

Research Article

Healing-Centered Restorative Justice

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Abstract

This concept paper maps out an approach to restorative justice that enriches current trauma-informed understandings and promotes healing and repair. The paper draws upon many sources, including qualitative research undertaken between 2021-23 in Israel/Palestine and New Zealand/Aotearoa, and an ongoing collaborative research project in the U.S. It also incorporates gathered wisdom on trauma and healing from leading experts across many disciplines. The paper begins by delineating different understandings of trauma, including personal, collective, historical, and structural forms. It then highlights three critical perspectives that offer useful insights into how the field of restorative justice can more effectively achieve its transformational potential: (1) Indigenous/collectivist perspectives; (2) positive psychology-related perspectives; and (3) transformative justice/abolitionist perspectives. The paper goes on to reframe these critical perspectives as core features of healing-centered restorative justice: first, a contextualized, multi-dimensional understanding of trauma; second, a strengths orientation toward human behavior; and third, a relational worldview grounded in interconnectedness, mutuality, and shared responsibility. By adopting this holistic and humanistic framework, restorative justice scholars and practitioners can develop effective and culturally sustaining conflict transformation processes that contribute to healing and repair at individual, interpersonal, and systemic levels of society.

Keywords

Restorative Justice, Trauma, Healing, Relational, Indigenous

1. Introduction

Healing is really the most radical act we can engage in in social justice, because it confirms that we have the right to be well. [28]

This concept paper maps out an approach to restorative justice that centers and promotes healing and repair. It draws upon many sources, in particular qualitative research on facilitation of restorative justice and similar conflict transformation processes I undertook between 2021-23 in Israel/Palestine and New Zealand/Aotearoa, and an ongoing collaborative research project in West Philadelphia, U.S., connected to developing community dialogues. It also draws

upon the work of leading experts in North America and elsewhere on trauma and healing across many disciplines. The paper begins by offering definitions of trauma, including personal, collective, historical, and structural trauma, and touching on neuro-biological and somatic understandings. It then identifies three critical perspectives that offer useful insights into how the field of restorative justice can achieve its transformational potential: (1) Indigenous/collectivist perspectives; (2) positive psychology-related perspectives; and (3) transformative justice/abolitionist perspectives. The paper goes on to identify

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core features of healing-centered restorative justice that are responsive to these critiques: contextualized, multi-dimensional understandings of trauma; a strengths orientation toward human behavior; and a relational worldview that emphasizes interconnectedness, mutuality, and shared humanity and responsibility. By contextualizing trauma using a multi-dimensional lens which includes greater emphasis on the systemic aspects of trauma, shifting the focus toward strengths, and incorporating a relational worldview, restorative justice scholars and practitioners can seek to develop effective and culturally sustainable approaches that promote healing. Centering healing as the main goal of restorative justice is critically necessary for the field to address harm and transform relationships in lasting ways at personal, interpersonal, and systemic levels. Healing-centered approaches draw upon the origins of restorative justice and its continued aspirations to align with Indigenous and ancestral wisdom traditions and non-Western cultures across the globe.

Part I discusses the methodology used to inform this paper. Part II offers current understandings of different dimensions of trauma that are relevant to the field of restorative justice. Part III identifies critical perspectives that have emerged from within and outside the restorative justice community addressing how trauma has often been understood, particularly within conventional medical and mental health circles. Part IV highlights the key features of a healing-centered restorative justice approach responsive to these critiques and situates this approach among other parallel movements. And finally, Part V outlines some of the gathered wisdom on healing-centered practice and offers some promising developments and ideas for further exploration.

2. Methodology

This article draws on qualitative research conducted in four sites. One of these sites is West Philadelphia, where I have served as a Co-Primary Investigator on a team engaging in a Critical Race Participatory Action Research (CPAR) project. Between 2020 and 2024, the team has conducted a number of interviews, focus groups, and community dialogues. Further, in connection with a Fulbright Global Scholar award, between 2021 and 2023, I completed twenty-six (26) interviews with facilitators of restorative justice, mediation, and similar conflict transformation processes in three different settings: Israel/Palestine (21); Hawai'i (2) and New Zealand/Aotearoa (3). Among the facilitators who participated, about one-third identified as members of Indigenous and/or minoritized or otherwise underrepresented groups within their communities, including Arab Israeli, Palestinian, Bedouin, Māori, and Indigenous Hawai'ian. The ideas presented in this article also reflect my lived experience expertise over four decades of professional practice in the fields of social work and law, and an extensive and broad-based literature review.

