




# From Trauma to Recovery: Restorative Justice Conferencing in Cases of Adult Survivors of Intrafamilial Sexual Offenses

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Accepted: 17 December 2020 / Published online: 4 January 2021

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## Abstract

Restorative justice (RJ) is a way of doing justice following an offense that is primarily oriented towards repairing individual, relational, and social harm. This study examined how RJ processes, conducted following intrafamilial sexual abuse, helped restore the family relationship, and assessed their contribution to the healing and recovery of the victims and the family system. Twenty-three adults who have chosen to take part in RJ processes were interviewed for this study, including incest survivors, non-offending family members, friends, and RJ facilitators. We used a thematic approach within an experiential framework to analyze the qualitative data. Analysis of the interviews highlights the unique role played by the family affected by incest in the journey of recovery undertaken by the survivor and other family members. Together, the participants' voices join into a multifaceted portrait of a highly complex process that enables survivors and their family to make themselves heard, become empowered, and grow towards recovery and restoration. The present study adds to recent studies on RJ in cases of sexual offense, and in the particular intrafamilial context. It enriches the literature with descriptions of the participants' experiences, shedding light on the unique characteristics of RJ processes in incest cases. The study also refines the contribution of the RJ process as an alternative for or as complementary to legal or therapeutic processes, as well as in highlighting the importance of restoring the family system and the suitability of the process for incest cases.

**Keywords** Restorative justice · Intrafamilial sexual offense · Incest · Victims · Family system · Recovery

## Introduction

Restorative justice (RJ) is a way of doing justice following an offense that is primarily oriented towards repairing individual, relational, and social harm (Walgrave 2013). RJ is distinct from the criminal justice mechanism that views the offense only as a deviation from legal norms, in that it views it primarily as affecting individuals and relationships (Johnstone and Van Ness 2007; Umbreit and Armour 2010; Zehr 2002). Redressing the harm caused by the offense may be achieved by unprejudiced, guided dialogue between the parties affected

by the offense on what the offender and the community need to do to address the needs of those affected by the offense (Johnstone 2012; Zehr and Mika 2003). In the process, the offender has to come to terms with the results of their actions and the suffering they have caused and become aware of opportunities to make amends. To do so, they must accept accountability for their actions and to be willing to address the needs that have become salient as a result (Roche 2003; Zehr 2002). In the RJ approach, the community is an important stakeholder, representing the dual role of secondary victim and secondary perpetrator, the latter due to its failure to prevent and/or address the crime (McCold 2004). "Communities of care" that support both victims and offenders are key stakeholders in RJ; perceiving crime as violating people and relationships is the underlying premise for their inclusion in RJ processes (Zehr 2002).

The present study examines RJ processes conducted at the initiative of adult survivors, addressing intrafamilial sexual offenses that occurred in their childhood or adolescence. It focuses on how these processes have helped restore the family relationship and contributed to the healing and recovery

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process of family members and the family system as a whole. The literature on RJ for intrafamilial sexual offenses is clearly scarce. Understanding how RJ processes help restore family relationships can contribute to basic research on RJ, adding another important layer that is missing. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, it can provide new knowledge enabling better understanding of the effectiveness of RJ practices as an alternative or complementary form of justice in cases of intrafamilial sexual offenses.

### Restorative Justice Conferencing

The term restorative justice is used to describe the RJ movement, approach, and processes. In this paper, RJ refers to processes based on personal encounters between the victim, offender, and others affected by the offense, such as RJ conferencing. In RJ conferencing, all parties affected by an offense are brought together: the victim, the perpetrator and if appropriate, family members, friends, and community representatives (Zehr 2002). Following thorough preparation, the participants meet in a structured, facilitated process to discuss the offense and its effects on the main and secondary victims, (Umbreit and Armour 2010).

Preparation times vary, usually from one month to two years. The appointed facilitators (usually two) are concerned to ensure a safe space for the participants, considering the victim's psychological readiness as well as the offender's risk factors (including levels of sincerity and remorse). The preparation often consists of the facilitators meeting the victim to hear about their expectations of the process, needs and wishes. Next, both meet the offender and finally other family members, supporters, or friends. The facilitators conduct the preparatory meetings back and forth to assess safety needs and the potential scope of the dialogue (Jülich 2006; Keenan 2014; Koss 2014). The preparatory stage enables dealing with family subsystems one by one, in individual sessions or joint meetings, preparing the ground for the final meeting between the offender, victim, and supporters (Beck et al. 2017).

Procedural flexibility is a basic requirement of RJ and the process must be adapted to parties' needs (Keenan 2014; Umbreit and Armour 2010). Flexibility applies to the timing of the preparation meetings, the intervals between process stages, the setting and location of dialogue meeting, the participants' identity, and other factors important for the victims or relevant to the case.

