned restorative justice organizations operating in North America. Therefore, it provides an ideal context for an intensive examination of the research topic.
2. Through my own volunteer experiences at your organization, I believe I have developed a solid foundation of trust and rapport with staff and group members, that I believe will give me confidence in the level of depth and accuracy of the detail I will collect.

For the purposes of this study and to further protect the privacy of everyone involved, the organization will remain anonymous and be generally referred to, in any thesis, paper, or publication resulting from the study, as a “community organization.” To begin data collection for my study, I am looking for **two** service coordinators who would be interested in being interviewed (individually) as part of my research. The primary objectives of these interviews are to gain an understanding of how the groups are structured to meet the needs of group members and how the core aims, values, and principles of restorative justice are utilized in this setting.

Participation in this study involves a 45-to-60-minute interview between May 16-31. The interview would be conducted virtually through Zoom at a time that is convenient for you. You would be able to decline to answer any of the interview questions without penalty. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from this study at any time without negative consequences. With your permission, the interviews would be recorded with an external audio recording device to facilitate the collection of information and later transcribed for analysis. Your identity will be confidential, and any quotations I use in later published work would be anonymized.

Please find attached a more detailed letter of information that outlines the purpose of the study, your responsibilities as a participant, your rights as a participant, and the risks/benefits of the study.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB [44027]). If you are interested in participating in an interview, please contact me by email at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca at your earliest possible convenience. I look forward to hearing about your experiences and learning more about your work.

With sincere regards,
Mackenzie Leclaire

Appendix D – Staff Interview Information Letter and Consent Form

Project Title: A Case Study Exploration of Restorative Justice-Based Support Groups for People Who Have Offended Sexually



Research Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

Researchers:

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To help you make an informed decision regarding your participation, this letter will explain what the study is about, the procedures involved in the observation, and your rights as a participant. If you do not understand something in the letter, please ask one of the investigators prior to consenting to the study.

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Mackenzie Leclaire in the Department of Sociology & Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo. The objective of this study is to explore how restorative justice-based support groups are utilized and experienced by people who have offended sexually (PWOS), and how their involvement in these groups potentially contributes to their reintegration and aids in long-term healing. The findings will be used to identify the unique reintegration needs of PWOS, demonstrate the utility and value of restorative justice-based programs for individuals who have caused sexual harm, and illustrate how support groups for PWOS can foster safe communities for all. This research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).



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Purpose of the Study:

In recent decades, there has been greater support for the use of restorative justice as an approach to respond to sexual harm. Restorative justice searches for restoration, healing, responsibility, and prevention following incidents of sexual harm. Restorative justice has been found to give people who have offended sexually (PWOS) the opportunity to understand the harm they have caused, a chance at meaningful reintegration, and a space to focus on their own healing. Existing research on this topic demonstrates three themes: 1) PWOS face significant barriers to receiving support within the community, which often hinders their ability to reintegrate into society post-offence; 2) restorative justice approaches have been introduced and recognized as a promising method to support the unique needs of PWOS; and 3) PWOS experience valuable gains through participating in activities that involve social support.

It is clear that opportunities for social support, driven by a restorative justice approach, need to be better understood so that the healing and reintegration needs of the PWOS population are better recognized and supported. Although it has been found that individuals with criminal histories benefit greatly from peer-to-peer social support, research on restorative justice in the context of support groups for PWOS has been

overlooked. Yet, support groups developed through the restorative justice model have the ability to accommodate individuals with complex lived experiences, such as those who have caused sexual harm and have potentially ruptured the relationship they have with themselves, their loved ones, and their community. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the utilization and influence of restorative justice-based support groups for PWOS through an in-depth case study at one of the largest operating restorative justice organizations in North America.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher (Mackenzie Leclaire) for an interview. The data collected will be used for the researcher's Master's thesis, as well as to provide groundwork for a number of academic publications and conference presentations. Although the thesis will be made available to the organization following its defence, you are also welcome to request a copy from the researcher at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca. The thesis is anticipated to be completed and ready for dissemination in March 2023.

Your Responsibilities as a Participant:

What does participation involve?