3. Defining Trauma

Trauma in a person, decontextualized over time, looks like personality. Trauma in a family, decontextualized over time looks like family traits. Trauma in a people decontextualized over time looks like culture! [47]

The word trauma comes from the Greek term meaning 'wound,' however, current thinking views trauma as a bodily response, rather than an event or emotion.¹ [46, 33, 37] This definition takes account of contemporary bio-psycho-social and political understandings of the mind-body connection. Trauma has been described as 'a spontaneous protection mechanism used by the body to stop or thwart further or future potential damage.' [46] Viewed through this lens, trauma represents a highly effective and adaptive tool rather than a flaw or weakness. In the aftermath of a dangerous or threatening or stressful situation, the survival-based parts of the brain embed a response that can look many ways, including some form of fight, flight, freeze, or fawn behavior. Trauma may also result from secondary or vicarious experiences, or violations of someone's dignity. [22, 33]

What creates a traumatic response for one person may be entirely different for someone else, depending on a combination of many factors, including their level of social supports, prior trauma history, the meaning that person or their society attaches to it, and their genetic makeup [65] Unless or until a trauma response is addressed in some effective way, it can get stuck in the body such that it can easily and often unconsciously be activated or 'triggered' in moments of actual or even perceived threats. [46, 33, 37] Seeking to understand the sources of traumatic responses can potentially point to paths for healing. In this sense, the aims of restorative justice connected to trauma may well be more about processes that allow it to be heard, held, accepted, and cared for, rather than fixed or resolved. [11, 44]

Trauma may result from a single, dramatic event, such as the death of a loved one, or it may be experienced over an extended and ongoing time period, such as living in an unsafe or abusive environment, or living under conditions of dire poverty. [67] Apart from personal or situational trauma and its potential ripple effects, it is critically important to recognize that trauma also may be experienced directly by larger communities and cultures, and even whole societies. These forms of trauma can be understood as collective, systemic, and historical trauma. Similar to the individual-level response, larger communities and whole societies can take on trauma responses, such as attacking 'the other' and adopting a punitive mindset, which may both be externalized and turned in against

¹ It is also important to acknowledge up front that the concept and understandings of trauma in this article are tied to Western cultures, so they may not resonate with non-Western cultural traditions, as much as the goal here is to move outside of conventional Western ways of thinking. E.g., Anderson, K. & Salaymeh, M. (2021). *Western conceptions of trauma*, <https://www.keppelhealthreview.com/autumn2021/decolonisingtrauma-part2> ['Western knowledge and its tools are incapable of identifying the expressions of trauma and the appropriate treatments cross-culturally.']

a society's own members.

For example, Fania Davis identifies two deep traumas that are intertwined with the birth of the United States: the genocide of Indigenous communities and slavery. [18] The wounds of these deep and pervasive traumas continue to cause severe and ongoing harm and oppression. To truly address these systemic traumas, Davis and others believe we need to engage in collective truth telling as the foundation for healing. [54, 45, 18, 22, 62]

The ongoing harmful impacts of racialized trauma can also be seen in other cultural contexts, particularly those with parallel racialized, colonial and post-colonial dynamics to the U.S. [58] For instance, in the context of New Zealand, massive group trauma experiences connected to colonization and ongoing racism as well as other collective harms show up in Indigenous communities as negative social conditions and behaviors that are then pathologized by the dominant culture as common traits belonging to Indigenous peoples. [49]

Moreover, the persistence of historical and collective trauma experiences has created what is known as intergenerational trauma, meaning trauma passed down within families and communities through genetic material. Neuroscientists and epigenetics researchers have been able to demonstrate that trauma gets carried from parent to child at the cellular and DNA levels. [66, 67] In the Canadian context, for example, extensive research has demonstrated the persistent and highly damaging consequences of intergenerational trauma brought on by settler colonialism, cultural genocide, and residential schools impacting that country's Indigenous communities. [40] Similarly, in New Zealand, historical and intergenerational sources of trauma caused by colonization and oppression of Indigenous peoples also included genocide, forced removal and relocation, and medical experimentation. [49] Indigenous cultures notably have long recognized this tragic reality, which they identify as 'blood memory,' meaning that younger generations inherit the many forms of trauma and trauma responses of their elders and ancestors. [40, 46, 49] The combined impacts and ripple effects of collective historical and ongoing trauma resulting from colonization and systemic racism have contributed significantly to the high incidences of poverty, violence, breakdown of social structures, physical disease, and internalized racism that are prevalent among many Indigenous and other affected communities. [49]

Yet another potential source of trauma that is especially relevant in the restorative justice context is the experience of participating in causing harm to others, whether by accident, or as a part of one's professional role or in some form of anti-social behavior. [67] Examples of situations where this form of trauma might occur include participation in law enforcement or military service. The traumatic effects of inflicting harm on others in these situations may also be severe and long lasting. [67]. Given that one of the central aims of restorative justice is to bring those who were involved in causing harm together with those who experienced the harm, awareness of this form of trauma is an important consideration.