RJ programs were originally designed for juvenile and minor offenses (Gustafson 2005; Sherman and Strang 2007) (rather than for cases of sexual violence. Indeed, in some programs, it was explicitly forbidden to conduct RJ processes in cases of physical or sexual violence against women (Jülich 2010; Koss 2010; McGlynn et al. 2012). In the past, the idea of reparation or restoration in cases of serious crime such as murder or rape was commonly seen as inappropriate. The

change was led by the victims themselves, who sought to initiate RJ processes, usually years after the offense (Umbreit et al. 2006). The practice of RJ for sexual offenses has been growing gradually from the 1990s, among other things thanks to the understanding that it can meet victims' unique needs and facilitate justice for them, as well as the offenders, their family members and the relevant community (Beck et al., 2017; Bletzer and Koss 2012; Daly and Wade 2017; McGlynn 2011; McNevin 2010).

### Intrafamilial Sexual Offense and its Disclosure

Intrafamilial child sexual offense or incest is a traumatic experience that can have lifelong negative consequences for the victim (Gekoski et al. 2016; Van der Kolk 2017). It might violate the child's physical and emotional confidence in their siblings, parents or other adult caregivers and cause the loss of social and personal resources (Sheinberg and True 2008). Incest ranges from exposure to pornography through intimate contact to full sexual intercourse and may be one-time or continuous over years (Courtois 2010; Putnam 2003).

The phenomenon is widespread across all populations, with no known relation to education, religion, ethnicity, or conservatism (Courtois 2010). According to one estimate, one child out of seven is sexually abused by a family member (Russell 1983). Another study, which surveyed 1067 participants, found that among the 18.7% who had experienced child sexual abuse (CSA), 36.8% of the offenders were relatives (Pineda-Lucatero et al. 2009). Finally, The Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel (2019) reported that in 91.4% of the 51,000 calls made to it in 2018, the offender was known to the victim and that in two-thirds of reports by children under 12, the offender was a family member.

One of the main characteristics of incest is the victim's often-lifelong difficulty to disclose it, due among other things to the special dynamic of the incestuous relationship that usually subjugates the victim to the perpetrator both physically and emotionally; to repression that is typically used by victims; and to their fear of breaking up the family. The social taboos on sex and incest in particular, as well as the sanctity of the family also contribute to victims' difficulty to disclose, especially when they are part of a religious or traditional culture where family values include unconditional obedience and the children rarely turn to their parents for emotional support (Courtois 1988; Szwarcberg and Somer 2004). The tendency to delay disclosure is suggested by data showing that 80% of victims abused by the age of 12 – whether by a family member or not – reported the abuse or contacted support only after 10 years or more (Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel 2019).

The RJ process that is the focus of this study is designed to enable disclosure. The disclosure itself can empower the victim, regardless of the reaction of the family or community.

Family or community approval can contribute significantly to the victim's recovery process. Confrontations with family members can be empowering when they are properly planned and carried out. Overall, supportive response to incest disclosure predicts better recovery (Herman 1992; Imber-Black 1998; Keenan 2014; Toren 2015). Unfortunately, the relevant community and family members do not always accept the disclosure with understanding, and often blame the victims and treat them as weak and vulnerable. For the victims, these reactions can be a source of distress, sometimes even more so than the offense itself (Szwarcberg and Somer 2004).

### Victims' Needs Unmet by the Criminal Justice System

The main need described by victims of sexual offense is validation of the offense and its implications. For this, they want their family and significant others to acknowledge the basic facts of the offense and the harm it inflicted. The victims say that it is crucial that offenders take responsibility for their actions. Moreover, they need some family members who were around as bystanders when the offense took place to acknowledge the offense and its implications (Gustafson 2005; Herman 2005; Hopkins 2012; McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). In cases of incest, the community that is most significant to the victim while disclosing the offense is the family (Beck et al. 2017), and the validation of the offense and its implications by family members is crucial to the victim's recovery (Herman 1992). Many victims keep relying on their family of origin for support and appreciation, even when they already have families of their own (Herman 2005).

Another central need often mentioned by victims is vindication. Victims want their relevant community to express clear condemnation of the offense. This confirms the community's solidarity with the victim and transfers the burden of shame from the victim to the offender (Herman 2005; McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). Some victims want a genuine apology and believe that this is the most powerful compensation the offender can give them. Many want their family and community to apologize for their inaction, which in their view has enabled the offense. Other victims doubt the sincerity and value of apology. Some view apology as a manipulative move designed to gain sympathy from the community and weaken them (Herman 2005). Finally, the need to hold the offender responsible – accompanied sometimes by negation of the offender's status and dignity, whether through the legal system or otherwise – is often described by victims as stronger than their need to take the offender's money or freedom (Herman 2005; Miller 2011).

