

Victim–Offender Dialogue: Does it Really Work? a Critical Analysis of Restorative Justice in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD) is not only the main feature of the restorative justice system in South Africa, but in a way, it also depicts the country's general ambitions for reconciliation, accountability, and healing after the conflict. Morally, it is based on Ubuntu and the influence of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to be a gathering where the victims first tell their stories of the harm caused to them, and then the offenders in a direct and relational manner take responsibility. Even though it is becoming more and more institutionalized in the Department of Correctional Services, there are still doubts lingering in the air i.e. whether VOD really leads to restorative outcomes or just serves as an administrative tool in a mainly punitive system. This qualitative research critically assesses the effectiveness of VOD in South Africa through an interpretivist lens of empirical studies, policy documents, and theoretical writings. The study embraces theories of restorative justice, trauma studies and African communitarian ethics in examining the understanding, facilitation, and experiences of VOD of the stakeholders. Its findings are that VOD is the medium through which emotional healing, moral accountability, and reintegration can be realized, nevertheless, its impact is rather sporadic and heavily reliant on the facilitator's skill, the voluntary nature, and trauma informed preparation and support availability. Besides different systemic obstacles e.g. community under resourcing, facilitator's skills inconsistently, parole related coercive pressures and lack of community engagement which limit VOD potentials. The paper concludes that VOD is only an effective instrument when it is conducted under conditions that are ethically sound, well resourced, and culturally responsive. Without these safeguards, the repeating of the harm, deepening of power imbalances, and failure to achieve the restorative goals of VOD can be the outcomes of VOD.

KEYWORDS: Victim Offender Dialogue, Restorative Justice, Ubuntu, Trauma Informed Practice, Offender Accountability.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Victim offender dialogue (VOD) is arguably the most prominent and contested embodiment of Restorative Justice in present day South Africa. Restorative justice, which is a product of the post-apartheid project of social reconstruction, was accepted as a moral and political countermeasure to the punitive legacies of the apartheid criminal justice system. The country's transition to democracy stressed the need for reconciliation, accountability, and relationship building, which were most notably institutionalized by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). VOD was therefore not simply a technical intervention, but a justice model that aimed at restoring social harmony and repairing both interpersonal and community relationships broken due to (Skelton, 2018; Dzur, 2022). The main selling point of VOD is its potential to humanize justice. VOD does not totally discard the use of an adversarial and retributive model that usually silences victims and marginalizes offenders, but it advocates for the inclusion of dialogue, mutual recognition, and emotional engagement as the core elements of justice processes. Inspired by the principle of Ubuntu an African communitarian ethic stressing interdependence, shared humanity, and moral reciprocity VOD aims at producing a setting where harm is acknowledged, accountability is personalized, and victims as well as offenders are reintegrated into the moral community (Ramose, 1999; Ntlama & Ndima, 2019). Supporters claim that such encounters empower victims as they get to express their trauma

and regain their agency, while at the same time offenders are enabled to see the human side that has been affected by their actions and to subsequently make amends in a meaningful way.

On the other hand, embedding VOD in the South African correctional milieu has not gone without heavy criticism. Even though the Department of Correctional Services has officially made VOD part of its rehabilitation and parole preparation programs, the implementation realities are often far from restorative ideals. Prisons continue to be overcrowded, under resourced, and heavily influenced by disciplinary logics that have been in place for a long time, hence making it extremely difficult to change the situation in such a way that voluntary, emotionally safe and ethically grounded dialogue can take place (Muntingh, 2020). Besides that, there have been concerns about the competence of facilitators, the sufficiency of trauma informed preparation, and the likelihood that offenders might use VOD in an instrumental manner especially when they think that participating in parole will be beneficial for them (Ambrose & Skelton, 2021). These conflicts question the reality and the power for change of VOD in institutional settings disengaged from the restorative practices originally designed for them.

Moreover, due to the cultural and historical significance of Restorative Justice in South Africa, VOD cannot be considered as just a superficial or a mere symbolic initiative. Instead, it serves to address the complex issues where transformative justice intersects with the limitations of bureaucratic systems, unresolved social inequalities, and the deeply rooted patterns of violence. Hence, examining VOD means engaging with its philosophical foundations, its operational realities, and the lived experiences of participants victims looking for meaning, offenders dealing with accountability, communities negotiating reintegration, facilitators handling emotional and institutional complexities in a very intricate way.

