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Barriers to Community Engagement in Restorative Justice in Melbourne, Australia: Communication, Trust, and Access

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Abstract
This study examined barriers to community engagement in restorative justice in Melbourne, Australia, where access conditions remain insufficiently understood. Although restorative justice may be available, participation can be constrained by limited information, inadequate language support, mistrust of justice agencies, and time or resource demands. Guided by the Reintegrative Shaming Theory, the study adopted a convergent parallel mixed methods design, using stratified random sampling to select 373 adult victims and purposive sampling to recruit 14 justice professionals: five magistrates, five prosecutors, and four probation officers. Data were collected using structured questionnaires. Informational, institutional, cultural, and practical constraints were identified through descriptive analysis and thematic interpretation. Among respondents, 82.57 per cent agreed that lack of awareness was a barrier, 78.01 per cent identified inadequate preparation of volunteers, 77.48 per cent reported cultural or language barriers, and 72.66 per cent indicated institutional mistrust. Professionals also reported passive notification, limited interpretation services, and unaffordable participation demands. The findings reflect participants' perceptions rather than actual exclusion from the target population. The study recommends proactive communication, accessible interpretation, flexible arrangements, practical support, and meaningful community engagement. The findings have implications for African and diasporic justice scholarship in examining whether participation opportunities are accessible and voluntary while sustaining restorative justice's relational ideals. Overall, institutional provision alone does not guarantee equitable access or meaningful involvement, which depend on information, trust, and supportive participation conditions. The study highlights the need for restorative justice programme providers to address these conditions when developing inclusive processes that promote informed and voluntary participation.

Key terms: Access to justice, community engagement, institutional trust, participation barriers, restorative justice.

INTRODUCTION

Restorative justice can be set up at the institutional level but is not accessible to those who lack information or language support, confidence in justice agencies, time or resources. The number of people who participated in a programme cannot reveal what obstacles they faced or the extent of their practitioners' understanding of the obstacles. They also may not account for the experiences of those who never reached the programme. A study of barriers needs to include, in addition, the population the results came from, along with what the study found.

One key element to the success of restorative justice is community involvement, allowing those who have been impacted by the harm to have the power to respond. But describing a programme as restorative is not enough to engage communities. Information, confidence in the procedure, practical means of attendance and a meaningful role are needed. This study explored barriers to community engagement in restorative justice programmes from both the community (victim) and justice professional perspectives in metropolitan Melbourne, Australia. For the purposes of this article, community presence means attending an event, participation is about contributing to the process, engagement is beyond attending, and influence is about being able to shape decisions. The barriers that can be measured are related to information and communication, institutional trust and safety, cultural or language access, volunteer preparation, and practical costs or time.

Community presence and community influence are not the same. For instance, Christie (1977) pointed out that the appropriation of conflict by professionals might attract attention to possibilities for the directly concerned. A community representative can join the process without interfering with or affecting the professional process. Not engaging in the process does not necessarily mean disapproval of the principles of restorative justice – this may be as a result of a lack of information, transport or interpretation.

Asadullah (2020) examined community engagement in British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Bangladesh, and he found a difference between community engagement relations and relations between communities and institutions. Even local willingness is not sufficient, because his framework says that engagement implies more. It also depends on the ways in which organisations make community knowledge accessible and recognise it, and on the maintenance of relationships. This perspective is useful when considering difficulties that may prevent a victim or a community member from going to a restorative meeting.

The categories of the programmes included in the study were not considered to be identical programmes or approaches: victim-offender mediation, youth justice conferencing, Koori Court processes and other restorative processes. The Children's Court of Victoria supports group conferences with victims, supporters, police, and community members when eligible for young people in Victoria, to work out an outcome plan for the court (Children's Court of Victoria, n.d.). The Koori Court is a culturally responsive sentencing model where Elders and Respected Persons provide advice to the Magistrate, who still has sentencing power (Magistrates' Court of Victoria, 2025). The arrangements organise community participation in various institutional roles and provide clues to the question of why community influence, and meaningful community influence, is worth investigating.