4. Critiques of Individualistic Approaches to Trauma

An exclusively individualized approach fails to account for the ways in which social injustice, discrimination, and colonialism have systematic and far-reaching effects on entire communities. A more adequate and complete framework for understanding trauma and its impact, then, needs to focus on the ways in which traumatic stress is experienced by individuals, while also attending to the relevance of the social contexts which shape this very experience. [51]

Numerous critiques have surfaced within and outside the restorative justice field related to the treatment of trauma, both in the literature and in practice. [30, 49, 27, 60] Most of these critical perspectives share the view that conventional medical and mental health approaches to trauma, which over-emphasize the individual dimension and pathologize trauma responses, are incomplete at best. [30, 49, 60, 48] A review of this literature reveals three overlapping areas of critique: (1) Indigenous/collectivist perspectives; (2) positive-psychology-focused perspectives; and (3) transformative justice/abolitionist perspectives.

All these perspectives caution against an over-emphasis on personal or situational sources of trauma. One example that demonstrates the dangers posed by using an overly individualistic lens is the tendency to rely on and misinterpret information connected to 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' or 'ACEs.' The ACE project began as a series of healthcare-related research studies focused on adults that found a connection between the subjects' present-day health challenges and adverse experiences during their childhoods. Results from these studies were distilled in the form of a checklist identifying the most commonly occurring traumatic childhood events, with some indications that experiencing a larger number of events on the list during childhood might potentially be linked to a higher incidence of physical and mental health concerns in adulthood. The main intention of the original research studies was to increase policy makers' understanding of the importance of childhood adversity broadly speaking. Nevertheless, according to experts, including at least one who was involved in this project early on, the ACE checklist has been misused by treating it as both a diagnostic and predictive tool at the individual level in the field of law as well as in medicine and education. [3, 64, 60]

With respect to restorative justice, Walker and others have expressed concern that ACE information regarding participants might easily be distorted and mishandled because of some of the legal literature suggesting that individuals who score higher on the number of ACEs are more likely to have anti-social behavior and end up in the criminal legal system. [60] While educating restorative justice professionals on the prevalence of childhood trauma and its possible effects on adult health and behavior is necessary and important, it is equally important to avoid using adverse childhood experi-

ences or other situational factors to predict future behavior or place undue responsibility on individuals given the tremendous impact of contributing factors at the collective, historical, and systemic levels.

4.1. Indigenous/Collectivist Perspectives

Beyond these critiques of conventional medical and mental health approaches to trauma, individualistic approaches are fundamentally misplaced when they are applied to members of communities and societies whose cultures possess a relational and collectivist worldview. [49, 45] Renee Linklater, whose scholarship focuses on decolonizing trauma work, states as follows: 'Indigenous worldviews evolve out of a direct wholistic relationship that encompasses our spirit and the universe.' [38] Pihama and colleagues similarly point out that the notion of collectivism within the Māori world is 'a traditional and contemporary cultural reality that...contrasts with fundamental western valuing of individualism.' [49]

This focus on collectivism brings with it an emphasis on the interconnectedness of all things, which contemplates deep relationships with the land and all its inhabitants and includes past and future generations. Indigenous and collectivist ways of thinking view ideas such as health and wellness differently than in many Western societies. McCaslin and Breton describe this perspective as 'helping us to understand how to be in good relationship—how to 'be a good relative'—whether it is with ourselves, our families, our communities, other Indigenous peoples and nations, or with the peoples of the natural world.' [45]

Linklater speaks of the 'soul wound,' which refers to the dramatic and all-encompassing harms caused by colonization. [38]. Juan Tauri and other Indigenous scholars and practitioners have identified colonial harms that have been reproduced within the field of restorative justice to include cognitive injustice, co-optation, and cultural appropriation of Indigenous traditions. [55, 45, 1] Cognitive injustice is a term that describes the dominance of Eurocentric worldviews in the field, which reflect deeply entrenched hierarchical structures and processes. [1] The repeated imposition of such Western thinking across generations has resulted in an internalized sense of inferiority within some Indigenous communities, which has impeded the authentic development of Indigenous ideas and practices within the field of restorative justice. [45, 1]