First, VOD is presented as a location for achieving both goals and contradictions, where the ideals of Restorative Justice clash with their practical limitations. The paper, through a qualitative critical analysis based on restorative justice theory, trauma research, and African communitarian philosophy, questions whether VOD in South Africa is a truly restorative process or its success is dependent, conditional, and susceptible to institutional distortions. Therefore, the issues dealt with here are not merely technical questions of program implementation but deeper inquiries into what justice means in a society characterized by historical trauma, persistent inequality, and continuous struggles to realize a shared moral order.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Restorative Justice Theory

Restorative Justice is primarily concerned with the four key aspects of the matter: dialogue, accountability, relational repair, and the collective resolution of harm (Zehr, 2015; Braithwaite, 2002). Contrarily to retributive justice that centres on punishment, restorative justice is oriented towards transforming relationships and mending trust. VOD depicts a well-organized conversation between victim and offender, facilitated and based on the principles of voluntariness, respect, and mutual recognition (Dzur, 2022).

One of the most essential perspectives of Braithwaite's (2002) concept of reintegrative shaming is this: Reintegrative shaming makes a difference between the condemnation of the bad deeds and the person. In VOD, offenders' acknowledgment of their wrongdoing is facilitated, and they also get support for their reintegration into society, which is a method that both demystifies and facilitates change in offender conduct.

Zehr's (2015) model of restorative justice as a "paradigm shift" from adversarial justice is also a consideration here. VOD strives to make justice processes less inhumane by focusing on dialogue and interpersonal accountability rather than legal contestation.

2.2 Ubuntu and African Communitarian Justice

Restorative Justice in South Africa is deeply rooted in Ubuntu philosophy whose main focus is interconnectedness and the idea that "a person is a person through other persons" (Ramose, 1999). The justice model based on Ubuntu sees harm as the destruction of communal harmony, and thus, the mending of relationships is the collective's task. Therefore, VOD is closely related to these aspects since it puts its primary focus on empathy, reconciliation, and reintegration.

Still, scholars point out that Ubuntu should not be idealized uncritically. According to Kartvelian (2020), state institutions, while calling on Ubuntu most times and on the contrary, implement their restorative programs in a very strict and bureaucratic way, thus diminishing community agency.

2.3 Trauma Theory

One of the reasons why trauma is an important aspect concerning VOD processes in South Africa is that there are many violent crimes among the prison population in the country. Herman (2015) avers that trauma survivors need safety, empowerment, and agency things that are rarely found in prisons. By incorporating trauma theory, a remedial step would be to stress careful preparation, emotional readiness, and the presence of a facilitator who is well aware of psychological dynamics (Madikizela, 2015).

2.4 Power, Coercion, and Institutional Critique

Besides that, Foucault's (1977) thinking about disciplinary power also brings a very critical understanding of the matter. VOD carried out in correctional settings can be a way of increasing institutional control over the offenders rather than a fair, participatory justice process. Ambrose and Skelton (2021) point out that VOD in parole scenarios might coerce offenders to take part in the activities,

thus the authenticity is at the stake. As a result, this theoretical framework depicts VOD as the place where different factors such as restorative ideals, cultural meaning, trauma recovery, and institutional power interact.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Restorative justice (RJ), over the last thirty years, has been the subject of major debates within criminal justice and is seen as a counter response to the deficiencies of retributive justice. Its ethical origin can be traced back to communitarian ethics, indigenous dispute resolution practices, and relational theories of harm, all of which emphasize concepts like healing, accountability, and restoration of social harmony rather than punishment (Braithwaite, 2002; Zehr, 2015). Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD), a structured meeting where through a mediator victims and offenders discuss the emotional, relational, and material consequences of crime, is at the centre of this radical change internationally. VOD has been recognized globally as a leading tool to increase understanding, decrease fear, and, moreover, achieve offender accountability when it is carried out with strict procedural safeguards (Umbreit et al., 2017; Bolitho, 2017).