The research question was: What were the barriers to community engagement in restorative justice programmes in Melbourne identified by participants, victims and justice professionals, and how did their stories help to account for the lack of involvement? Awareness, communication, fear, institutional trust, volunteer preparation, cultural and language access, time, financial considerations, opportunities for input and safety were explored. These were treated as distinct but related conditions. This was not intended to indicate that any given barrier was necessarily a reason for not taking part, and that a positive rating by current participants equated to someone who might still have been participating.

In addition, the inquiry is comparative in its relevance to African studies of criminology and justice. Ubuntu was explored by Elechi et al. (2010) in the context of justice, where they also highlight relationality,

responsibility, and restoration. What one might then ask is whose relationships and voices are heard when community justice is practised through formal organisations? Participation and institutional responsibility are the two areas being compared here; the Melbourne evidence is not directly offered as issues about African communities, nor as a test of Ubuntu itself. Ubuntu expresses a different kind of communal responsibility and institutional legitimacy, but not an interchangeability of the nature of justice contexts in Africa and Australia.

The concepts of community centrality and the organisation of restorative processes have been discussed in existing research. For instance, Asadullah and Morrison (2021) examined the role of community relationships in the restorative justice practice in BC. They were not able to determine in Melbourne which set of access restrictions was best known among the participating victim witnesses. To connect the reported barriers with the accounts of communication, professional practice and everyday access conditions, a locally grounded investigation was required. There has been scholarship in Australia on the processes of conferencing in various jurisdictions (Daly & Hayes, 2001) and on the distinctive culture of Indigenous sentencing courts (Marchetti & Daly,2007). These accounts, however, fail to indicate the way that participating victims in Melbourne experience the barriers in information, institutions, culture, and practice that are measured here.

The objective was to identify barriers to community engagement in restorative justice programmes in Melbourne, Australia. The matching question was: What barriers were identified by participating victims and professionals in the justice system, and what did the narratives reveal in terms of limitations in engagement? Awareness and access were separated from programme satisfaction. It didn't assume that the endorsement of a barrier in a questionnaire represented a causal level of satisfaction. The article therefore reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical literature and explains and reports on the study methods with respect to the observable barriers and the considerations in relation to accessible participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reintegrative Shaming and the Conditions of Engagement

Braithwaite's (1989) Reintegrative Shaming Theory guided the study. It challenged stigmatising rejection of the individual and saw disapproval of offending as part of reintegration into social relationships. This account is about community engagement, with those relationships offering a means of communicating responsibility, whilst maintaining a path to accepted membership. Such involvement should not disrespect or disgrace those involved. The theory guided the inclusion of the items on mistrust, fear, safety, and opportunities for meaningful community input, as these could relate to enabling or hindering non-stigmatising engagement and reintegration.

The theory also emphasises the circumstances that make communication and interaction possible. People without interpretation, who fear repercussions or who do not understand the process, may be unable to contribute. Braithwaite and Mugford (1994) did not limit reintegration ceremonies to a particular type of meeting; rather, they discussed the social situation the process tackled. Their work is rooted in their exploration of the organisation of trust, recognition and participation in practice. The relationship between institutional trust, perceived credibility of invitations, active victim participation (ways in which it helps express harm), and potentially active victim community engagement (how it can help support accountability and reintegration) was used as interpretive propositions, not tested causal pathways.

The framework was used as a critical framework rather than assuming that community participation is always beneficial. Communities can be characterised by inequitable power dynamics, conflicting interests, and pressures to see the victim reconcile when he or she may not feel ready. Daly (2002) demonstrated that actual experiences of encounters are more intricate than just the contrast between restorative and conventional justice. The issue was not whether or not an informal community engagement is "better" or "preferable", but the quality and access to the engagement. The remaining questionnaire items dealt with the prerequisites (communication, public awareness, culture and language, time, cost, and

volunteer preparation) in which the social relationships that the theory assumes can exist.

