Australian Government
Australian Institute of Criminology

Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice

No. 720 October 2025

Abstract | Research examining restorative justice (RJ) for domestic and family violence (DFV) and sexual violence is growing. While best practice principles are used to guide the design and implementation of RJ for these forms of violence, these principles have primarily been informed by experts and other stakeholders. Importantly, there has been little empirical examination of the perspectives of victim-survivors on best practice in relation to RJ for DFV and sexual violence.

The current study addresses this gap, drawing on interviews with and surveys of 13 victim-survivors who participated in an Australian RJ program for DFV and sexual violence. Victim-survivors repeatedly identified Convenors' skills and expertise, flexibility and a feeling that they were supported to satisfy a diverse range of justice needs as critical to the success of restorative justice in this context.

Victim-survivors' reflections on best practice in restorative justice for domestic, family and sexual violence

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Introduction

Restorative justice (RJ) is now integrated into criminal justice practice across Australia and internationally. RJ is a process that brings together people impacted by an offence (victim-survivors, perpetrators, other relevant members of the community) to take part in facilitated dialogue and problem solving to respond to the drivers and the impacts of the crime (Marshall 1999). In contrast to the courts, where victim-survivors are only peripherally involved in the ascertainment of guilt and sentencing, victim-survivors have a central role in RJ as active participants and decision-makers (Robinson & Shapland 2008).

Research with victim-survivors of domestic and family violence (DFV) and sexual violence who are navigating the criminal justice system shows that they often feel disrespected, silenced, misrepresented and excluded from the process (Herman 2005; Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee 2023). Contrastingly, victim-survivors report satisfaction with RJ across a broad range of offences, ranging from minor crimes such as theft to very serious crimes including sexual assault, DFV and the murder of a loved one (Nascimento, Andrade & De Castro Rodrigues 2023; Sardina & Ackerman 2022). Benefits include lower anger, less shame and self-blame, and improved wellbeing (Silva 2020); reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms such as avoidance and intrusive thoughts; and reduced anxiety, fear and distress (Nascimento, Andrade & De Castro Rodrigues 2023).

Despite considerable evidence for, and interest in, RJ as a facilitator of healing and recovery from crime, there is a level of apprehension within the community and among some victim-survivors of sexual violence about whether and how RJ should be an option for these crimes (Jülich 2006; Marsh & Wagner 2015). There are concerns about the unique risks associated with DFV and sexual violence matters, particularly regarding the potential for perpetrators to use coercion and to manipulate the process (Gavrielides 2015; Pennell et al. 2021). Any expectation of apologies or forgiveness is problematic in the context of DFV relationships, where perpetrators frequently use apologies as a means of control, and forgiveness may not be in victim-survivors' interests (Stubbs 2007). However, other stakeholders have suggested that the challenges can be mitigated when programs adhere to best practice principles in design and implementation (Jeffries, Wood & Russell 2021).

Research with practitioners and victim-survivors has informed the development of best practice principles for RJ in DFV and sexual violence matters (Bolitho 2015; Gavrielides 2015; Jeffries, Wood & Russell 2021; Wolthuis & Lünnemann 2016). These include:

- specialist expertise in the dynamics and impacts of DFV and sexual violence;
- flexibility in approach to preparation and facilitation;
- an intensive preparation phase allowing for rigorous, continuous risk assessment;
- assessment of the victim-survivor's justice needs and the offender's capacity (or willingness) to meet these, and effective management of participant expectations around this;
- close engagement and collaboration with relevant services and experts; and
- a co-Convenor model where two Convenors are assigned to each matter, ideally representative of gender.

Stakeholders agree that best practice in RJ for DFV and sexual violence is characterised by a victim-centred process. Victim-centred RJ is distinct from other forms of RJ that can proceed without victim-survivor involvement (eg some youth justice conferencing models), or RJ processes that are not driven primarily by the decision-making, needs and interests of the victim-survivor (Jeffries, Wood & Russell 2021; Joudo Larsen 2014). Daly (2006) summarised the potential benefits of RJ for victim-survivors of gendered violence, including participation and voice, validation, offender accountability, relationship repair, and access to flexible, trauma-informed justice that can be adapted to their needs. Interviews with participants of RJ programs show that addressing justice needs, Convenor skills, extensive risk assessment and involvement of a range of experts are important to victim-survivors and key for safeguarding their safety (Bolitho 2015; Gavrielides 2015).