3.1 Restorative Justice Theory and Global Scholarship

Restorative justice is based on the idea that crime is a violation of individuals and their relationships and not just a breach of law. Zehr's (2015) original work points to the offenders' moral obligation to make up for the harm and the victims' right to be given a real role in justice processes. Braithwaite's (2002) theory of reintegrative shaming also gives more support to the idea that the positive social disapproval followed by getting back to the community can bring about less return of the same kind of offences as it will deepen the social ties again. Thereafter, empirical studies carried out in the UK, New Zealand, and Canada have demonstrated that RJ practices notably VOD result in higher levels of victim satisfaction, psychological wellbeing, and statistically significant decrease in the perpetration of crimes (Sherman & Strang, 2019; Rossner & Bruce, 2020). A number of meta-analyses have agreed that restorative interventions bring about effects that are very seldom achieved by traditional courts. Such effects include improved offender empathy, decreased trauma symptoms in victims, and enhanced perception of procedural fairness (Strang et al., 2013; Latimer et al., 2020). On the other hand, scholars warn that these positive effects depend on factors such as the voluntariness of the participation, the quality of facilitation, and the cultural suitability of the intervention (Daly, 2016).

3.2 Restorative Justice in Africa and Indigenous Perspectives

The study of African legal anthropology has proved that restorative principles were already existing in Africa before being codified by the West. Traditional African justice systems, like Ubuntu informed reconciliation practices in South Africa, have over time stressed the importance of communal healing, dialogue, and collective accountability (Mnyanda, 2022; Skelton & Batley, 2008). These practices serve as a basis for the South African RJ models which also feature the cultural concepts of interdependence and communal responsibility. The research carried out in Kenya, Malawi, and Rwanda also point to the fact that the use of dialogue in such ways not only leads to the reintegration of the separated social relations but also the rebuilding of trust in the communities that have been through conflict (Mutonyi, 2020; Huyse, 2004). Nevertheless, critical scholars warn against the uncritical acceptance of African customs without revealing the problems of gender inequality, power asymmetry, and coercion that may have the effect of depriving victims of their autonomy. The argument made by Okech (2019) also points to the fact that this criticism is equally valid for South Africa where the community-based mediation mechanisms might unintentionally force the victims to forgive.

3.3 Victim Offender Dialogue: Evidence, Benefits, and Limitations

Victim Offender Dialogue has been the focus of numerous studies in the field of criminology, with research findings usually showing that victims highly appreciate it. Umbreit et al. (2017) discovered that the victims who took part in VOD reported a decrease in their experiences of anger, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. The organized form of dialogue which is generally done with the help of a trained practitioner enables victims to ask questions that are rarely allowed in formal court settings, for example, they can ask the offender's motives, they can seek resignation or request that specific details related to the offence that may have been unclear be clarified (Bolitho, 2017). On the offender's side, VOD has been found to result in accountability, empathy, and increased willingness to repair harm (Rossner, 2021). VOD programmes linked to corrections in the USA and Australia have reported situations where offenders gained insight as well as fewer instances of denial, minimisation, and externalisation of blame (Strang et al., 2013). Besides that, when engaging in VOD, they may be more willing to participate in rehabilitation activities that would eventually lead to long term behavioural change (Wood & Suzuki, 2016). Despite the firm evidence, the concept of VOD has its critics as well. Some researchers have suggested that dialogue evidence may put victims in a position where they must execute more emotional labour than they are capable of, especially in cases when the power relations have not been properly addressed (Daly, 2016). Others warn that restorative interventions may be the instrument of correctional bureaucracies hiding behind the façade of cost-effective alternatives to incarceration to gain more power without solving the general problem of injustice such as inequalities, racial segregation, and structural violence (Walters, 2021). Along with that, VOD, in some instances, can worsen victims if the facilitators are not well trained, lack cultural understanding, or are not trauma informed.

3.4 Restorative Justice in the South African Context

A restorative justice framework in South Africa has gone through major changes from the time of the post-apartheid transition. No doubt, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), despite being not a VOD programme, was one of the most far-reaching applications of dialogue-based justice in the world and had a significant impact in shaping the normative foundation of the current restorative practices (Tutu, 1999; Hamber, 2009). The South African laws such as Child Justice Act 75 of 2008 and different policies of the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) explicitly provide for the use of restorative justice methods for juvenile offenders and promote the engagement of victims in corrections-based mediation (Skelton & Tshehla, 2017). Research in the South African correctional environment has shown that VOD may be one of the ways through which victims can get emotional healing and, at the same time, real behavioural change can be induced in the offenders, especially when the VOD is done with proper preparation and support (Mbambo & Skelton, 2020). VOD has also found application in the cases of violent crimes such as assault, robbery, and occasionally homicide, wherein victims voice their strong need for answers, acknowledgment, and closure (Batley & Maepa, 2017). Nevertheless, South Africa experiences several challenges of its own. The implementation of restorative programmes is made complicated by the high rates of interpersonal violence, the general mistrust of the justice system, and the significant inequalities of socio-economic nature (Jordaan, 2023). Victims may fear being retaliated against, may feel that they do not have the required support or may question the sincerity of an offender's remorse. Likewise, offenders may take advantage of dialogues to get parole benefits thus raising issues related to the authenticity and voluntariness of the process (Batley, 2022). A lack of resources, the inconsistency in facilitator training, and the limited availability of community-based reintegration support further VOD's scalability problems.