Community Centrality and Institutional Control

Asadullah and Morrison (2021) demonstrate that to talk about community centrality is not only to talk about restorative values, but also to ask an organisational and practical question. They used views of people involved in the development and delivery of restorative justice as the foundation for their research. It offered information about community relationships but did limit its ability to estimate a causal effect of community ownership on victim outcomes. This distinction is very important when considering its implications for a different jurisdiction. Daly and Hayes (2001) provide a valuable description of conferencing in Australia, and Marchetti and Daly (2007) illustrate how Indigenous sentencing courts have different objectives and a unique cultural perspective. Both of these studies do not measure the extent of those barriers experienced by the included victims in Melbourne's metropolitan area.

Institutional organisation, staffing, referral and resources can be facilitators in the process of participation. Professional practices may also limit participation by deciding who will be informed, who will have a voice and how much. Asadullah (2020) proposed addressing relationships horizontally and vertically. Together, these studies imply that barriers need to be investigated at the interface of communities and institutions and not be solely attributed to the lack of motivation. What is still unresolved, and the issue that needs to be addressed and moves beyond institutions and community, is how communication, credibility and access to materials are experienced together.

Information, Culture, and Practical Access

In studies of victim-offender mediation, it has been argued that there is a need for adequate preparation, and there must be an opportunity to take part in a meaningful way. An extensive body of practice and research is reviewed by Umbreit et al. (2004), but positive experiences on the part of the participants do not create equal access prior to participation. Without educating or providing information about restorative options, a person will not have the same choice as a person who is provided with the same information and assistance. Information is thus not only an access condition, but also a characteristic of programme delivery.

This is more than just programme names being translated into a different language. This should ensure that participants know what responsibility, harm and confidentiality are, and the role they will be asked to undertake. Elechi et al. (2010) presented a relational understanding of justice and warned about a culturally specific version of 'restoration' being represented by a single institutional model. It is a conceptual contribution to the comparative context, and does not represent any common interpretation of justice in all African or diasporic communities. In this study, the comparison focused on the possibility of informed participation rather than ascribing a lack in the participant due to a difference in culture.

The practicality of participation may also be a factor. Facility, travel, childcare, and meeting locations can make the difference as to whether an invitation can be accepted or not, and time off from work is a critical factor. It is important to note that these should not be equated with attitudes towards restorative justice. Therefore, the present study explored the importance of looking at practical issues and awareness/assurance in addition to information to produce engagement. The cross-sectional responses do not allow for determining if time, transport and childcare barriers interacted and/or caused non-participation.

Safety, Consent, and the Research Gap

Strang et al. (2013) identified positive victim outcomes in randomised research of face-to-face restorative conferences of willing participants. The consent requirement has limitations as to what conclusions can be drawn regarding those who do not participate in a contact or who cannot. Also, it illustrates why it is bad to reduce meaningful choice in order to increase participation. A programme may be useful if it is appropriate for a particular participant and may not be appropriate for every case. This evidence is based on consent and does not enable the generalisation to be drawn regarding those who did not receive an invitation to attend or did receive but did not attend.

Jeffries et al. (2021) explored practitioners' perspectives in relation to adult restorative justice and

gendered violence, noting there are important questions to consider regarding suitability and safety. Their research confirms the need for expert assistance and careful consideration of power; however, it does not offer a "one-size-fits-all" solution for access. This research gap was what led to the combination of reported institutional, informational, cultural and practical barriers in one metropolitan setting. The study analysed such barriers without pretending to quantify the experience of all who do not participate or test the efficacy of any solutions suggested. To this end, the current mixed methods study incorporates barrier ratings and justice-professional accounts, but maintains the distinction between perceived barriers and observed exclusion.