Prior research on the topic of best practice in RJ for DFV and sexual violence has focused on understanding the benefits victim-survivors may experience through RJ and what stakeholders consider important for safe practice (Jeffries, Wood & Russell 2021). What is missing from the literature is an analysis of Australian victim-survivors' experiences of RJ juxtaposed against the best practice principles for RJ and DFV and sexual violence discussed in the literature. This is important for developing understanding of victim-survivors' experiences of best practice in Australia and internationally, and building upon evidence primarily informed by the opinions of stakeholders.

This study examines the experiences of victim-survivors participating in an RJ program for DFV and sexual violence, canvassing what they viewed positively about this program and any areas for improvement they identified. This is used to explore best practice in RJ for DFV and sexual violence from the perspective of victim-survivors. The analysis and subsequent discussion examine their views against best practice principles identified in the literature, both adding to and expanding on them.

The Restorative Justice Scheme

This study is part of a larger research project evaluating Phase Three of the ACT Restorative Justice Scheme for DFV and sexual violence matters. In 2019 the Australian Institute of Criminology was commissioned by the ACT Government Justice and Community Safety Directorate to evaluate the processes and outcomes of this scheme. The broader project involved interviews with key stakeholders and participants, analysis of post-conference surveys, observation of conferences and analysis of administrative data to map referral pathways and recidivism outcomes in matters referred between November 2018 and August 2022 (see Lawler, Boxall Dowling 2025 for further details).

Restorative justice in the Australian Capital Territory is delivered through the Restorative Justice Scheme (RJS) and legislated under the *Crimes (Restorative Justice) Act 2004* (ACT). The RJS has been taking referrals from the criminal justice system for less serious offences by young people since 2005 (Phase One). The RJS was expanded in 2016 to include adults and more serious offences by young people and adults (Phase Two). In 2018 the RJS commenced taking referrals for DFV and sexual violence matters (Phase Three).

Consistent with best practice principles of RJ for DFV and sexual violence (eg Jeffries, Wood & Russell 2021; Wolthuis & Lünnemann 2016), Phase Three includes a number of unique features which distinguish it from Phases One and Two, including:

- a co-Convenor model (where two Convenors are assigned to each case);
- more intensive risk assessment and case review processes by a member of the senior leadership team; and
- careful consideration of any patterns of abusive behaviour and histories of harm in the relationship.

DFV and sexual violence matters can be referred to Phase Three at all stages of the justice process (diversion to post-sentence); however, there are restrictions on which statutory bodies can refer at each criminal justice stage. The program is victim-centred, participation is voluntary, all parties must provide informed consent and perpetrators are required to accept some level of responsibility for the offence to be eligible.

Methods

Data

This paper summarises the qualitative analysis of surveys and interviews with 13 victim-survivors who completed an RJ program for a DFV or sexual violence matter. The characteristics of respondents who completed a post-conference survey and/or participated in an interview are summarised in Table 1 below.

Post-conference survey

All 34 victim-survivors who participated in a Phase Three conference between November 2018 and August 2022 were invited to complete a telephone survey approximately six weeks later. Ten respondents (29.4%) completed the survey, including two victim-survivors of sexual violence and eight victim-survivors referred for DFV offences (*n*=2 intimate partner violence; *n*=3 child-to-parent violence; *n*=2 adolescent family violence against an older family member; *n*=1 adolescent family violence against a sibling).

The survey included questions about participants' experiences and satisfaction with the RJ process before, during and after the conference, and any agreements made during the conference. Participants were also asked about their feelings around safety and support, being listened to and respected, and whether they were able to say what they wanted to say. Participants who completed the post-conference survey were also provided with the opportunity to consent to being contacted by researchers to take part in a follow-up interview at a later date.

Interviews

Victim-survivors were recruited for an interview in two ways. Either they provided consent to be re-contacted for an interview through the post-conference survey (see above), or they could consent to their contact details being shared with the research team through the Convenor assigned to their matter.