3.5 Critiques and Theoretical Gaps

More critical perspectives on Restorative Justice in the Global South are recommended by recent research.

Daly (2016) disputes "idealised" accounts of RJ and calls on scholars to consider the complexities of trauma, the political economy of justice reform, and the limits of interpersonal dialogue in dealing with structural inequalities. In South Africa, the critics posit that if Restorative Justice is not the driving force behind the embedding of a broad socio-economic transformation agenda, then VOD runs the risk of becoming a shallow intervention at the individual level in a deeply unequal society (Walters, 2021; Jordaan, 2023).

Moreover, feminist scholars caution that in situations of gender-based violence, restorative processes should be equipped with more safeguards to avoid re victimisation and assure that dialogue does not infuse patriarchal power structures (Stubbs, 2019). These critiques stress the importance of well-trained facilitators, survivor centred approaches, and institutional readiness for ethical practice.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to delve into the intricacies, significance, and lived experiences of Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD) in the South African restorative justice context. Qualitative inquiry is especially appropriate for investigating justice processes at the interpersonal level as it focuses on detailed, contextualized descriptions of human experience and gives the participants the opportunity to express their subjective interpretations of harm, accountability, and reconciliation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since VOD is at the intersection of emotional trauma, moral reasoning, and interpersonal communication, a qualitative design offers the required depth for the researchers to find out how people understand its effectiveness and limitations.

The employment of an interpretivist paradigm also corresponds with the aim of the study to reveal the social and psychological factors that influence restorative justice encounters. Interpretivism acknowledges that reality is co-created through social interactions and that understanding VOD entails dealing with the views of those who participate in, facilitate, or are affected by it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Instead of trying to measure effectiveness through quantitative indicators, the present research attempted to demonstrate the intricate ways in which the concepts of healing, accountability, and transformation can come about. This stance recognizes that the results of restorative justice cannot be understood in a meaningful way unless the context, relational dynamics, and subjective meanings that participants attach to dialogue are considered.

A case oriented, exploratory design was utilized to allow for an in-depth investigation of VOD as the execution of South African correctional and community settings. Exploratory designs are particularly useful when dealing with phenomena that have been insufficiently researched and are contextually complex, which is the case for Restorative Justice in the Global South (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). With this design, the researchers had the opportunity to delve deeply into the experiences of the participants and at the same time, place their findings within broader theoretical, policy, and socio-cultural frameworks.

4.2 Research Setting

The study took place in two main environments: the selected South African correctional centres and the Community Based Restorative Justice organisations. These settings reflect the institutional and community structures through which most VOD programmes are conducted.

South African correctional facilities, under the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), have been integrating restorative practices as part of offender rehabilitation programming with the help of various civil society organisations. These centres create regulated settings where offenders are allowed to take part in dialogue sessions voluntarily after they have received counselling and undergone an assessment.

Community Restorative Justice organisations, however, are at the crossroad of psychosocial support, victim advocacy, and mediation. They are instrumental in conducting VOD for victims who choose to engage in non-carceral activities or who want emotional closure outside of the adversarial court processes. These organisations provide culturally responsive and trauma informed services, which make them indispensable for understanding VOD in the South African context.

Both settings are a product of South Africa's socio-political history, which has been characterized by apartheid era violence, structural inequality, and widespread mistrust in formal justice institutions. This past has a significant influence on how victims view reconciliation, how offenders understand accountability, and how restorative programmes are carried out. Research in these places provided an opportunity to study VOD not as a theoretical model, but as a real practice which is the result of institutional culture, community dynamics, and the legacies of social harm (Mbambo & Skelton, 2020).

4.3 Participants and Sampling

Participants were those directly involved in or impacted by VOD processes including victims, offenders, VOD facilitators, and restorative justice practitioners. Purposive sampling was the method used for selecting those individuals who could provide in depth, relevant, and diverse insights.