How are those needs met by the law enforcement system? Over the past forty years, extensive changes have been made to sexual offense laws and procedures, with increasing emphasis on responding to victims' needs (Fileborn 2011; Horvath and Yexley 2011; Keenan 2014; Koss and Achilles

2008; McGlynn and Munro 2010). Although these changes mark significant progress in victims' social and legal standing, it is still difficult to provide a comprehensive social and legal response to their needs. Numerous studies show that despite the welcome changes, results are yet to be seen in terms of reducing the number of cases and increasing conviction rates – a fact that influences victims' sense of justice (Daly and Curtis-Fawley 2006; Herman 2005; Keenan 2014; Koss and Achilles 2008; McGlynn 2011; McGlynn et al. 2012; Miller 2011; Naylor 2010).

The Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel (2018) reported that only 13.7% of victims complained, while 84% of complaints filed with the police ended with no indictment. Moreover, victims – particularly of incest – often do not seek imprisonment in response to the offense (Jülich and Landon 2017). Keenan (2014) found that victims of sexual assault by strangers tend to seek imprisonment, while those victimized by the clergy or family members have mixed feelings regarding it.

The automatic link made between “justice” and the criminal justice system (CJS), alongside the low rate of reports and convictions means that “real justice” eludes most victims. Victims often feel betrayed in the CJS since they feel that the procedure does not meet their needs and offers them partial justice (Keenan 2014; Koss 2000; McGlynn et al. 2012; Wager 2013). The literature often describes the tormenting journey victims have to go through in the system as “second rape”, as they face disbelief, hesitation and even contempt and objectification that resonate the offense (Herman 2005; Hopkins and Koss 2005; Koss and Achilles 2008; McGlynn et al. 2012; Pali and Sten Madsen 2011). Indeed, one of the main difficulties described by victims is their marginal role in the CJS. They find it hard to understand why the system focuses on the offender and leaves them in a minor place, usually as mere witnesses (Herman 2005; Keenan and Zinsstag 2014).

### Sexual Offenses and Restorative Justice

The unique characteristics of sexual offenses and the failure of the CJS to provide an appropriate response have led to the conception that the RJ processes can achieve better results by providing a process that allows healing and growth (Daly and Curtis-Fawley 2006; Jülich 2006, 2010; Koss 2014; McAlinden 2007; Naylor 2010; Van Wormer 2009; Wager 2013). RJ process can provide the victim with an opportunity to confront the offender; the confrontation is conducted in a way that enables empowerment, voice, validation, and restoration of the relationships (Koss 2000; McGlynn et al. 2012; Peleg-Koriat and Klar-Chalamish 2020). Specifically, empowering the victim becomes possible thanks to the ability to experience control over the process and the decision-making phase (Daly and Stubbs 2006; Gustafson 2005; Van

Wormer 2009). In cases of incest in particular, the offender is usually part of the victim's immediate surrounding and is often a significant figure for them. RJ processes enable building consent regarding future behavior and restoring the relationships in positive, future-oriented context (Keenan 2014; Macaulay 2013; Monk-Shepherd and Nation 1995).

There are various approaches to the implementation of RJ processes in sex offense cases, each with its own characteristics and preconditions. In Israel, unlike legal procedures, RJ processes are based on the offender's acceptance of accountability. It is clarified from the outset that the victim is not to blame, as often happens during legal processes. Taking part in a process wherein the offender acknowledges accountability and the victim has support from the family members can help reduce the victims' feelings of self-blame and aid their healing (Daly and Stubbs 2006; Herman 2005; Hopkins 2012; McGlynn et al. 2012; McNevin 2010; Miller 2011; Naylor 2010; Pali and Sten Madsen 2011; Wager 2013). In cases of incest in particular, the process enables decision making on the victim's place in the family system and family relationships from a future-oriented perspective that seeks to preserve family relationships (Keenan 2014; Monk-Shepherd and Nation 1995). Note that developing the option of RJ in sexual offense cases does not seek to abolish or replace the CJS, but rather *expand* the range of existing responses to meet victims' needs.