Participation in this study will involve an interview of approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length. The interview will be conducted virtually through Zoom, accessible only with a password, at a time that is convenient for you. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions about how the support groups offered at the organization are structured and coordinated. The purpose of the interview will be to understand how the core aims, values, and principles of restorative justice are utilized in this setting.

Your identity is considered confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study. With your permission, anonymized quotations may be used. Before the interview commences, you will be able to choose a unique pseudonym (a fake name which cannot be traceable to your identity) that you will be referred to in the write-up of the study. With your permission, the interview will be recorded with an external audio recording device. Shortly after the interview, the audio recording will be transcribed in a password-protected Microsoft Word document, in an encrypted folder, on a password-protected computer only accessible to the researcher. Once the audio recording has been transcribed, it will be deleted immediately. The transcription file will be labeled with your chosen pseudonym and date of the interview. Names and all other identifying information will be deleted from the transcript.

The interview will be conducted through Zoom, which is widely used in qualitative research dealing with sensitive data. Zoom uses user-specific authentication, real-time encryption of meetings, and is able to securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software. Zoom has implemented technical, administrative, and physical safeguards to protect the information provided via the services from loss, misuse, and unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration, or destruction. With that said, no internet transmission is ever fully secure or error free, and you must be aware of that risk.

If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, the recorder can be turned off at your request, and hand-written notes will be taken. If this is the case, hand-written notes will be typed in a password-protected Microsoft Word document, in an encrypted folder, in a password-protected computer only accessible to the researcher. If at any time you do not wish to continue, you can also request to stop the interview entirely.

Once the interviews have been conducted and the analysis of the interview transcripts has concluded, the researcher will contact you by encrypted email to allow you an opportunity to comment on the main themes that have been identified by the researcher, as well as to verify that your anonymized quotations can be used in the thesis (if applicable).

Who may participate in this study?

In order to participate in the study, you must work as a service coordinator in the program for people affected by sexual harm.

Your Rights as a Participant:

Is participation in the study voluntary?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to stop taking part in the project at any time by communicating this directly to the researcher. If you choose not to participate in the research, there will be no penalty to you. You may withdraw your consent from the interview at any time up until the thesis is submitted in March 2023. Upon withdrawal from the study, all information and data relevant to you will be destroyed immediately.

What are the possible benefits of the study?

Although there is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study, the results from this study will be of benefit to researchers and society. *First*, participation in this study will ensure that the voices of PWOS are considered in discussions within social scientific research on ways to best reintegrate and support them, with the awareness that most PWOS will eventually return to their communities post-offence. *Second*, this research will show the ways in which restorative justice can help PWOS overcome challenges and barriers to reintegration and healing. *Third*, the findings of this study will be important to restorative justice practitioners who wish to implement support groups or other restorative justice-based initiatives to support PWOS. *Fourth*, the findings of this study will reveal how support groups for PWOS can lessen the impact of the severe stigmatization and isolation that this population experiences. *Fifth*, the results of this study will help the organization better articulate the influence of the support group programming they provide for PWOS, with the goal of helping overcome resistance, reluctance, or a lack of readiness exhibited by the public. *Sixth*, participation in this study will help advocate for the implementation of restorative justice-based support groups for PWOS on a wider scale.

What are the risks associated with the study?

There are no known or anticipated risks associated with participating in this study.

Privacy, Data Storage, and Retention:

All data collected in the interviews will not contain any personal information, such as your name, specific age, and any other information which may be linked to your identity. Your chosen pseudonym will instead appear in the write-up of the study.

Collected data will be encrypted, and securely stored in a password-protected computer for a minimum of 1 year and may be used in future academic work on this topic. Your identity is considered completely confidential and will not be shared with other participants or staff at the organization. However, since this is a case study, there is a possibility that the organization's executive director, staff, and volunteers could identify you based on the study findings, quotations, etc. To minimize this possibility and any negative repercussions of becoming identified by those within the organization's community, I will remove any information that could potentially be linked to your identity and potentially sensitive information you share about yourself, other staff, and the members of the community you support. For the purposes of this study and to further protect the privacy of PWOS participants, the organization will remain anonymous and be generally referred to, in any thesis, paper, or publication resulting from the study, as a "community organization."