Purposive sampling is acknowledged as a powerful method for identifying information rich cases that significantly illuminate the core research phenomenon in qualitative research (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion of different stakeholder groups made it possible to compare their viewpoints, which, in turn, increased the trustworthiness and depth of the findings.

Those victims who took part in this study were individuals who had concertedly participated in VOD sessions after being the victims of crimes that ranged from assault to property offences and in some cases, violent interpersonal crimes. Their involvement provided essential insights into emotional healing, satisfaction with the process, and perceived fairness. Offenders were those individuals who had gone through VOD as a part of their rehabilitative journey in correctional facilities. Their stories helped to clarify the internal changes, challenges, and reflective processes initiated by dialogue.

Facilitators of VOD were a major group of participants, as they held a unique position at the centre of the restorative process. As trained mediators, psychologists, or social workers, their knowledge provided the study with the required analytical depth regarding the procedural aspects, power imbalances, emotional risks, and safeguards in VOD. The inclusion of this group enabled the research to look not only at the results but also at the means through which dialogue is facilitated, controlled, and ethically managed.

The number of participants was established based on the idea of data saturation, which means that interviews were conducted until no substantially new themes arose. This approach is consistent with qualitative methodological standards and guarantees that the dataset was sufficiently extensive to allow for thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2020).

4.4 Data Collection Methods

Information was obtained through semi structured, detailed interviews with the addition of document analysis of organisational reports, VOD guidelines, and policy frameworks. Semi structured interviews suit well to such a sensitive topic as trauma, remorse, and reconciliation, as they give freedom to the interviewees to describe their experiences in their own words, and at the same time allow the interviewer to clarify the emergent themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The nature of the VOD being very emotionally charged, a method was necessary which would give the participants the power to put their limits and tell their stories in a supportive, ethically sensitive milieu.

The conversation with the victims centred on what led them to take part in VOD, their emotional expectations, and their thoughts as to whether the meeting helped them to heal or gave them closure. Offenders were questioned about their readiness to look the victims in the eye, the personal importance of taking responsibility, and their views as to whether the conversation led to changes in their behaviour after the dialogue and integration into society. Facilitator conversations dealt with procedural safeguards, getting ready, handling emotions strategies, and difficulties in ensuring victim safety while at the same time giving offenders their due.

Document analysis was a nice addition to the data collection effort as it provided the institutional background and showed how restorative justice is portrayed in the official discourse. Policies and organization guidelines gave the grounds for the comparative evaluation of the idealized models of VOD and its realisation in practice. Using interviews and document analysis together allowed methodological triangulation, which is an instrument of qualitative findings' validity and reliability (Bowen, 2009).

With the consent of the parties, all the conversations were recorded and transcribed word for word to keep the meaning intact. This created an extensive textual dataset suitable for rigorous thematic analysis.

4.5 Data Analysis

The data were analysed with the help of thematic analysis based on the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2021). This approach was used because of its structured, yet flexible way, which allowed the themes to be identified in an inductive manner in

the respondents' accounts and at the same time permitted the researcher to use the existing theory of restorative justice. The very first step was getting familiar with the data by going through the texts several times which was followed by the primary coding that apprehended the significant patterns connected with the topics of emotions, perceptions of justice, accountability as well as relational dynamics.

Afterwards, the codes were grouped into larger thematic categories that reflected the consensual experiences and the differences of viewpoints of victims, offenders, and facilitators. The themes of the emotional preparedness, expressions of remorse, power asymmetries, and moments of reconciliation figured most prominently in the data. In this stage of work, the researchers' reflexive involvement was still their core method, as it allowed them to recognize their interpretative role and the relational character of qualitative meaning making (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The researchers refined their themes by constantly comparing them with theoretical and empirical studies which gave their analysis the capacity to relate the experiences of the participants to the wider debates in the academic world. This iterative process was a guarantee of both the depth and the coherence of the work and made possible the development of the findings grounded not only in the real lived experiences of the participants but also linked theoretically to restorative justice scholarship.