METHODOLOGY

The study design used was a convergent parallel mixed-methods design with a descriptive cross-sectional approach. The victim questionnaire data and justice-professional interviews were gathered at the same stage of the study, analysed separately, and integrated during interpretation. This study was conducted in the metropolitan Melbourne region, Victoria. Some programme types in the sampling frame were restorative processes in youth justice, victim-offender mediation, and Koori Court processes. The quantitative target population comprised 17,605 adult victims who had engaged in restorative programmes from January 2022 to December 2024.

Yamane's (1967) finite-population formula resulted in a desired sample size of 391 victims. Stratification was done with respect to programme type and offence category, as well as geographical area, and simple random sampling was done in all the strata. There was a 95.4 per cent response rate with a total of 373 completed questionnaires retrieved for analysis. A total of 14 justice professionals were interviewed – five magistrates, five prosecutors and four probation officers – using a semi-structured approach. Professional experience of restorative referral and processes guided selection. Perceived barriers were measured with 10 statements on the questionnaire, which used a 5-point 'agreement' rating scale. Primarily, questionnaires were provided electronically via a secure online platform and paper questionnaires where necessary. Interviews were conducted individually, either face-to-face or through secure video communication, and recorded with consent. SPSS version 31 was used to summarise the quantitative findings, while principal component analysis examined the underlying structure of the ten items.

Qualitative analysis was carried out in the iterative stages of familiarisation, coding, theme development, review and interpretation following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). The convergent design was selected as the survey and interviews were concurrent, and neither strand would influence the other strand if we had used an explanatory or exploratory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The survey measured perceived barriers and their underlying constructs, whereas the interviews revealed possible processes for the emergence of barriers. During interpretation, integration compared descriptive patterns with convergent and divergent professional themes.

Magistrates, prosecutors, and probation officers were chosen in positions where they directly determine whether a case will be referred for restorative justice, can coordinate between restorative justice and prosecution, or are in charge of supervising cases referred for restorative justice. The professional interview sampling frame did not include facilitators, volunteers, community representatives and victim-support organisations, which means that the spectrum of institutional and community views is limited.

The study documentation identified the sampling number of 17,605 people as a result of declared referrals from the Victorian justice agencies in 2022 (5,174), 2023 (5,611) and 2024 (6,820). These figures were considered to be the number recorded as referred, not as a self-standing count of unique, eligible victims. There was no full breakdown of programme, offence and locality into which the frame broke in the material that was reported; a summary of the sample composition achieved is provided in Findings.

The barrier descriptions reproduced in Table 1 are the 10 items on the questionnaire. They embrace theoretical and/or empirical issues of awareness, trust, stigma, safety, volunteering and cultural and language accessibility, time and costs and opportunity for input.

The two agreement responses were scaled together (with the percentages shown as responses). The questionnaire appendix is coded in the opposite direction from some of the published mean score interpretations, and the interpretation syntax for the original questionnaire was not available; percentages are provided for each category, which assume no direction of numeric coding.

Ethical Considerations

The study reported university ethical approval and permission to access participants. Participants consented (on paper or electronically) and participation was voluntary, with the ability to decline answering questions at any time and to withdraw from the study. Confidentiality was maintained through IRB-approved respondent codes and secure storage of the data. Support information was provided because discussing crime and justice experiences could be distressing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Reported Barriers to Community Engagement

Table 1 presents the ten barriers in the questionnaire sequence. The percentages indicate agreement that an issue could prevent community members from engaging with restorative justice. They should not be read as the proportion of victims personally excluded by each issue. Multiple barriers could be endorsed by the same respondent.

Table 1: Reported Barriers to Community Engagement (N = 373)

Barrier	Agree/strongly agree (%)
Lack of awareness about restorative justice	82.57
Fear of retaliation or stigma	75.34
Insufficient training or support for volunteers	78.01
Cultural or language barriers	77.48
Mistrust in the criminal justice system	72.66
Lack of time or competing priorities	77.48
Limited opportunities for meaningful community input	72.12
Financial or logistical constraints	73.19
Inadequate communication by justice agencies	76.94
Safety concerns during meetings or events	67.83

Source: Research Data (2026).