Seven interviews were conducted with victim-survivors of DFV and sexual violence, including two victim-survivors of sexual violence and five victim-survivors of family violence perpetrated by young people. Interviews were conducted in person or via telecommunication, at least three months after they had exited the program. Four interviewees also completed the post-conference survey. Participants were reimbursed $50 for their time.

Participants were asked about their expectations of RJ, their motivations for participating, and how their experience differed from other traditional criminal justice system responses (eg going to court). Participants were also asked about any benefits they received from participating in RJ, and any areas of improvement for the program.

Table 1: Victim-survivor characteristics (*n*=13 respondents)

ID	Gender	Offence type	Year referred	Referrer	Conference	Response provided
CPV1	F	Child-to-parent violence	2019	ACTP	Face-to-face	Survey & interview
CPV2	F	Child-to-parent violence	2020	ACTP	Face-to-face	Survey & interview
CPV3	F	Child-to-parent violence	2019	ACTP	Face-to-face	Interview
CPV4	F	Child-to-parent violence	2020	CYPS	Face-to-face	Interview
CPV5	F	Child-to-parent violence	2021	CHC	Face-to-face	Survey
FV1	M	Adolescent violence against older family member	2019	ACTP	Video	Survey
FV2	F	Adolescent violence against older family member	2019	ACTP	Video	Survey
FV3	F	Adolescent violence against sibling	2020	ACTP	Face-to-face	Survey
FV4	F	Adolescent violence against older family member	2018	ACTP	Face-to-face	Interview
IPV1	F	Adult violence against current partner	2019	MCC	Face-to-face	Survey
IPV2	F	Adult violence against former partner	2019	ACTP	Face-to-face	Survey
SV1	F	Sexual violence against adult	2020	ACTP	Face-to-face	Survey & interview
SV2	M	Sexual violence against adolescent	2022	ACTP	Face-to-face	Survey & interview

Note: ACTP=ACT Police; CHC=Children's Court; CYPS=Child Youth Protective Services; MCC=Magistrates Court; CPV=child-to-parent violence; FV=family violence; IPV=intimate partner violence; SV=sexual violence

Analysis

Interview transcripts and the post-conference surveys were analysed in MAXQDA. As this analysis was secondary to the original aims guiding data collection, the guidelines provided by Ruggiano and Perry (2019) for methodological rigour in secondary qualitative data analysis were followed. These guidelines highlight the importance of clarifying the difference between the aims of the parent study (see Lawler, Boxall and Dowling 2025) and those of the secondary analysis.

The parent study was a commissioned evaluation that examined victim-survivors' experiences in each stage of the process (referral, preparation, conference, post-conference) and focused on outcomes and areas for improvement for Phase Three. In this secondary analysis, the aim of examining specific best-practice principles outlined in the literature is narrower than the objectives of the broader evaluation. While there is overlap between the themes and findings across both pieces of work, this study is a distinct piece of research that is less targeted in its aims and conclusions.

The generic inductive approach was applied. This qualitative analytic approach involves reading and re-reading text and coding information based on a combination of predefined categories of interest and other themes that emerge from the data (Thomas 2006). This included recording themes relating to the best-practice principles outlined in the literature (Jeffries, Wood & Russell 2021; Wolthuis & Lünnemann 2016), as well as those that were naturally reflected on and reported by victim-survivors.

Limitations

Only victim-survivors whose matters proceeded to conference completed the post-conference survey and only 14.8 percent of matters referred to Phase Three proceeded to a conference in the evaluation period (*n*=24, 2018–2022; Lawler, Boxall and Dowling 2025). This means that only a small pool of victim-survivors was eligible to be surveyed and, following on from this, that only a small sample did (*n*=13). The views of those who completed the survey and participated in an interview may not, therefore, be representative of all victim-survivors who participated in Phase Three or of all participants in RJ programs for DFV and sexual violence more broadly.