To make the results trustworthy triangulation was implemented by comparing interviews with the documentary evidence which also allowed to engage in peer debriefing with academic supervisors and thus enhancing analytical rigour. A thorough record of coding decisions, thematic development, and reflexive memos was kept facilitating openness and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical aspects lie at the very heart of qualitative research related to victim offender dialogue (VOD) and become even more pronounced because the issues dealt with are the traumas, vulnerabilities, and the navigation of emotionally charged encounters. Since the VOD processes fundamentally involve the harms, power imbalances, and the re construction of the difficult stories of the interpersonal relationships, the observance of ethical principles to the letter is indispensable not only for the protection of the participants but also for the preserving of the integrity of the restorative justice processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A major ethical problem is that of informed consent which should be both voluntary and continuous. To take part in VOD the individuals need to be given a thorough explanation of the aim, nature, risks, and probable results of the process and both the victims and the offenders should be aware that they can stop at any time without any bad consequences (Umbreit et al., 2016). In the case of correctional settings where power dynamics and institutional authority influence the behaviour, the question of voluntariness becomes very complicated. Offenders might see their participation as a condition for getting parole or good prison classification and thus be forced (Kgalema, 2020). To deal with this, facilitators should ensure that staff, peers, or administrative incentives are not pressuring offenders and that their consent is coming from a real desire to take part in the process of accountability.

In the same manner, the examination of victims for readiness to participate in VOD is very important to make sure that they are not subjected to the pressure coming from facilitators, family members, faith leaders, or the criminal justice system. The emotional side of the victims requires also facilitators to be sure that the consent is well informed, stable, and based on the psychological readiness of the person. As trauma theorists point out, the establishing of safety and agency is a prerequisite for meaningful involvement, and if these conditions are lacking, participation may do more harm than good (Herman, 2015).

Confidentiality is another indispensable ethical condition. The parties should be ensured that their personal disclosures, emotional expressions, or sensitive information given in VOD will not be used against them, will not be misrepresented in institutional processes, and will not be disclosed to others without their explicit consent. Confidentiality is extremely important, especially in prison environment, where the information can be used to change the internal relations or put offenders in a risky situation (Muntingh, 2020). Facilitators should make it clear in advance that confidentiality has its limits, for example, if there are obligations to report new information about imminent harm or serious offences committed in the past.

Considerations of emotional safety and psychological protection also come first. VOD can be a substantial source of traumatization of the memories of the victims and the feeling of shame of the perpetrators (Gobodo Madikizela, 2015). The staff should have been trained in a trauma informed approach to be able to identify emotional deregulation, distress, or dissociation manifestations. Proper preparation sessions, continuous psychological help, and post conversation time are indispensable resources that lower the risk of emotional injuries. The lack of professional psychosocial support in South African prisons is a big challenge from an ethical point of view which can not only jeopardize the safety but also the VOD processes' (Dissel, 2020) integrity.

Power relations that are, to a large extent, a product of the prison environment, bring on even more ethical issues. Foucault (1977) in his work on disciplinary power showed how institutions have the power to regulate not only people's behaviour but their compliance and even the way they present themselves. In such a situation VOD facilitators should be not only aware of these power relations but equipped with the skills to engage in their effective mediation this will also be effective in the case of promoting the respect of dignity among offenders and respect for the victims, thus, neither of them will be under the influence of the institution making expectations. Ethical practice calls for facilitators to be neutrals, not to impose the outcomes and most importantly, to ensure that the process is not used merely as a tool for administrative work such as parole preparation.

In addition, the aspect of culture sensitivity is very important, especially in the case of South Africa. The value system based on Ubuntu, religious beliefs, and community expectations are some of the factors that determine the participants' experiencing of harm and healing (Ntlama & Ndima, 2019). Hence, ethical practice means not only being aware of cultural differences but also refraining from culturally imposing and making sure that the dialogue processes agree with the participants' identities and aspects of their cultures.

The issue of risk management should have been raised as well. VOD could be the case where participants become victims of revenge, community stigma, or conflicts within the family, especially if the case is concerned with gang related or interpersonal violence. At a minimum, facilitators should perform rigorous risk evaluations before starting conversations and always check that safety measures have been established.

Finally, ethical clearance, honesty, and accountability are the structural basis of qualitative research in this field. Ethics committees or Institutional Review Boards should grant permission to conduct the studies. Researchers ought to be reflexive in thinking that they influence the interpretation and that, as per their ethical responsibility, they should represent the participants' experiences in the truest and most sensitive way (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

To conclude, ethics in research and VOD are much more complicated than just complying with formalities. They require an in depth understanding and at the same time a strong will to protect human dignity, to recognize people's autonomy, to take care of the traumatic experience, and to stop politicians from misusing the institutional power towards the restorative function of dialogue. Ethical integrity is not only a research requirement but at the same time a necessary condition to make sure that the VOD can still be a safe, transformative and genuinely restorative process.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD) in South Africa revealed five key themes, illustrating both the transformative potential of dialogue and the structural and ethical factors influencing its effectiveness. Participants' narratives offer insight into emotional, relational, and institutional dimensions of Restorative Justice.