In a study that examined RJ conferencing in sex offense cases in the Restore program in New Zealand, victims described the process as empowering and as the beginning of a long journey toward healing, highlighting the importance of family members' involvement (Julich et al. 2010). In another study, McGlynn et al. (2012) interviewed a victim who took part in RJ conferencing with a family member who had assaulted her in childhood. The process enabled the victim to sound her voice and gain control over the process and that she experienced it as a turning point in her life, leading her to stop blaming herself and place the blame on the offender. Wager's (2013) scoping study reviewed articles on RJ processes for sex offenses and showed that RJ programs had the potential of meeting victims' needs when they were designed specifically to deal with this kind of offenses. Finally, Daly and Wade (2017) compared RJ conferences with other mechanisms of justice from the perspective of victims of youth sibling sexual abuse. RJ conferences had significantly higher degrees of victim participation and voice, allowing victims to tell their story, ask questions and propose ideas. Moreover, RJ conferences were far better than sentencing in bringing to light the impact of the offense and the harm to the victim.

### The Family's Role in Restorative Justice Conferencing Following Incest

The RJ approach ascribes a key role to the community. In cases of incest, the family can be seen as a close and a

meaningful community for both the victim and the perpetrator (Beck et al. 2017), as the community is actually comprised of secondary perpetrators and victims, respectively, who were there when the offense had taken place and affected by the offense in a ripple effect. This complexity and other emotional aspects of the RJ process in cases of incest are elements that need to be taken into consideration when discussing RJ conferencing in these cases (Beck et al. 2017; McNevin 2010). Indeed, perpetrators are also in need of social and family supports, as these are key for meeting their needs in an adaptive way, reducing the likelihood of new acts of aggression (Ward and Stewart 2003).

In a similar vein, Braithwaite's (1989) reintegrative shaming theory, which underlies the RJ approach, informs a process that condemns the act but accepts the perpetrators as persons and shows concern for their rehabilitation. The shaming process must be reintegrative and not stigmatizing, as in legal procedures (Braithwaite 1989; McAlinden 2007). This approach is most relevant for sexual offense cases in which social and educational messages are of great importance, as is inclusion of the offenders in order to help and reintegrate them into the family and community (McAlinden 2007; Naylor 2010; Oudshoorn et al. 2015).

To meet the needs of both victims and perpetrators, managing a conflict following incest requires a special process that enables the inclusion of family members. The facilitators seek to rely on and promote the family's resilience and restore its relationships. In ensuring the success of RJ processes following intrafamilial sexual abuse, family therapy can be complementary role, and run parallel to conferencing. Emotional therapy can help identify the potential risks of the RJ process, such as revictimization or minimization of the offense (McNevin 2010). The RJ process can be conducted in a broad format so all the family members can participate, including siblings, step parents, grandparents and others affected by the offense who want to be a part of the process (Beck et al. 2017). Family members unable to participate can be represented by a letter or in other ways (McNevin 2010).

### The Present Study

This study examined several RJ processes conducted in Israel years after incest, when the victim was an adult. As indicated above, such delayed disclosure is highly common, and attests to the need to provide for victim needs unmet by the CJS. Specifically, this study examined how RJ helped restore family relationships and contribute to healing and recovery by the victim, the offender, and the family system. As noted, only few studies have examined the experiences of sexually victimized participants in RJ processes. To the best of our knowledge, no study has examined the family's contribution to the restoration process by examining several test cases. The present study responds to this challenge.



## Method

### Participants

Twenty-three adult participants were interviewed, including victims (6 women), non-offending family members (2 mothers, 1 sister and 1 brother), victims' friends who participated in the process (3 women), and RJ facilitators (10 women). All took part in six RJ processes undertaken following incest as part of a dedicated program. Victims' ages at the time of the offence ranged from 6 to 16 years. Victims' ages at the time of the process ranged from 18 to 37 years. All were abused by males (3 fathers, 2 siblings, and 1 uncle). In all cases, the offenses were prolonged rather than one-time events. The age gaps between participants and their perpetrating siblings ranged from 3 to 6 years.

### Procedure

The participants were adults who participated in RJ processes. The RJ program for sex offenses in Israel (*Betsedek*; Klar-Chalamish and Peleg-Koriat 2020) located potential participants. After obtaining their informed consent, their details were transferred to the first author who contacted them to schedule the interview. Interviews were held six to 24 months following the conclusion of the RJ processes. The first author used a prepared script to conduct the semi-structured interviews. The questions asked by the interviewer were deliberately general (e.g., “Tell me about your experience in the RJ process”; “Tell me about the decision to initiate the RJ process”). The interviews lasted one to two hours; they were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed manually.