Note. Reported agreement percentages are preserved, including rounding of the original response categories. Multiple barriers could be endorsed. These figures are perceptions of barriers, not rates of personal exclusion or estimates for ethnic subgroups.

Of the 373 respondents, 204 (54.69%) identified as 'Female', 140 (37.53%) identified as 'Male', 20 identified as 'Non-binary/Other' and nine identified as 'Other'. The largest age group was 26–35 years (123, 32.98%). Programme forms consisted of victim-offender mediation (216, 57.91 %), youth justice conferencing

(124, 33.24 %), Koori Court processes (28, 7.51 %) and other forms (5, 1.34 %).

The greatest endorsement was for 'lack of awareness' (82.57%). Respondents cited insufficient volunteer training or support (78.01%), cultural/language barriers (77.48%), and balancing two or more time demands (77.48%) as barriers. Inadequate communication by justice agencies was identified as a problem by 76.94 per cent. The distribution revealed that even those who had successfully accessed restorative processes were widely aware of both informational and practical challenges. Even established participants might still have this lack of awareness if they learned about restorative justice only after a lot of work or noticed inadequate publicity in the community. Perceived gaps in volunteer preparation can relate to recruitment, training, supervision or institutional resources, which have not been separately measured. Costs of travel, work, and child care schedules can have a cumulative effect, while language varies and can also impact availability to understand informed consent.

Respondent fear of retaliation or stigma (75.34%), financial or logistical barriers (73.19%) and mistrust of institutions (72.66%) were all endorsed. Limited opportunities for meaningful community input received 72.12 per cent, while safety concerns received 67.83 per cent. Low placement of the issue of safety doesn't mean that it was not important or that it was being adequately addressed in all situations. Over 2/3 continued to cite it as a barrier. The potential link between poor communication and fostering mistrust in the pursuit of justice agencies, where they are already seen as inaccessible, was not statistically estimated.

Exploratory Structure of the Barriers

Three groups related to each other were identified with principal component analysis: institutional/psychological barriers, barriers to awareness/ communication and barriers to practice/logistics. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin statistic reported was .867, and Bartlett's test reported was significant with a $p < .001$ and a Chi-square value of 2431.678. The three components had a reported item variance of 71.4 per cent. These findings were a description of the structure of the barrier ratings and not variation in programme satisfaction. Principal component analysis, employing Varimax rotation, was used for extraction, with convergence achieved after five iterations. These three reported components had the item variance of 28.6 per cent, 23.1 per cent and 19.7 per cent.

Expert review and pilot testing in Geelong assessed clarity and relevance. Based on eight victim respondents, the barriers scale demonstrated a pilot Cronbach's alpha of .798 and was considered preliminary evidence. The source documentation shows that specialists in criminology and restorative justice conducted the review, determining their relevance and clarity in relation to the research objectives. No details regarding their own scores were given, nor about how many they received.

The awareness and communication aspect had a loading value of .846 for agency communication and .812 for lack of awareness. Associated with the institutional and psychological component were mistrust, fear, volunteer support, lack of input and safety. The practical and logistical grouping is based on culture and language, time and financial constraints. Some of the input was also limited on the communication side, which means that the number of access problems might be more than one in order to gain the opportunity to influence. The institutional and psychological label groups represent perceived risks ("Am I safe to participate? Do I know how to participate safely?") and institutions' capacity to provide "trustworthy and safe participation." Cultural and language access was clustered by empirical grouping with time and costs, and interpretation can be another form of exclusion, cultural or institutional. Limited community input loaded on institutional and awareness components (.685 and .512), which seems to be influenced by decision-making authority and communication.