Different forms of DFV and sexual violence often have distinct underlying dynamics as well as shared associated drivers and impacts. The offence types included in this research represent those eligible for referral into Phase Three, rather than implying that these offences are interchangeable. There were no interviews with victim-survivors who proceeded to conference for intimate partner violence (IPV) or adult family violence (FV) matters. As a result, understanding of the effectiveness of the Scheme for IPV and FV matters is limited, particularly with regard to non-heterosexual relationships.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns across the research period also restricted the number of referrals being made to Phase Three as well as the ability of the Restorative Justice Unit and Convenors to make progress with matters.

This study involves secondary analysis of data collected for the purposes of evaluating the processes and outcomes of an RJ program for DFV and sexual violence. Victim-survivors were asked about their experiences of the service they received, but there may be some aspects of best practice (eg the extent to which Convenors and services worked together) where the participants' depth of understanding may be limited. Therefore, there may be gaps in the information provided by participants.

Results

Best practices discussed by victim-survivors are categorised into four main themes: Convenor skills and expertise, victim-centred processes, intensive preparation and risk management, and collaboration with other services and experts.

Convenor skills and expertise

Victim-survivors consistently discussed Convenors' expertise and skills. All victim-survivors reflected positively on the experience of working closely with the Convenors to prepare for the conference, particularly regarding the high level of support they received:

> I guess I just felt supported by them in the process. (FV4, 2018)
>
> Definitely no concerns, surprised how well it went … Good support in lead up was a factor. (IPV2, 2019)

Several victim-survivors said they appreciated Convenors being available and flexible, as well as listening and contacting them regularly to see how they were, for example:

> Well, she would check in with me. And if I needed to talk to her, she was available … she actually listened … she knew how to get me through that situation. (CPV4, 2020)

Multiple victim-survivors said that they found it helpful when Convenors expressed hope and optimism about the potential for change, as they were often experiencing hopelessness about their circumstances. This was particularly the case with child-to-parent violence (CPV) matters:

> I was getting close to losing hope that I will ever have my son back … from the first day [the Convenor] came, hope started again. (CPV2, 2020)
>
> [the Convenors] were exceptional, inspired a lot of confidence. (FV2, 2019)

Several victim-survivors reflected on Convenors' skills in managing perpetrator behaviour:

> There was a couple of awkward times through the process where my son would get a bit frustrated with the whole thing, and he'd want to walk out and things like that … The facilitators were great, and they didn't pressure him to stay but they helped to talk through what was going on for him. They'd even talk outside the room, they'd go out with him and talk to him, and then they'd come back in. They really facilitated the whole thing, I think, really well. (FV4, 2018)

One parent of a young person who had used violence was very positive about the approach taken by the Convenor in supporting the offender to change:

> [the Convenor was able to] make him see that he could be in control without being a bully … [the Convenor] managed to create a relationship with him, and [the offender] genuinely liked her at the end … those people working in restorative justice are more efficient than everything else I tried together. (CPV2, 2020)

Feedback provided by victim-survivors show that it is important to them that Convenors are able to recognise and manage perpetrators' attempts to manipulate the process and are able hold them accountable in real time:

> I believe [the offender] should have been pulled up when [they] started speaking during my opportunity. (IPV1, 2019)
>
> It gave me an opportunity to say how it made me feel in a way that he wasn't going to interrupt me and he had to listen. Whereas, in the home setting if he didn't want to hear it, he would just walk away or distract himself or me with something else. (CPV3, 2019)

Several participants reflected on best practice in the way Convenors managed their expectations. This was evident in descriptions from victim-survivors about how Convenors clearly explained what to expect and provided them with information about the process. In one case, the victim-survivor spoke about how the Convenor was clear from the beginning that the process was going to take time:

> [the Convenor] said, "I would get him there, but you're going to have to be patient and it's going to be little steps," and eventually that's what happened, but little step by little step. (CPV2, 2020)

This was also evident in victim-survivors' reflections on the alignment between their justice needs and the offender's capacity and willingness to meet these:

> I guess [the Convenor's] role was explaining the purpose and the expected outcome, but also understanding how our family worked and what was realistic to [the offender]. (FV4, 2018)

In summary, all victim-survivors reflected positively on Convenors' judgement, skills and expertise, which was apparent in the tailored support they received, and Convenors' ability to manage their expectations about the process. Victim-survivors also valued Convenors' ability to manage problematic behaviours of perpetrators.