Whenever information is transmitted via the internet, privacy cannot be guaranteed. There is always a risk that your responses may be intercepted by a third party (e.g. government agencies, hackers). Please note that we do not collect or use internet protocol (IP) addresses or other information which could link

your participation to your computer or electronic device. Additionally, please be aware that any sensitive emails sent to you by the researcher will be encrypted to protect the information being distributed.

You will be asked to give verbal consent at the beginning of the interview. Your consent will be documented in a password-protected Microsoft Word document, in an encrypted folder, in a password-protected computer only accessible to the researcher. On the last page of this letter, there is information about what you will be asked to consent to. If you have any questions or require more information about the study, please contact Mackenzie Leclaire by email at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB [44027]). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or reb@uwaterloo.ca.

I would like to express my utmost gratitude and thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

With sincere regards,

Mackenzie Leclaire, MA Candidate

Informed Consent to Participate in an Interview

Project Title: A Case Study Exploration of Restorative Justice-Based Support Groups for People Who Have Offended Sexually

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study conducted by Mackenzie Leclaire in the Department of Sociology & Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo, under the supervision of Dr. Christina Parker and Dr. Rashmee Singh.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB [44027]). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or reb@uwaterloo.ca. For all other questions, please feel welcome to contact Mackenzie Leclaire at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca.

- I. I agree to have my interview audio recorded for transcription purposes.
- II. I agree to have my interview data encrypted, stored, and used in any thesis or publication that comes from this research.
- III. I agree to the use of de-identified data in future research on this topic.
- IV. I agree to the use of anonymized quotations in any thesis or publication that comes from this research.
- V. I was informed that participation in the study is voluntary and that I can withdraw this consent by informing the researcher.
- VI. I have had the opportunity to ask questions related to the study and have received satisfactory answers to my questions and any additional details.
- VII. With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

By providing your consent, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigators or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities.

Appendix E – Group Member Interview Recruitment Letter

Hello,

This email is being sent to you on behalf of the researchers in a study on restorative justice-based support groups.

My name is Mackenzie Leclaire, and I am a graduate student working under the supervision of Dr. Christina Parker and Dr. Rashmee Singh in the Department of Sociology and Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo. I am interested in understanding how restorative justice-based support groups are utilized and experienced by people who have offended sexually, and how their involvement in these groups potentially contributes to their reintegration and aids in long-term healing. This research is being funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

I am currently looking for support group members to participate in an interview. To be eligible to participate, you must have:

1. At least two years of involvement in support groups at the organization.
2. Previously experienced a sentence of imprisonment (intermittent [i.e., weekend detention] or consecutive).
3. Have no pending criminal charges.

Participation in this study involves a 60-to-90-minute interview during the month of June 2022. The interview will be conducted virtually through Zoom at a time that is convenient for you. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your involvement in support groups, your experiences with restorative justice, and the potential influence this has had on your community re-entry and healing post-offence.

Your safety is of utmost importance to me. Your participation in the interview would be completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from this study at any time up until the thesis is submitted in March 2023. With your permission, the interviews would be recorded with an external audio recording device to facilitate the collection of information and later transcribed for analysis. Your identity will be confidential, and any quotations I use in later published work would be strictly anonymous. For the purposes of this study and to further protect your privacy, the organization will remain anonymous and be generally referred to, in any thesis, paper, or publication resulting from the study, as a “community organization.”

Please find attached a more detailed letter of information that outlines the purpose of the study, your responsibilities as a participant, your rights as a participant, and the risks/benefits of the study.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB [44027]). If you are interested in participating in this study, please carefully read the information letter, and contact me by email at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca at your earliest possible convenience to schedule a time for an interview in June.

I look forward to speaking with you and learning about your experiences in support groups.

With sincere regards,
Mackenzie Leclaire

Appendix F – Group Member Interview Information Letter and Consent Form

Project Title: A Case Study Exploration of Restorative Justice-Based Support Groups for People Who Have Offended Sexually



Research Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

Researchers:

Student Investigator:
Mackenzie Leclaire

Department of Sociology & Legal Studies
University of Waterloo
200 University Ave. W.
Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1
meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca

Co-Supervisor: Christina Parker, PhD

Department of Social Development Studies
Renison University College
240 Westmount Rd. N.
Waterloo, ON N2L 3G4
(519) 884-4404, ext. 28791
christina.parker@uwaterloo.ca

Co-Supervisor: Rashmee Singh, PhD

Department of Sociology & Legal Studies
University of Waterloo
200 University Ave. W.
Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1
(519) 888-4567, ext. 43020
r78singh@uwaterloo.ca

To help you make an informed decision regarding your participation, this letter will explain what the study is about, the procedures involved in the observation, and your rights as a participant. If you do not understand something in the letter, please ask one of the investigators prior to consenting to the study.