Similarly, co-optation has arguably occurred because of the prevalence of Eurocentric and conventional Western thinking in the field of restorative justice, which has led to Eurocentric approaches being miscast as Indigenous. [55] McCaslin and Breton point out the untenable position created and perpetuated by these ongoing power dynamics. '[I]f [Indigenous peoples] adapt to what these structures demand, we carry a load of frustration and fury at what we experience ourselves and see done to others, and we also risk losing connection to who we are in the process.' [45] Linklater notes that the pro-

found soul wound inflicted by colonization is exacerbated by Western therapies. Thus, approaching trauma using an individualistic lens designed by Western medical and mental health experts may well undermine potentially more effective and culturally sustaining indigenous approaches to healing. [6, 5, 38, 45, 49]

Cultural appropriation generally refers to when someone from a dominant culture adopts or exploits elements from a non-dominant culture. In the context of restorative justice, Dashman and colleagues [17] have noted that whenever 'white practitioners fail to acknowledge the roots of this knowledge, we are engaging in cultural appropriation, and in doing so, replicating the same power dynamics and oppression that has shaped the criminal justice system and broader society.' [17]

4.2. Positive Psychology-Related Perspectives

Another critical perspective regarding conventional medical and mental health understandings of trauma is associated with theory and research connected to positive psychology. This area of critique also includes the emerging field of positive criminology and support for alternative approaches such as the 'good lives model'. [15] These developments are part of larger efforts in criminal law and related fields to shift the focus away from solely looking at risk factors and toward focusing on positive factors that can support rehabilitation and reintegration into communities. When viewed through a positive psychology lens individualistic approaches to trauma may not sufficiently account for, and indeed may undermine, human potential for moving through adversity and using it as a basis for growth and even human flourishing.

Similarly, the focus on individualized trauma may also effectively cause greater harm by reducing individuals to their personal histories rather than seeing them as full human beings who also possess significant assets and abilities. [27] This perspective is shared by self-identified abolitionists and supporters of transformative justice, such as adrienne maree brown. According to brown, '[t]rauma and oppression are part of the current reality of our species, but there is wholeness and beauty that comes before, during and after the pain. There is a place in each of us, what Maya Angelou called our 'inviolable place,' a place we can return to.' [11]

At the same time, this positively oriented perspective, which is often associated with the concept of *resilience* itself has been the subject of strong criticisms when viewed solely through an individualistic lens. [50, 48] It is therefore vital for restorative justice scholars and practitioners familiarize themselves with relational approaches to the idea of human flourishing. For example, rather than focusing solely on self-care, the field of restorative justice needs to place greater emphasis on and devote more resources to developing practices aligned with notions such as collective care [14].

4.3. Transformative Justice/Abolitionist Perspectives

As alluded to above, both transformative justice and abolitionist perspectives view individualized approaches to trauma somewhat critically, given the tendency especially in Western societies to misplace responsibility on the individual for the impact of traumatic situations that are systemic and often have deep historical roots in colonialism and other forms of oppression and marginalization. ‘Of course, a system that never addresses the ‘why’ behind the harm never actually contains the harm itself.’ [34] Further, abolitionists and transformative justice advocates such as Mariame Kaba believe that narrow thinking about the origins of trauma contribute to the ever-widening justice gap and expansion of the carceral state in the U.S. and similar societies. Restorative justice processes therefore risk compounding existing harms when they focus solely on individual narratives. The field of restorative justice needs to focus instead on incorporating group narratives that center the voices of Indigenous peoples and other oppressed and marginalized communities that have been directly impacted by colonization and structural racism. Further, according to Kaba, ‘we must imagine and experiment with new collective structures that allow us to take more principled action, such as embracing collective responsibility to resolve conflicts.’ [34]

5. Core Features of Healing-Centered Restorative Justice

Healing broken relationships must involve sincere and genuine efforts by all of those involved to practice values such as fairness, honesty, compassion, harmony, inclusiveness, trust, humility, openness, and most important, respect. It is about engaging our best selves to respond to harms, so that instead of causing divisions among us, harms can be used to bring us together and to make our families and communities stronger. [45]

Leading voices in the field of restorative justice have long recognized the significant role of trauma in situations of harm and violence [18, 23, 70, 69] In their pivotal article on trauma and restorative justice, Melanie Randall and Lori Haskell asserted that becoming trauma-informed is key to the effectiveness of all restorative processes and practices. [51] Other restorative justice scholars have also contributed to more holistic and relational understandings of restorative practices that take account of the critical perspectives identified above. For instance, Jennifer Llewellyn has been a vocal advocate for relational approaches to restorative justice. [39, 40] Fania Davis has focused much of her work on the interface between restorative justice and racial justice and other forms of systemic oppression. [18, 19, 20] Shadd Maruna has written extensively about the need for a strengths-based approach to restorative justice in the re-entry context. [43] And Lorenn