Table 2: Reported Rotated Component Loadings for the Ten Barrier Items

Barrier item	Institutional/ psychological	Awareness/ communication	Practical/ logistical	Communality
Lack of awareness of restorative justice	—	.812	—	NR
Fear of retaliation or stigma	.734	—	—	NR
Insufficient volunteer training/support	.701	—	—	NR
Cultural or language barriers	—	—	.788	NR
Mistrust of the criminal justice system	.768	—	—	NR
Lack of time or competing priorities	—	—	.745	NR
Limited opportunities for community input	.685	.512	—	NR
Financial or logistical constraints	—	—	.723	NR
Inadequate justice-agency communication	—	.846	—	NR
Safety concerns during meetings	.652	—	—	NR

Note. Extraction: principal component analysis; rotation: Varimax (five iterations). Dashes indicate loadings below .500 that were suppressed in the available output. NR = not reported. The original matrix did not include communalities or subthreshold loadings; these cannot be inferred accurately. Source: Research data (2026).

The component outcomes did not yield a conclusion that communication was the strongest causal predictor of engagement. A high loading does not necessarily mean a strong effect of a proposed intervention but rather represents a high association with the measured component. A description ranking and descriptive accounts were therefore taken into account in addition to the component structure. This prevented using statistical measurement properties as evidence of a policy priority.

Agency Communication and Public Awareness

Relying on the potential participants' awareness of the existence of restorative justice was described by professionals. A magistrate said that victims might come across police, courts, and support services without proactively being informed about restorative options. The prosecutor noted that there was a similar issue with recruiting volunteers, with limited publicity also relying on community members being exposed to notices in institutions. These accounts attributed low engagement to agency communication (a factor not always cited as a reason for low engagement) versus disinterest alone.

A magistrate explained the information deficit:

> *We rely too much on the victims knowing to ask for RJ. Most victims do not know it exists (M005, KII, May 2026).*

A survey confirmed this interpretation. This was expressed with a high endorsement of 'lack of awareness' and 'inadequate communication', which suggests that there are perceived information gaps. However, results did not demonstrate what percentage of the eligible victims was not reached and which type of outreach was most effective. The contribution of the interviews was in being able to locate a plausible institutional process for further evaluation.

Asadullah (2020) described the difference between community relationships and institutional connections, and how to move beyond passive information. A website can have information; however, it cannot make a safe space for people to ask questions, seek clarification, or interact with the website. The discovery in turn reinforced reciprocal communication in community congruent settings. It did not call for a rescission of the informed consent in favour of the pressure to accept the invitation.

Institutional Trust, Safety and Stigma

A prosecutor's perspective was that mistrust was not only related to information about the restorative process, but to previous experiences with the justice system as well. One note was that some communities were still sceptical about the difference that could not occur if there was no regular practice or real partnership. This opinion was in line with 72.66 per cent of respondents who viewed institutional mistrust as an obstruction. It also made some suggestions as to why a communications campaign might not resolve the issue.

A related but different worry was fear of retribution and/or stigma. Even if people understand the concept of restorative justice, they may be reluctant to sign up as part of a restorative justice process or parties to a conflict. It didn't differentiate between all potential sources of that fear in the survey. The findings, therefore, confirmed the value of assessing need in order to be safe and secure whilst leaving no room for the suggestion that every reluctance was to be interpreted as misinformation.

Daly's (2002) critical account is relevant in that restorative language does not necessarily result in power differences being dissolved. It may be a programme that provides reconciliation without participants being able to be at ease about the impact of talking. Trust cannot only be linked to descriptions of programmes, however, but has to be associated with what institutions do. Efforts to pursue reintegration must be protected by a secure environment, without any stigmatising or coercive experiences. These safeguards are in line with the principles of the Reintegrative Shaming Theory as it advocates for participation to convey responsibility, but without coercion or fearful behaviours of the victim and community members, or stigmatisation. It was not tested for outcomes of offender reintegration.