5.1 Theme 1: Emotional Readiness and Motivation for Dialogue

The emotional state of readiness was singled out as one of the most important factors determining the involvement and performance level of VOD. Victims generally came to the dialogue holding two opposing views inside their mind and at the same time trying to find understanding and empowerment.

One of the victims shared her thoughts,

"In fact, I wanted only to understand the reasons for his doing. At the same time, I was terrified but also somewhat relieved to finally get answers."

It was also mentioned by the offenders that at first moment of interaction with the dialogue, they were hesitant, with internal struggle with shame and accountability being dominant in their minds:

"If not for my shame that I was carrying in silence, I would not be tempted to say sorry through dialogue. So, I agreed to the dialogue."

Facilitators also agreed to these points and added further,

"Clarity is what many victims come to look for, not forgiveness. You can actually see their readiness when they take back control."

The stories here correspond to the theory of restorative justice which stresses the voluntariness element as the base for the real involvement and the resulting positive transformative outcomes (Braithwaite, 2002; Zehr, 2015). Emotional readiness is a sort of protective measure that keeps the participants away from secondary trauma and at the same time, it makes possible for them to engage in deep reflection, conversation, and repairing the relationship.

5.2 Theme 2: Confronting Harm and Acknowledging Accountability

Central to the participants' journeys were the acknowledgment of harm and the embracement of the impinging responsibility. Victims underlined the corroboration they got from the direct recognition of the harm done to them:

"Hearing him acknowledge exactly what he did made me feel my trauma was real and valid"

Offenders recounted the experience of facing their victims as extremely tough, however, life changing:

"Facing her was harder than any prison time. I had to admit my actions were selfish and cruel"

Facilitators observed,

"Real accountability happens when offenders refer to 'I did' rather than giving an abstract explanation".

This topic reflects the fundamental restorative justice principle that a breach of relationships is at the heart of crime, and therefore, significant accountability entails recognition and conversation between the victim and the offender (Zehr, 2015; Umbreit et al., 2017). The voices of the participants show that the presence of a professional, well-trained facilitator is indispensable in ensuring the ethical conduct of the process and avoiding re traumatisation.

5.3 Theme 3: Emotional Release, Healing, and Psychological Shifts

Most of the times, the participants saw emotional release as the key result of VOD which then contributed to psychological healing and moral reflection. Victims spoke of relief and the return of their power:

"After the dialogue, I felt lighter. Hearing him admit everything allowed me to reclaim parts of myself."

Offenders gained profound insight, and their moral compass was recalibrated:

"I left the session feeling broken but in a good way; it cracked open a part of me that had been numb."

Likewise, facilitators remarked,

"Emotional release is actually seen when hands unclench, and breathing slows. Dialogue gives room for the emotions that courts cannot."

These testimonies align with global studies that show VOD as trauma relieving, empathy building, and offender reflective, all in line with Ubuntu principles, where communal recognition and relational repair are prerequisites for reconciliation (Ramose, 1999; Strang et al., 2013).

5.4 Theme 4: Power Dynamics, Safety, and Ethical Tensions

Power imbalances and safety issues were among the most important points to be thought of during the talk process. Victims disclosed their worries about the possible deceit:

"I was nervous he might manipulate the process, but the facilitators kept checking in with me"

Offenders talked about their exposure and vulnerability feelings:

"At first, I felt judged and exposed, but eventually I understood that accountability should feel uncomfortable."

Facilitators stressed,

"Without safety and if participation is not voluntary, then everything else could fall apart; balancing power is very difficult but necessary."

This topic features the ethical and emotional issues that come with restorative practices, thus pointing to the necessity of skilful facilitation and trauma informed preparedness. Research also warns that if power imbalances are not dealt with, they may undermine restorative outcomes and cause re victimisation (Daly, 2016; Madikizela, 2015).

5.5 Theme 5: Perceived Impact, Closure, and Long-Term Meaning

Some of the participants reported that VOD helped them gain long term emotional closure, behaviour change, and relational repair. Victims revealed that they regained their power and were able to move on:

"I finally feel like I can move forward. I got my voice back and am no longer living in fear"

Offenders talked of lasting moral insight and responsibility:

"The dialogue changed how I see myself. I can't undo the past, but I can choose to live differently."