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Mackenzie Leclaire in the Department of Sociology & Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo. The objective of this study is to explore how restorative justice-based support groups are utilized and experienced by people who have offended sexually (PWOS), and how their involvement in these groups potentially contributes to their reintegration and aids in long-term healing. The findings will be used to identify the unique reintegration needs of PWOS, demonstrate the utility and value of restorative justice-based programs for individuals who have caused sexual harm, and illustrate how support groups for PWOS can foster safe communities for all. This research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Purpose of the Study:

In recent decades, there has been greater support for the use of restorative justice as an approach to respond to sexual harm. Restorative justice searches for restoration, healing, responsibility, and prevention following incidents of sexual harm. Restorative justice has been found to give people who have offended sexually (PWOS) the opportunity to understand the harm they have caused, a chance at meaningful community reentry (reintegration) post-offence, and a space to focus on their healing. Research on this topic shows three important findings: 1) PWOS face barriers to receiving support within the community, which often impacts their ability to reintegrate into society post-offence; 2) restorative justice approaches have been introduced and recognized as a promising method to support the unique needs of PWOS; and 3) PWOS experience benefits by participating in activities that involve social support.

It is clear that opportunities for social support, driven by a restorative justice approach, need to be better understood so that the healing and reintegration needs of the PWOS population are acknowledged and

supported. Although it has been found that people with criminal histories benefit greatly from social support, research on restorative justice in the context of support groups for PWOS has not been sufficiently explored. Yet, support groups developed through the restorative justice model have the ability to help individuals with complex lived experiences, such as those who have caused sexual harm and have potentially ruptured the relationship they have with themselves, their loved ones, and their community. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the influence of restorative justice-based support groups for PWOS, and how they are used, structured, and facilitated. This research will be done at one of the largest operating restorative justice organizations in North America.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher (Mackenzie Leclaire) for an interview. The data collected will be used for the researcher's Master's thesis, as well as to provide groundwork for academic publications and conference presentations. The thesis will be made available to the organization following its defence, and you are also welcome to request a copy from the researcher at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca. The thesis is anticipated to be completed and ready for dissemination in March 2023.

Your Responsibilities as a Participant:

What does participation involve?

Participation involves a 60 to 90 minute interview during the month of June 2022. The interview will be conducted virtually through Zoom, accessible only with a password, at a time that is convenient for you. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your involvement in support groups, your experiences with restorative justice, and the potential influence this has had on your post-offence reintegration and healing. At the beginning of the interview, you will also be asked to confirm your age. Your specific age will not be reported in the write-up of the study. The write-up will simply report age ranges (i.e. 18-25, 26-31, etc) that include the ages of the participants interviewed. The purpose of including age ranges in the write-up of the study is to provide readers with minimal descriptive information about the study participants.

Your identity is considered confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study. With your permission, anonymized quotations may be used. Before the interview commences, you will be able to choose a unique pseudonym (a fake name which cannot be traceable to your identity) that you will be referred to in the write-up of the study. With your permission, the interview will be recorded with an external audio recording device. Shortly after the interview, the audio recording will be transcribed in a password-protected Microsoft Word document, in an encrypted folder, on a password-protected computer only accessible to the researcher. Once the audio recording has been transcribed, it will be deleted immediately. The transcription file will be labeled with your chosen pseudonym and date of the interview. Names and all other identifying information will be deleted from the transcript.

The interview will be conducted through Zoom, which is widely used in qualitative research dealing with sensitive data. Zoom uses user-specific authentication, real-time encryption of meetings, and is able to securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software. Zoom has implemented technical, administrative, and physical safeguards to protect the information provided via the services from loss, misuse, and unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration, or destruction. With that said, no internet transmission is ever fully secure or error free, and you must be aware of that risk.