The two authors used a thematic approach within an experiential framework to analyze the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The main themes that emerged from the interviews were explored in successive interview transcripts. The authors discussed differences in their interpretation to improve consistency and reduce the influence of personal bias, such as a personal view, expectation, or wish. In order to ensure trustworthiness and verify the results, the authors discussed their preliminary findings repeatedly with a team of experienced qualitative researchers to reflect on initial interpretations and refine the thematic structure. The analysis consisted of several steps: (1) repeated readings of each transcript to gain familiarity with the data; (2) generating preliminary labels to encapsulate the ideas expressed; (3) clustering labels indicating similar ideas and producing a provisional list of themes for each interview; (4) comparing themes across interviews and creating a “thematic map” of the data; and (5) refining and defining the themes, and producing a comprehensive set of themes. Each theme was illustrated by sample interview excerpts (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

## Ethical Considerations

Given the subject of this study, we have devoted special attention to ethical issues. All interviewees were fully informed about the study's purpose, measures to protect their privacy, their ability to stop the interview at all times or refuse to answer any question, and their option not to be included in the research at any stage until data analysis. Next, the interviewees signed informed consent forms and received the authors' contact details. The authors also obtained their agreement to record and to transcribe the interview for analytic purposes. To protect their privacy, identifying details were altered. At the request of some, no aliases were used, but only their designated “role” (victim, offender, etc.) next to the case number. Approval for the present study was granted by the institutional ethics committee.

## Results

Analysis of the interviews shows that the role of RJ processes in the family's journey to healing and restoration can be conceptualized in terms of six central themes: (1) Initiating the RJ process due to a significant family change; (2) The RJ process as meeting the years-long yearning for family repair; (3) The family system as a place for healing and growth; (4) The process as meeting the victims' needs for voice and validation; (5) The process as a platform for agreements on future family conduct; and (6) The conference as a turning point in the victim's healing process.

### (1) Initiating the RJ Process Due to a Significant Family Change

The participants described the victims' need to initiate an RJ process in order to heal the family system as triggered by significant family-related milestones in their lives, such as a wedding, a birth, or emigration. It appears that these events have motivated the victims to face the abuse and discuss it with the family – to “put things in order” and “place the issue on the table” before the significant life change. Family changes and events can confront the victims with their family relationships and trigger the need for conducting a dialogue to talk about the offense and its effects on the family in order to achieve “closure” and enable a “fresh start”.

For example, one victim described initiating the RJ process on shortly before her wedding day:

It was right before I got married... My parents and the rest of my brothers didn't really know why I wasn't on speaking terms with [the perpetrator], and there was this whole business of the invitations to the wedding... and I wanted to put things in order beforehand, and start this

new chapter in my life in a more orderly fashion. I felt we had to do something, because it didn't work that way.

This victim's mother also said that "it felt that we must do something before the wedding, everybody was concerned about what is going to happen at the wedding. My daughter didn't want [the perpetrator] to come and I felt helpless".

In another case, one of the facilitators described the victim's pregnancy as the trigger leading her to initiate the process: "She was pretty advanced in her pregnancy, and I think that's something that triggered her to make a difference and see if she could reconnect with her family". Apparently, the upcoming change "forced" the victim to confront the situation and to initiate an emotional family process that faces the future.

## (2) The RJ Process as Meeting the Years-Long Longing for Family Repair

The various participants described the restorative process as meeting their need to repair the family atmosphere and reshape relationships to enable the longed-for family recovery. In the next example, one of the victims described her and her partner's relationship with her siblings after the process, and the efforts to maintain "regular" family contacts:

Ever since [the process] the other brothers are trying really hard to keep in touch with us, I mean much closer than they used to be, which is very important for us. We also make the effort, and meet with the kids and for coffee now and then.

It seems that the victims waited for the opportunity to have a way "back" to the family. Restoring the family place required a well-designed process and usually could not happen spontaneously. A facilitator in one of the cases described it this way:

It was amazing to see that all of them actually wanted the same thing: to be a part of a family again; to have family dinners, to spend time together, to be in touch with each other and to get help when needed. It was important for them; they all mentioned it in the personal preparation meetings.

Another victim said:

Now I feel there is some kind of restoration – there's coming together. One of my brothers, for example, started a family WhatsApp group... See how important the family is to me – I downloaded WhatsApp for the family group... that's the only reason I did it".

A third victim shared:

What happened is amazing. Look, first of all, I don't feel like an orphan anymore. It's not like she's a mother I can call for advice – not that kind of mom – but there's no longer that sense of being orphaned, like she doesn't exist, like there's just vacuum there.

It appears that despite the enormity of the abuse and betrayal, the family remains an essential space of belonging for the victims. They describe the meaning of family relations to them and the contribution of the RJ process to restoring the family space after the abuse, in a way that contains the abuse and its implications rather than ignore or "bypass" them.