Victim-centred processes

Victim-survivors' experiences of best practice in relation to a victim-centred approach were evident in reports of participatory decision making, a flexible approach to preparation and facilitation that took account of their justice needs and preferences, and a diverse range of desired outcomes being met through the process. This included being given the opportunity to voice the impacts of the crime, ask questions, re-establish feelings of safety, repair relationships, and achieve accountability and forgiveness. Several interviewees observed that everyone involved in the conference benefited from 'being able to say their piece' (CPV1, 2019).

> [It was an] opportunity to talk to him face to face, lift myself up. Did wonders for me and my confidence, part of healing process. (IPV2, 2019)

> I felt heard, even though I didn't need my perpetrator to understand what I was saying. I just needed a space to say it. And I don't think I realised how helpful that was going to be to me. (SV1, 2020)

Multiple victim-survivors reported that the experience of voicing the impacts of the offence and the circumstances surrounding it had flow-on effects for other family members and relationships:

> They helped the family more broadly than just between me and my grandson … The longer lasting outcomes for that is that it had a positive impact on the trajectory of our relationships. It put us in a place where we could keep growing in our relationships, rather than being stalled and estranged from one another. (FV4, 2018)

Two interviewees described the conference as important for building feelings of safety and developing practical safety plans to re-establish contact as well as boundaries:

> The conference I think that was more about getting [the offender] coming back, and working her way back to live with me … to work out how she was going to come back to live with me. Making sure that [the offender] was safe enough to be around, basically. (CPV4, 2020)

Others expressed satisfaction at being able to use the process as a way for the offender to take accountability and apologise, which was important to them. Relatedly, expressing forgiveness was important for some victim-survivors, particularly if the offender was a young person in their care:

> At the conference, it took over a year, but [the offender] said, "I'm sorry," and he meant it. (CPV2, 2020)

> Because I wanted to forgive him. I live in a world where forgiveness is the really powerful thing … I think it was more for his benefit that he apologised so that then, when I said I accepted his apology, he could feel forgiven. (FV4, 2018)

Victim-survivors reported that Convenors' engagement with them was tailored to their needs, consistent with victim-centred and trauma-informed restorative practice. One victim-survivor positively described Convenors' responsiveness to their request for some affected persons to join later in the conference as they did not want to voice certain issues with them present (SV2, 2022). While victim-survivors valued intensive one-on-one support from Convenors in the lead-up to the conference, some reported getting to a point where they preferred less frequent contact:

> Every time you talk about it, you're rehashing it and you're re-experiencing trauma. It is helpful but at a certain point it holds you back … It would be a constant topic in my therapy sessions because it would be a constant thing in my life. In the end, [the Convenors] were lovely. I decided that – we decided together that I didn't need any more meetings until one more meeting before the conference. (SV1, 2020)

Taken together, the importance that victim-survivors' ascribed to the victim-centred nature of the process was evident in their satisfaction with RJ providing them the opportunity to achieve individualised justice in a wide range of circumstances and cases. Victim-survivors particularly highlighted the importance of flexibility and adaptability during preparation and facilitation.

Intensive preparation and risk assessment

The majority of victim-survivors reported feeling satisfied with certain elements of the conference preparation process, including measures to help them feel ready to participate and help them to understand their role in the process. This was related to Convenor characteristics, specifically support, availability, specialist expertise and understanding (see section above on Convenor skills and expertise):

> [the Convenors] did a lot of preparation. Extraordinary important part of process, big investment, time and support. (FV2, 2019)

Several participants reflected on how high-risk matters were managed well when they described re-contact with the offender being approached slowly and in highly controlled circumstances:

> She'd [the offender] come over for a few hours or something, and then she'd go again. And then she'd like, just gradually coming back slowly, instead of coming back straightaway … working back in, the small steps, yes, that was so much better. (CPV4, 2020)

> The first six months when I was with [the Convenor], he [the offender] did not come in once, and then we had many, many meetings and eventually he came for one night, and a week later two nights, and he started to come back a little bit here and there. (CPV2, 2020)

One victim-survivor reported the Convenors 'did everything they could' to prepare them for the conference, describing the space where they eventually met the offender face-to-face as 'heavily curated' (SV2, 2022). They appreciated how Convenors explained when, where and how the conference would take place, visiting the space with them beforehand, and supporting them to write their talking points on cards in case they needed conversational prompts on the day.