If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, the recorder can be turned off at your request, and hand-written notes will be taken. If this is the case, hand-written notes will be typed in a password-protected Microsoft Word document, in an encrypted folder, on a password-protected computer only accessible to the researcher. If at any time you do not wish to continue, you can also request to stop the interview entirely.

Once the interviews have been conducted and the analysis of the interview transcripts has concluded, the researcher will contact you by encrypted email to allow you an opportunity to comment on the main

themes that have been identified by the researcher, as well as to verify that your anonymized quotations can be used in the thesis (if applicable).

Who may participate in this study?

In order to participate in the study, you must have at least two years of involvement in the organization's support groups, have experienced a sentence of imprisonment (intermittent [i.e. weekend detention] or consecutive), and have no pending criminal charges.

Your Rights as a Participant:

Is participation in the study voluntary?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to stop taking part in the project at any time by communicating this directly to the researcher. If you choose not to participate in the research, there will be no penalty to you. You may withdraw your consent from the interview at any time up until the thesis is submitted in March 2023. Upon withdrawal from the study, all information and data relevant to you will be destroyed immediately.

What are the possible benefits of the study?

Although there is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study, the results from this study will be of benefit to researchers and society. *First*, participation in this study will ensure that the voices of PWOS are considered in discussions within social scientific research on ways to best reintegrate and support them, with the awareness that most PWOS will eventually return to their communities post-offence. *Second*, this research will show the ways in which restorative justice can help PWOS overcome challenges and barriers to reintegration and healing. *Third*, the findings of this study will be important to restorative justice practitioners who wish to implement support groups or other restorative justice-based initiatives to support PWOS. *Fourth*, the findings of this study will reveal how support groups for PWOS can lessen the impact of the severe stigmatization (public disapproval) and isolation that this population experiences. *Fifth*, the results of this study will help the organization better articulate the influence of the support group programming they provide for PWOS, which will help overcome resistance, reluctance, or lack of readiness exhibited by the public. *Sixth*, participation in this study will help advocate for the implementation of restorative justice-based support groups for PWOS on a wider scale.

What are the risks associated with the study?

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. The interview questions will be focused on your experiences in restorative justice-based support groups, how your relationships have changed, and your healing process post-offence. There is a possibility that this line of questioning could prompt some emotionally difficult thoughts and memories, so the researcher will provide you with a list of counseling resources before the interview begins. However, the foreseeable emotional risk associated with discussing your experiences is not anticipated to be greater than you would encounter in your regular discussions in support groups.

Privacy, Data Storage, and Retention:

All data collected in the interviews will not contain any personal information, such as your name, specific age, and any other information which may be linked to your identity (i.e. religious affiliation, employment history). Your chosen pseudonym will instead appear in the write-up of the study.

Collected data will be encrypted, and securely stored on a password-protected computer for a minimum of 1 year and may be used in future academic work on this topic. Your identity is considered completely confidential and will not be shared with other participants or organization staff members. However, since

this is a case study, there is a possibility that the organization's executive director, staff, and volunteers could identify you based on the study findings, quotations, etc. To minimize this possibility, I will remove any information that could potentially be linked to your identity, such as the details of your offence, and the researcher will not disclose your participation to anyone at the organization. For the purposes of this study and to further protect your privacy, the organization will remain anonymous and be generally referred to, in any thesis, paper, or publication resulting from the study, as a "community organization."

Whenever information is transmitted via the internet, privacy cannot be guaranteed. There is always a risk your responses may be intercepted by a third party (e.g. government agencies, hackers). Please note that we do not collect or use internet protocol (IP) addresses or other information which could link your participation to your computer or electronic device. Additionally, please be aware that any email sent to you by the researcher will be encrypted to protect the information being distributed.

Limits to Confidentiality:

Please note that during the course of the interview, should you disclose any instances of child abuse or threats to a child's safety about which authorities are not already aware, the researcher will be obliged to report them to Children's Aid. In addition, a disclosure that leads the researcher to believe that you or another person is in danger of physical harm is also subject to limited confidentiality.