Cultural, Language, and Practical Access

In one instance, a magistrate reported that an interpreter was available, but did not understand restorative goals and the victim withdrew. The professional's interpretation of this was only that the victim's language ability was lacking and thus that the service had failed to prepare the interpreter. This was a piece that further illustrated the endorsement of 77.48 per cent of cultural/language barriers. It did not report a share of withdrawals for any group of languages.

In another instance, the client's work, child care and travel schedule meant it was impractical to meet during the day whilst in the city centre. These cumulative needs were not taken away by willingness to participate, the probation professional stressed. Competing time priorities and financial and/or logistical constraints were also broadly mentioned as concerns on the survey. These findings indicated that accessibility was related to the real cost and organisation of participation.

It was important to differentiate between choice and limited access. Refusing an offer in circumstances when it is unaffordable is not the same as refusing a known and feasible one. However, the authors did not directly interview those who did not enter into restorative programmes. Its evidence is more indicative of a need to re-think and critically analyse access conditions than a denial of any place of institutionally caused non-participation. Since these non-participants were not recruited directly and no record was made of them, it was not possible to categorise non-attendance empirically as either freely chosen or constraint-driven. The prevalence of such differences cannot be estimated and is shown only by practitioners' examples.

Volunteer Preparation and Meaningful Input

Respondents also identified challenges faced by those who will sustain community engagement. Volunteers may have limited confidence, continuity and ability to do the job responsibly due to inadequate volunteer training. The process of input was limited, and

engagement levels could remain consultative and not influential. The latter distinguished recruitment from the creation of sustainable, meaningful roles. Volunteer skills are: confidentiality, trauma-informed conversation, cultural competence, consent and safe referral. These are separate needs for recruitment, start-up training, supervision and post-training. Developing meaningful input in the context of communities also brings up the question of opportunities to influence programme or discussion; however, decision-making power for community representatives was not assessed in this study.

Likewise, the community centrality was identified in the daily lives of relationships and organisational work by Asadullah and Morrison (2021). Results from Melbourne brought in the experience of affected individuals who saw training and input as being constraining. They didn't assess the quality of all volunteer programmes or test a particular governance model. The idea was not just to look at how many volunteers were being recruited, but to what extent they were willing and authorised to go. The main examples were inadequate volunteer preparation (78.01%) and inadequacy of input information (72.12 %), as well as inadequate professional interviews reporting on the lack of efforts to recruit volunteers.

Discussion

From Invitations to Usable Opportunities

The integrated findings revealed that engagement was dependent on a series of conditions. There had to be an awareness of opportunities, understanding of them, perception of credibility of institutions and a means to participate. They also required positions in which they would be able to participate instead of just 'be there'. A weakness at one stage may limit strengths at another. The four linked conditions are: accessible information; institutional credibility; feasible participation; meaningful institutional input. Safety and voluntary consent should be protected across all four aspects. This interpretation extended beyond one meeting. Publicity might help knowledge grow but will not solve doubt, and interpretation might help to communicate but would not remove travel or childcare expenses. Practical help, on the other hand, would be a rather restricted benefit to an uninformed or frightened individual. The research indicated coordinated responses to barriers without asserting testing of the statistical interaction of these factors. This was found to be in keeping with the difference between restorative aspiration and implementation. Braithwaite's theory (1989) is one that is set against the relationships, but the relationships require enabling conditions. The reported barriers had to do with the opening or closing of institutions with regard to these conditions. Community involvement was therefore not a resource that could only be accessed if programmes wished to use it but instead an organisational requirement and so had to be handled fairly and feasibly.

Comparative Implications for African Justice Scholarship

In the community context of the Melbourne evidence, a comparative question pertinent to African and diasporic justice debates arises when community participation is made possible: whose is made possible and whose is assumed? Elechi et al. (2010) located Ubuntu in an African context of restoration and of ‘relational responsibility '.