## (3) The Family System as a Place for Healing and Growth

The victims who initiated RJ processes sought to manage the discourse and talk about the abuse in the family sphere, with family members, the perpetrator and others, taking active part in the process. The family is where the offense took place originally and therefore is the place to deal with it. Confronting and talking to the significant people and family members who were around at the time of the offense can be an opportunity for a meaningful process that can facilitate healing and growth. According to one victim, "I have talked about it with my psychologist for hours, but the real difficulty, and also the opportunity, lies *with them*. This is the significant place for me today". One brother who took part in the conferencing said: "It was always there, but no one talked about it. It felt good to finally talk about it after so many years when everyone is seating around. It is our problem as a family and we have to solve it". Another victim explained her need as follows:

They were there when I was abused and they are the ones who can hold me now. For many years, I felt they did not understand me. It's important for me that they do, even if nothing comes out of it, maybe just a little of their understanding.

The family space, where the offense occurred, played a unique role in recovering from the trauma. Together with the victims' desire to conduct a dialogue with the family members, they described the contribution of the dialogue as a basis for progress in the emotional process and for closure. That dialogue addressed, among other things, the family's responses to the offense and its years-long implications – or lack thereof.

## (4) The Process as Meeting the Victims' Needs for Voice and Validation

Multiple studies on the needs of sexual offense victims have pointed to their basic need to have their voice heard, and for their abuse and its implications to be recognized and validated (Koss 2014; McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). In cases of incest, these needs have unique significance as the family members are part of the abuse in several senses: they were there when it happened and did nothing to prevent it or stop it (secondary perpetrators), but at the same time they were victimized by it and still are (secondary victims).

The family members' presence in the RJ process and their ability to meet the victims' needs was highly significant to the recovery of the victim and the entire family system. One of the victims described this as follows: "I kept silent for so many years, now I want us all to talk... I want my family to hear this from my point of view. I'm grown now, at the time they did nothing, and today I want them to hear what this did to me". Another said: "I never imagined him in prison, that's not the kind of thing I want, to see him in prison – I just want the truth to come out and I want my family to know everything and believe me". A friend of one of the victims said:

When we talked about the process, after it all ended she [the victim] said that it was the first time she felt someone was really listening to her and trying to do the best to help her heal. From my perspective, I saw her growing from meeting to meeting and especially after the dialogue with all [family members], when they were focused on the offense and what she had to go through – for the first time.

The RJ processes enabled the victims, some of them for the first time, to sound their voice in the face of the perpetrator and the other family members, without disturbance or external intervention. At the same time, they enabled them to have their abuse acknowledged by the perpetrator in the presence of the other family members, which was uniquely important for their recovery process.

#### (5) The Process as a Platform for Agreements on Future Family Conduct

The various participants described the process as promoting agreements regarding the family system's future conduct, such as decisions on spending dinners, holidays, or family occasions together, or decisions on keeping contact between family members. One of the victims shared: "Following the process we arrived at... some kind of agreement to talk once a week, and that only I will contact [my mother] so that she won't overburden me". Another family member said: "Until now, I didn't know how to behave – was I allowed to attend family events attended by [the perpetrator] or not? How would that look like? Not it's clearer to me what is expected of me". Another victim said:

It was very important to me to set some rules about family behavior. It is always a mess in our family and now they all know how I want them to behave. For example, not to come to my house without letting me know. We agreed that they need to call and get my consent in advance. I hope they understood what it means to me.

Building consensus regarding family behavior and rules is an important step toward restoring the family relationships and can help reduce fear and stress concerning family issues.

#### (6) The Conference as a Turning Point in the Victims' Recovery Process

The victims described the RJ process as significant to them, allowing growth and empowerment and constituting a turning point in their recovery process. One explained that "after so many years of therapy, I felt I was finally making some progress". Another told us that she had felt "stuck" for years:

I received various emotional therapies, but a big elephant remained in the room – my family. I couldn't make any progress alone. For me, this process enabled closure that would have been impossible for me without my family's participation. Now I felt that I, we, can start believing in recovery.

Another victim said:

It took some time... maybe six months... and then I understood that I made it. I did the scariest thing for me: I told him everything, I asked all the questions I wanted to, I cried in front of him, and I did it with all of them around me, with me in the middle. And then, I understood that I'm in a better and stronger place now.

Thus, it seems that the opportunity to hold a moderated dialogue, to be heard, to gain validation, and the option to control the process conducted with family members and other supporters can be the start of a new path for victims, perpetrators and other family members.