You will be asked to give verbal consent at the beginning of the interview. Your consent will be documented in a password-protected Microsoft Word document, in an encrypted folder, on a password-protected computer only accessible to the researcher. On the last page of this letter, there is information about what you will be asked to consent to. If you would like to participate in an interview, or have any questions, please contact Mackenzie Leclaire by email at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB [44027]). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or reb@uwaterloo.ca.

I would like to express my utmost gratitude and thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

With sincere regards,

Mackenzie Leclaire, MA Candidate

Informed Consent to Participate in an Interview

Project Title: A Case Study Exploration of Restorative Justice-Based Support Groups for People Who Have Offended Sexually

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study conducted by Mackenzie Leclaire in the Department of Sociology & Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo, under the supervision of Dr. Christina Parker and Dr. Rashmee Singh.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB [44027]). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or reb@uwaterloo.ca. For all other questions, please feel welcome to contact Mackenzie Leclaire at meleclaire@uwaterloo.ca.

- III. I agree to have my interview audio recorded for transcription purposes.
- IV. I agree to have my interview data encrypted, stored, and used in any thesis or publication that comes from this research.
- IV. I agree to the use of de-identified data in future research on this topic.
- V. I agree to the use of anonymized quotations in any thesis or publication that comes from this research.
- VI. I was informed that participation in the study is voluntary and that I can withdraw this consent by informing the researcher.
- VII. I have had the opportunity to ask questions related to the study and have received satisfactory answers to my questions and any additional details.
- VIII. With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

By providing your consent, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigators or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities.

Appendix G – Staff Interview Guide

Preliminary:

1. Thank the participant for their time and willingness to engage in this study.
2. Allow the participant to ask questions about information contained in the information letter to ensure they understand the purpose of the study, their responsibilities as a participant, the risks and benefits of participation, and limits to confidentiality.
3. Acknowledge that while the participant may know me in another capacity (as a volunteer facilitator), I am here with them today to engage with them in a researcher capacity.
4. Allow the participant to choose a unique pseudonym.
5. Respond to any other questions about the study or their participation in the interview.
6. Read the oral consent script and document their consent in the oral consent log.

Warm-Up Questions:

1. How long have you worked at the organization?
2. What does your role entail?

Transition Statement:

Thank you so much for sharing. The following questions I'm about to ask focus on the needs of people who've offended sexually, how the support groups are organized, how restorative justice is present in these groups, and your perceptions of the potential influence these groups have on members. You may answer these questions in any level of detail that you'd like. Before moving onto the next question, I may ask you to clarify something you said. In addition, you can let me know if you'd like to return to a previous question.

Central Questions:

Needs of Group Members:

1. From your experience supporting people who've offended sexually, what are the major challenges they face when reintegrating into their communities post-offense?
2. From your experience, what are some of the common needs of the group members you support?

Support Group Organization:

1. When were support groups first organized, and what was the rationale behind their implementation?
2. How would you summarize the support groups to someone who knew nothing about them?
3. How would you say the support groups align with a restorative justice framework?
4. What would you say are core topics that are often discussed in group?
5. How do group members hear about the support groups?
6. Without identifying any particular group members, what would you say the typical demographic makeup is?

7. Can you describe the role of the group facilitators and how they are trained?
8. Do you believe that the support groups are/can be transformational? If so, how?
9. What are the types of restorative justice facilitation strategies that are used in group to facilitate a transformative environment?
10. What do you perceive as some of the challenges that occur in group?

Values:

1. How do the values of restorative justice manifest in the support groups?
2. How do you ensure that the group facilitators and group members foster these values during group?

Aims:

1. In your view, what are the key aims of using a restorative approach to support people who have caused sexual harm, and how do the support groups play a role in achieving these aims?
2. How do you check in with group members to gain a sense of how they're being impacted by their participation in the groups?

Influence of Support Groups:

1. Do you think the support groups aid in their reintegration?
2. Do you think support groups contribute to their healing and address the needs you identified earlier?

Cool-Down Questions:

1. Is there anything that I did not ask you, that you wanted to share?
2. Do you have any other feedback, comments, or questions about the study and your experience with me today?