The current results raise questions concerning institutions’ structures with which ideals of relationships materialise into practice. This is not to say Melbourne and African justice contexts are interchangeable, but rather an analytical link. A relational approach emphasises responsibility and inclusion and can be used in different ways in different histories of colonisation, community representation and institutional power.

If community-based approaches are being considered, information, trust, language, safety, time and resources should be considered within the context of the institution. Well-known communication systems can support the process, but inactive steps can result in some voices being lost. Local investigation should be conducted to identify who has been excluded and whether it is being protected by the arrangements being proposed, and whether victims are retaining arrangements for their independent choice. The Melbourne study provides a set of empirically based questions, rather than a model to be simply transplanted unchanged.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The greatest constraint was the lack of participants outside of a restorative process. This may not be the same as the barriers following victims and professionals in their experiences. The language-access limitation also meant that less evidence was available from those most impacted by interpretation issues. More research should then be conducted on non-participants and employing recruitment through community languages. Therefore, these survey figures are not percentages of the exclusion rate in the eligible population at large, but rather percentages of the barriers recognised by the surveyed participants. A person who has not accessed the programmes might have been experiencing different or greater barriers.

Investigate whether notification, interpretation, flexible scheduling and practical assistance create changes in access and experience as explored in longitudinal and implementation studies. Development of evaluation should recognise the differences between invitation, uptake, engagement and involvement. It should also explore the unintentional pressure and withdrawal. Such research would not rely on the highlighted barriers as an indication of the effectiveness of the proposed responses.

Participants were individuals who had previously engaged in a restorative process. Perceived barriers to participation were reported in the victim survey, which did not directly represent those who were not able to enter a programme. Under the recorded recruitment criteria, victims who did not speak English and didn't have access to an interpreter were also excluded. This was particularly significant for the translation of the isolation, and the extent to which a claim encompassed the experiences of all culturally diverse interactions were interpreted.

The study did not offer ethnic specific estimates or sample an African-diasporic subset for analyses. So, professional examples have been provided to represent potential, not actually measured, subgroup differences. The cross-sectional data were not capable of providing evidence of whether a specific barrier came first or withdrawal, or whether barrier elimination would lead to increased participation. These restrictions remain in implications towards Melbourne and in conversation of comparing relevance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study found that there were various barriers to community involvement with Melbourne's restorative justice programmes: informational, institutional, cultural, and practical. Lack of awareness received the greatest endorsement, and agency communication, volunteer preparation, language access, time, cost, and trust/safety received substantial endorsement. Professional accounts showed how they might occur during routine practice. The evidence concerned perceived constraints and did not indicate causal effects on satisfaction or participation rates. The key takeaway is: Do restorative justice institutions create the opportunity to be connected with, trusted, accessible and influential? What is owed is the identification of these distinct conditions, and the elucidation of why perceptions told by those who already have access to these programmes cannot replace the information about those who do not have access to these programmes.

Recommendations: Justice agencies and restorative providers should provide information proactively, via the appropriate contact mechanisms and trusted community-based organisations. Communication should include information about eligibility, roles, safeguards and the right to decline without pressure. Questions and feedback must be solicited by the provider (not passively published). These measures must not be assumed to be effective.

Programme managers should strengthen interpreters' familiarity with restorative concepts and ask communities for culturally appropriate involvement. Flexible scheduling and venues, as well as practical assistance, should take into consideration participants' realities. Continuing support with preparation for volunteers should be provided, as should be clear responsibilities and recognition for meaningful input. These measures should be combined with the professional responsibility to keep the public safe and to make informed choices.

Finally, there must be some evaluation of those who refuse to attend, or those who cannot access programmes and an investigation into reasons for not

attending. Evaluation should not assume everyone has the same preferences or wants; nor should anyone assume that an unmet access need is illegitimate. Introduction of this into African contexts requires evidence and sensitivity to institutional as well as cultural variations. Community participation is more defensible if opportunities are available, and if they participate, they are made available, voluntary, and responsive to those who are asked to participate.

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