One victim-survivor spoke about how delays were influenced by different people involved in the matter being at varying stages of readiness to meet with each other in a constructive way. However, with ongoing preparation and practice over the course of a year, they described the final conference as 'a beautiful success' (CPV2, 2020). Similarly, another victim-survivor said they appreciated the additional time to prepare:

> [it was] quite a big long process, because there is a lot of stuff to do … it actually took quite a long time. But throughout the time and the process I was actually quite relaxed because it was giving me power. It's a slow and steady process but it's absolutely worth it. (SV2, 2022)

Victim-survivors valued the intensive preparation period as this supported them to feel ready to engage with RJ in their own way. Risk assessment processes such as the careful management and curation of contact between victim-survivors and perpetrators enhanced feelings of safety and support for victim-survivors, illustrating the lived experience of this best practice principle.

Close collaboration with services and experts

Broadly, the feedback of victim-survivors points to the value they saw in therapeutic support for themselves and perpetrators, both during and after engagement in the RJ process. One victim-survivor spoke about the benefits of engaging in therapy facilitated through RJ:

> The biggest thing that they provided me was a psychologist who actually did cognitive therapy with me, and it was the best thing, it was great. It's made a huge difference in my ability to move on. (FV4, 2018)

Another victim-survivor spoke about how important it was for them to see the person who harmed them engaging in therapy. This helped them to move forward from what happened and empowered them to feel like they had done something to prevent the offender harming others:

> I did genuinely want him to get help before he hurt someone else like how he hurt me. Because I wouldn't wish what he did to me on anyone else … I did get what I wanted from him which was answers and for him to go seek help. (SV2, 2022)

In one matter, a victim-survivor of sexual violence was disappointed the offender had not engaged with any consent education prior to the conference:

> He [the offender] has no understanding of consent. Twelve months between offence and RJ. Thought RJ would have educated him and encourage to do course before RJ. (SV1, 2020)

Other participants reported appreciating how RJ overlapped with other services to provide continuity of support after the formal conference part of the program had been finalised. One victim-survivor spoke about how her child (the offender) had been engaging with a local violence prevention service for men, which had been beneficial:

> I like the idea of [the service] because they've got that complexity at the centre that deals with the mental health as well as the domestic violence for adolescent men. (CPV3, 2019)

Another victim-survivor said they appreciated the ease of the transition from engaging primarily with the Restorative Justice Unit during preparation for the conference to a more intensive engagement with family group therapy:

> So restorative justice was stepping back, and then yeah, family group therapy was stepping in. (CPV4, 2020)

The value victim-survivors saw in therapeutic support is also evident in the criticisms several made about the unavailability of some services. One victim-survivor said the young person who harmed her did not participate in any specialised programs for adolescent girls using FV behaviours because 'there were none' (CPV1, 2019).

In fact, several victim-survivors reported feeling frustrated that they could not access the appropriate and relevant specialist services despite being (at least partly) motivated to participate in RJ for this reason:

> I felt like there is definitely gaps in services. People talk to you for a long time and go, "Oh, I was just going to suggest this, or PCYC or…" At the end of it I go, "I've already tried those things." And they go, "Oh, well, thanks for sharing. See you." (CPV3, 2019)
>
> Everyone was telling me, "We can't help you". (CPV2, 2020)
>
> RJ people very supportive. Very useful but no professional[s] apart from them. (IPV2, 2019)

Overall, the availability and accessibility of professional supports alongside the RJ process was important for victim-survivors, in terms of both their own experience of healing and the level of engagement demonstrated by the offender. While several reflected on the limited availability of specialised programs, the supports that victim-survivors found particularly useful (aside from Convenors) were one-on-one clinical psychological support, family group therapy and local violence prevention programs for young men.