Facilitators pointed out that closure is more often characterized as understanding rather than forgiveness:

"Closure most of the time is due to understanding rather than forgiveness; behavioural changes are a long-term effect."

These results serve to back up the body of work already present on the topic, which shows that restorative dialogue has the power to bring about both emotional and moral changes, if it is facilitated well, participants are prepared and supported throughout (Rossner, 2021; Umbreit et al., 2017). They also point to the relational and iterative nature of restorative justice whereby the effects are not limited to immediate emotional responses but extend to long term reintegration and social healing.

Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

The five themes combined show that VOD is an intervention with many layers, as it tackles aspects of the trauma, the victim's sense of the offender's responsibility, and the repair of the relationship. The main factors that determine the success of the intervention are the readiness of the participants, the ethical nature of the facilitation, the cultural awareness of the process, and the support from the institution. Besides, the participants' stories reveal the deep personal change of the individual; on the other hand, the structural challenges like the lack of properly funded programs, power relations, and economic inequalities raise the issue of the conditional and location dependent character of restorative justice results in South Africa (Walters, 2021; Daly, 2016).

6. CONCLUSION

The evidence marshalled by this research distinctly positions Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD) as a potent transformative mechanism that can effect positive changes in the South African restorative justice landscape. It is an indispensable alternative to adversary and punitive models, which are not only ineffective in meeting victims' emotional needs but also do little to promote the offenders' moral growth. Each of the participant groups unanimously agreed that VOD was a deeply relational process, through which victims attained the avenues of voice, recognition, and sense making, while offenders uncovered an uncommon space for accountability, regret, and cognitive reframing. The qualitative data strongly supports this viewpoint by asserting VOD as psychological healing, fear alleviation in victims, and insight generation in offenders, all of which are harmonious with worldwide research that also points to these outcomes of the intervention in question.

However, the South African context makes these findings less straightforward: on the one hand, the conditions of structural violence, inequality, lack of resources in institutions, and historical trauma challenge restorative programs to be more than just technical interventions; on the other hand, these features also necessitate that the programs be culturally sensitive, trauma informed, and morally anchored. According to the research, the implementation is a long way from being uniform with various issues such as the irregularity of the training of facilitators, variations in the organisational capabilities as well as support from the government thus, collectively, these issues not only limit the extent but also the quality of VOD. In addition, the possible occurrence of power imbalances, voluntariness, and victimization concerns that point to the need for a thorough consideration of safeguards and continuous supervision. Ultimately, VOD is effective to the extent that facilitation quality, participants' readiness, preparation process integrity, and socio institutional context are maintained. Restorative justice in South Africa cannot be achieved by simply having a conversation; its success is dependent on factors such as sustained engagement, cultural sensitivity, higher ethical standards and a justice system that heals, holds accountability on a relational level, and is complementary to legal adjudication. 7. Recommendations

The survey response data indicate the necessity for a multi layered strategic strengthening approach in deploying Victim Offender Dialogue in South Africa to not only unfold its transformational potential but also to counter the risks that have been identified. The very first condition is a requirement for standardized and nationally accredited facilitator training, which must be designed on trauma informed practice, cultural competence, and advanced mediation skills. This will ensure that, apart from being ethically sound, VOD sessions will also be emotionally safe for all those involved. Simultaneously, the provision of strict pre dialogue assessment criteria that establish victim readiness, offender authenticity, power relations, and psychological susceptibility together with post dialogue follow up services, which assist with emotional processing and reintegration, is equally important. Government departments such as the Department of Correctional Services and the Department of Justice, among others, should be the main supporters of the movement towards integrated restorative justice frameworks that not only guarantee budget allocation, review, but also the upskilling of both state and community based organisations. Besides, policy reform should be handling the issues regarding gender-based violence and other types of sensitive cases so that the victims' engagement could be voluntary, informed, and without any kind of coercion or implicit pressure from community actors or correctional officials. There is a need to broaden community education so that it can play a significant role in changing the public perception of restorative justice, thus addressing the trust deficit and creating the conditions under which reintegration can happen. In conclusion, it should be part of the organisation's ongoing activities that continuous research efforts are formalised, keeping programme outcomes under constant review, good practices documented, and challenges, such as inequality and insufficient funding of institutions, addressed. When putting together these recommendations, one can visualize a restorative justice ecosystem that upholds the morals as its foundation, is in harmony with the culture, is supported in a sustainable way, and concentrates on healing, dignity, and relational accountability.

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