## Discussion

The findings highlight the unique contribution of RJ processes to families affected by sexual offense in the journey of recovery undertaken by the victim and other family members. The voices of the participants who have chosen to take part in restorative justice (RJ) processes following incest – victims, family members, friends and RJ facilitators – join together to paint a multifaceted picture of a process of high complexity,

that enables victims to sound their voice and experiences, gain empowerment, grow, and make progress towards recovery and restoration.

The RJ processes involved in this study were usually initiated in response to major changes in the family system. Such changes acted as triggers, motivating the victims to start a family process focused on the offense—a process that had until then been delayed by them, for various reasons. This link between the decision to initiate an RJ process and the change in the family is inherent to the RJ process as dealing with people and relationships (Walgrave 2013). It appears the victims are motivated by a strong desire to mend the relationships broken by the offense and its implications. For example, a birth anticipated by one of the victims who participated in the study awakened thoughts about the meaning of family relationships and the family as a system, resulting in her decision to initiate the RJ process leading to stable relationships and future-oriented agreements.

It is in this context that we can understand why many participants commented in the interviews that, as the offense occurred within the family, the family should conduct the dialogue regarding the offense and its implications. Incest affects not only the direct victims, but also other family members and the family system as a whole. Therefore, any dialogue on the abuse, its repercussions, and future recovery should include other family members and take place in the relevant family space.

The manner and setting of the offense have a substantial effect on members of both the immediate and extended family, which in turn may affect how they support the primary victim (Fuller 2016). Following incest, the victim's home becomes a source of danger and harm. The key figures in their life – parents, siblings and other family members – who are supposed to protect them – might become unreliable and unstable. Whereas the abuse by the offender is direct, the other family members' role as passive bystanders, in some cases, should be considered indirect abuse. This distortion of family relationships and blurring of intergenerational boundaries are often a source of trauma beyond the primary trauma due to the actual offense (Sheinberg and Fraenkel 2001). The self is built of relationships and abused in the framework of relationships, and the victim's sense of self can therefore only be rehabilitated through the way it was established in the first place – relationships with others, in this case, the family. Thus, in the healing process, the victims need the emotional support of family members, partners and close friends – support that may transform as the trauma is resolved (Herman 1992).

In RJ processes, the family can be seen as a responsible community (Beck et al. 2017) that acts to prevent the offense from happening to others in the future and as a community of care (Beck et al. 2017), encouraging emotional support and the construction of adaptive meanings regarding the offense in the case of victims, and contributing with experiences of

social reintegration and inclusive reactions in the case of offenders (McCold 2000). For example, significant others may be invited to serve as counterbalance in the power relations between the parties, or to become an emotional support for victims or offenders' experience of openness and exposure (Beck et al. 2017).

In this journey towards recovery, the victims also witness the “recovery” of other family members affected by the offense and its disclosure (Jülich 2001). Sex offenses have a ripple effect on the lives of others, who may experience similar – albeit less intense – feelings of fear, confusion, anger or frustration (Miller 2011). They too can benefit from the RJ process that enables them to be part of the process, share their feelings, take an active part in the recovery process of both victim and offender. Namely, helping family members respond to the offense supportively and effectively can lead to better outcomes for the primary victim (Hill 2012) and the whole family (Fuller 2016). For that reason, RJ processes can be conducted also for part of the family, without the offender, but still allowing other family members to be a part of the recovery process.

In all cases examined here, the victims expressed their wish for the family members to participate. They wanted their family to understand the impact of the offense, lay the responsibility squarely on the offender, and help them in their subsequent recovery and in finding their new place within the family. Relatedly, the victims had felt ongoing longing to restore the family space. The literature describing victims' lifelong struggle with incest focuses on their ongoing struggle to create a livable reality, even years after the abuse had ended and even after the victims had started a family of their own (Courtois 1988; Russell 1983). Even long after the offense, the victims seek their family members' empathy and support (Herman 1992; Imber-Black 1998; Keenan 2014).

The victims seem to prefer maintaining family relations and attending family events, as well as obtaining family assistance in times of need, rather than lose their family belongingness (Herman 2005). An RJ process following incest relies on the assumption that a future-oriented family process may be performed, helping the family in redesigning the relationships (McNevin 2010). Despite the enormity of the offense and the feeling of betrayal, the family usually continues to serve as an essential framework of belonging for the victim, and it is there that they seek support and recognition. In addition, we suggest that the family process can be a platform to deal with future safety planning for the sake of the young generation and other relatives.

Many victims described the RJ process as meeting their needs (e.g. family validation of the offense and its implications, sounding their voice, feeling control). This finding highlights the potential of RJ processes for meeting the needs of incest victims by enabling them to tell their story in a meaningful and respectful way, in a safe atmosphere (Daly and



Curtis-Fawley 2006; Jülich 2006; Koss 2000; Marsh and Wager 2015; Stern 2010; Wager 2013), and to receive validation involving a clear denunciation of the offense and removal of any implied burden of shame (Herman 2005; McGlynn and Westmarland 2019), in a way that respects the victim as well as her experience (Stern 2010).