Wrap-Up:

1. Read the appreciation script.

Appendix H – Group Member Interview Guide

Preliminary:

1. Thank the participant for their time and willingness to engage in this study.
2. Allow the participant to ask questions about information contained in the information letter to ensure they understand the purpose of the study, their responsibilities as a participant, the risks and benefits of participation, and limits to confidentiality.
3. Acknowledge that while the participant may know me in another capacity (as a volunteer facilitator), I am here with them today to engage with them in a researcher capacity.
4. Allow the participant to choose a unique pseudonym.
5. Respond to any questions about the study or their participation in the interview.
6. Read the oral consent script and document their consent in the oral consent log.
7. Email them a list of resources that are free to access if they feel emotionally overwhelmed because of their participation in the interview.

Individual-Level Questions:

1. How long have you been receiving support from the organization?
2. How did you hear about the support groups?
3. What is your age?

Transition Statement #1:

Thank you so much for sharing. I want to better understand your experience in support groups, to see what influence (if any) it has had on you. The following questions I'm about to ask are larger and you may answer them in any level of detail that you'd like. Before moving onto the next question, I may ask you to clarify something you said. In addition, you can let me know if you'd like to return to a previous question.

Central Questions:

Challenges & Barriers:

1. Can you talk about the barriers or challenges that you've encountered since being charged with a sexual offence?
2. Can you talk about your experience transitioning from prison to your community? When I say community, I mean community in a geographical sense (where you live) but also your community of care (your relationships, work, involvement in different groups).
3. Can you talk about what kinds of support you need to heal from your past and to address the causes of your offence?

Restorative Justice:

1. What was your understanding of restorative justice prior to joining the support group, and has this understanding changed over time?
2. What values, do you think, are important to a restorative approach when supporting people who have caused sexual harm?

3. Do these restorative justice values appear in the support group? If so, how does this make you feel?
4. According to restorative justice, a major obligation for those who've offended is to take accountability and responsibility for the harm caused. Has the support group helped you carry out this obligation? And if so, how?

Experiences in Support Groups:

1. What aspects of the support groups stand out to you and are most important to you?
2. What topics that have been discussed in group have been the most helpful for you?
3. Earlier you mentioned some challenges that you've faced. Has the support group helped you navigate these challenges? If so, how?
4. How do you feel when leaving a support group session, and what are the key messages that you hold onto?
5. How do you define transformation? And by this definition, do you think the support groups can be transformational?

Transition Statement #2:

I appreciate your vulnerability and honesty in your answers. Thank you so much for sharing. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your experience in the interview today.

Cool-Down Questions:

1. Is there anything that I did not ask you, that you wanted to share?
2. Do you have any other feedback, comments, or questions about the study and your experience with me today?

Wrap-Up:

1. Read the appreciation script.

Appendix I – Observation Protocol

Observation Date: [Weekday], [Month, Day, Year]

Start and End Time: X to X

Preliminary:

1. Briefly review the purpose of why I am present in the space today.
2. Briefly review the limits to confidentiality.
3. Remind participants that the session will not be recorded, and that I will be writing observational notes in a password-protected Microsoft Word document, in an encrypted folder, on a password-protected fingerprint ID enabled iPad.
4. Acknowledge that while the participants may know me in another capacity (as a volunteer facilitator), I am here with them today to engage with them in a researcher capacity.
5. Ask if everyone has had the opportunity to read the information letter. If not, I will upload the letter to the Zoom chat for members to download and review.
6. Respond to any questions about the study or their participation in the observation.
7. Thank the participants for their time and willingness to be observed for this study.

Notes:

Participants:

- # Of participants (group facilitators, group members), characteristics (e.g., gender).

Support Group Environment/Space:

- How do participants appear in the space (e.g., cameras turned on/off).
- How do facilitators initially engage everyone in the space?
- How is a supportive, comfortable, and restorative environment created?

Facilitation Strategies:

- What types of restorative justice facilitation strategies are used by the facilitators?
- What types of questions are asked by the facilitators?

RJ Principles + Values:

- What RJ principles are visible in the space?
- How are restorative justice values modeled by the facilitators?
- How do the group members exhibit restorative justice values?

Perspectives and Responses:

- How do participants speak about their experiences?
- How do group members respond to each other?
- How are group members' perspectives valued and validated?
- How does participants' body language appear?

Wrap-Up:

1. Read the appreciation script.
2. Allow for participants to ask questions.