Discussion

This study examined victim-survivors' views and experiences of an RJ program for DFV and sexual violence, drawing out how these align with best practice principles for delivering RJ in this context. Several widely recognised best practice principles emerged as directly relevant to victim-survivors' experience of RJ, including Convenor skills and expertise, victim-centred processes, intensive preparation, and close and ongoing collaboration with external professional supports.

From the perspective of victim-survivors participating in RJ for DFV and sexual violence, the role of the Convenor 'cannot be overstated' (Bolitho 2015: 273), and their skills and expertise in several regards are critical. This is highlighted by the importance victim-survivors ascribe to Convenors understanding their needs and being available and able to offer tailored support. This aligns with the views of stakeholders that best practice relating to RJ in the context of DFV and sexual violence requires Convenors to have specialist knowledge of and experience in the dynamics and impacts of these crimes (Burns & Sinko 2023; Jeffries, Wood & Russell 2021; Wolthuis & Lünnemann 2016). Evidence of this was present in participants' reflections on the extent to which Convenors were able to recognise and manage problematic behaviours by perpetrators (or not) during the RJ process, and lay the groundwork for longer-term behaviour change. As highlighted, this is an especially acute concern in the context of IPV, which regularly occurs in relationships characterised by persistent manipulation and coercion (Gavrielides 2015; Pennell et al. 2021).

Close collaboration with DFV and sexual violence specialists and other relevant professionals is a critical component of best practice in RJ for complex harm matters (Bolitho 2015; Gavrielides 2015; Jeffries, Wood & Russell 2021). Victim-survivors in this study commonly reported that access to professional support alongside RJ was important to them, both for themselves and the person who offended against them. Valuations of the specialised support provided by Convenors to victim-survivors alongside reflections on the boundaries of their expertise highlights the importance of partnerships between RJ and external specialist support services, particularly specialised therapeutic programs for men using violence. While Convenors typically have clinical training and skills, several experts have cautioned that RJ is not, and should not try to be, a therapeutic program (Daly & Wade 2017; Lopez & Koss 2017). These findings highlight that it can be challenging to demarcate the roles and responsibilities of RJ Convenors versus collaborating external specialists, with overlapping skills, interests and expertise, particularly in regard to victim justice interests such as behaviour change and relationship repair.

RJ for DFV and sexual violence is necessarily adaptive, reflecting the diversity among victim-survivors in what they want to achieve through RJ. Indeed, variation in the extent to which victim-survivors wanted additional support outside of RJ, and the forms of support they preferred, underscores the necessity of other best practice principles such as flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs. This flexibility characteristic of RJ facilitates procedural justice for victim-survivors as they can 'steer' the response with tailored support and without infringing on the rights of the perpetrator (Van Camp & Wemmers 2013). Across diverse cases, personal circumstances, levels of perpetrator accountability and timelines, flexibility and participatory decision-making during preparation and facilitation was central to victim-survivors experiencing RJ as safe, positive and healing.

Lastly, practitioners consistently advocate for intensive risk assessment as essential for best practice when providing RJ in the context of DFV cases (Gavrielides 2015; Wolthuis & Lünnemann 2016). Victim-survivors in this study reflected positively on risk assessment practices, such as Convenors facilitating careful and staged re-contact with the offender. Victim-survivors also benefited from Convenors going over with them everything that would happen in the conference during the preparation period. This is consistent with evidence provided by victim-survivors participating in RJ for DFV in the United Kingdom, who similarly describe feeling empowered through preparatory exercises such as attending mock conferences with Convenors to practise voicing the impacts and to assess potential triggers (Gavrielides 2015).

Overall, victim-survivors report many experiences that align with the best practice principles outlined in the literature and that are specific to RJ in the context of DFV and sexual violence. The findings highlight the central role of Convenors in influencing victim-survivors' experiences of best practice, in line with previous research. Variability in the need for, and availability of, specialist therapeutic support alongside RJ highlights the particular importance of other best practice principles such as flexibility in preparation and approach to facilitate individualised justice for victim-survivors of DFV and sexual violence.

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ISSN 1836-2206 (Online) ISBN 978 1 922878 01 4 (Online)

https://doi.org/10.52922/ti78014

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