The RJ process is all about the offense and its restoration. It is not subject to strict rules, but rather tailored to the needs of the participants. The focus on the offense, the customization to the participants' needs, the victims' voice, choice and control – all these elements enable the RJ processes to empower them and thus contribute to their recovery (Braithwaite 2002). For the victims, the principles of the RJ approach enable recognition and validation, as well as vindication – aspects that are usually absent from legal processes (McGlynn et al. 2012).

Given these elements, the participants described their RJ process as a turning point in their recovery process and as a platform for agreements on the victims' future conduct in the family space and regarding family relationships, all in a positive, future-facing approach that seeks to preserve those relationships (Keenan 2014; Macaulay 2013; Monk-Shepherd and Nation 1995). These findings are consistent with the literature on the potential benefits of the RJ process as an alternative path to justice that enables recovery, growth and development (Daly and Curtis-Fawley 2006; Jülich 2006, 2010; Koss 2000, 2010, 2014; Koss and Achilles 2008; McAlinden 2007; Naylor 2010; Van Wormer 2009; Wager 2013).

An overview of the various experiences echoed in the interviews shows that the participants consider RJ as an enabling process that meets the unique needs in cases of incest, which occurs in a containing setting and is managed within a supportive and benevolent relationship. The knowledge gained in this and other studies contributes theoretically to our understanding of the potential of RJ processes and to the discussion on whether they are at all appropriate in cases of sex offenses.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, the present study has several *limitations*. First, it only included participants who had agreed to be interviewed. This may have biased the findings towards satisfaction with the outcomes of the process. Moreover, since the study focused on the victims' point of view, no offenders were interviewed. In order to present a fuller picture of the process, future studies should also examine the perpetrators' experiences, and the way RJ contributes to their rehabilitation and recovery.

Second, the literature usually refers to “victims” at general, ignoring the gender differences. Future studies should examine the gender aspect – the unique experience of male and female victims in RJ processes following intrafamilial sexual abuse.

Additionally, the study was conducted in Israel. Israel has a unique and diverse sociocultural context, but the mainstream Jewish family is generally considered to be Western, with family patterns resembling those in other industrialized countries (Kulik et al. 2016; Lavee and Katz 2003). Moreover, researchers in other countries have replicated the results of studies conducted in Israel (e.g. Mikulincer et al. 2005). Despite all of the above, caution should be exercised in arriving at generalizations based on our findings due to the fact that the study was conducted in Israel.

Last but not least, given the qualitative nature of the present study, the limited sample and the fact that RJ in cases of intrafamilial sexual offense is an emerging field of research that is continuously developing, our findings should be considered exploratory. Further research on how RJ helps restore family relationship is recommended before generalizing our findings. Nevertheless, our results provide valuable preliminary empirical insights into RJ in cases of intrafamilial sexual offense, a field which has so far been underexplored.

### Conclusions

The present study adds to recent studies on RJ in cases of sexual offense, and in the particular intrafamilial context. It enriches the literature with descriptions of the participants' experiences, shedding light on the unique characteristics of RJ processes in incest cases. The study also refines the contribution of the RJ process as an alternative or as complementary to legal or therapeutic processes, as well as the understanding of the importance of restoring the family system and of the suitability of the process for cases of incest. In such cases, RJ models are sometimes implemented as processes complementing family therapy. The assumption is usually that this is an informal process that relies on decision making by non-legal actors, but is dependent on and supported by the legal context, giving offenders the opportunity to publicly acknowledge their accountability and enabling the victims to sound their voice more actively (McNevin 2010). The RJ process can unfold in an expanded setting, involving all family members, including siblings who were not abusers or abused, step parents, and grandparents. Even family members prevented from participating due to developmental disabilities, young age, etc. may be represented by others in the conferencing, or address the other participants through a letter read aloud.

In cases of sex offenses, particularly within the family, the way the process is managed is extremely important, and enabling the victims to feel that they control the process and that they are fully and respectfully heard is hugely significant (Herman 1992, 2005; Jülich 2001; Koss 2010; Naylor 2010). Any work, restorative or not, which promotes recovery by sexual abuse victims and their relatives must be carried out sensitively, while empowering their sense of control and

providing them with respect, empowerment, a sense of confidence and intimacy. We hope that the present study will inspire additional research in the area, as well as continued and formal implementation of RJ processes in cases of incest.

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