Walker’s work has critiqued the overly deterministic applications of ACEs to young people and adults in restorative justice processes and has urged the field to take account of positive psychology- oriented considerations. [59, 60]

In distilling the relevant literature, three core features of healing-centered restorative justice emerge, which are directly responsive to the areas of critique identified above: (1) an appreciation of multi-dimensional contexts (bio-psycho-social-political-spiritual); (2) a strengths orientation toward human behavior; and (3) a relational worldview that emphasizes interconnectedness, mutuality, and shared responsibility. When these elements are present, they enhance other important dimensions of trauma-informed and healing-centered practice, such as the creation of safer and braver spaces, transparency and trustworthiness, and a sense of agency, including choice, voice, and empowerment.

5.1. Contextualizing Trauma: Bio-Psycho-Socio-Political-Spiritual Lens

Becoming healing-centered requires a multi-layered and multi-disciplinary understanding of the various dimensions of trauma responses—include biological, physiological, psychological, and social aspects and their possible causation. [51] As mentioned earlier, a major critique of approaches to trauma in the medical and mental health fields has been the tendency to emphasize the micro-level in ways that are individualistic and de-contextualized. It is therefore highly important to situate all trauma experienced by individuals in the broader social contexts to which it is inextricably connected—produced, shaped, and lived. [51, 30]

Howard Zehr, who is widely known as a founder of the modern restorative justice movement, also commented on this dynamic between personal, interpersonal, and systemic dimensions of trauma. He noted that structural injustices play a role in many crimes and conflicts and urged professionals working in the criminal legal and restorative justice fields to focus more on the roots causes of conflicts and harms at a structural rather than a purely individualistic level. [69, 70, 71]

Taking into account the social and systemic aspect of trauma more fully brings with it a commitment to acknowledging the human-inflicted harms that are ongoing in societies and systems of oppression throughout the world, along with their political implications. [69] One way to appreciate more deeply the impact of systemic trauma is to think of it as a kind of ‘social toxin.’ [29] Social toxicity includes fear, anxiety, stress, shame, and uncertainty connected to the social environment in which particularly marginalized and oppressed segments of our society are living. These pervasive social toxins are equally as present as physical toxins and affect quality of life and wellbeing just as much, especially among community members who are most directly harmed. And, all of society suffers in many ways because of these persistent widespread injustices. It is also important to emphasize that

marginalization and oppression can take many forms, including patriarchy, racism, white supremacy, ableism, and transphobia, which have an impact on every level of our communities: individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal. [29]

To address systemic forms of trauma across the globe, the restorative justice field needs to grapple with the ongoing political, socio-economic, and cultural realities of settler colonialism. Critical restorative justice scholars, who are also known as the *Colorizing Restorative Justice* movement or 'CRJ,' describe the principal states that perpetuate this settler colonial structure as 'CANZUS,' Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. [58] Edward Valandra, a leading voice in this movement, emphasizes that the starting point for appreciating this critical perspective is the need to acknowledge what he calls 'The First Harm'. [58] The First Harm is the theft of Indigenous land and ongoing erasure of Indigenous peoples by colonial settlers, which persists until today and has largely been ignored, including within the restorative justice arena. [58, 45, 49, 1]. Valandra challenges restorative justice scholars and practitioners to take specific actions toward addressing and remedying this fundamental structural harm. The broader Colorizing Restorative Justice movement also emphasizes the need to address 'The Second Harm' of enslavement and forced emigration of Indigenous peoples from Africa, along with the exploitation of their unpaid labor. According to this movement, the field of restorative justice will only reach its full potential when it is able to acknowledge both these harms fully and take significant action steps toward return of stolen land and reparations for stolen labor. As mentioned earlier, Valandra, Davis, and others identify the first step as creating space for those who have been harmed to tell their stories [58, 18, 20, 45], possibly through some form of truth and reconciliation process.

In addition to social, structural, and political dimensions, proponents of healing-centered approaches urge practitioners to embrace and support the spiritual dimension of healing. [45, 40] McCaslin and Breton note that Indigenous healing practices represent a fundamentally spiritual process, which affirms the intrinsic worth and goodness of each person. [45] The aim is to create balance and harmony in how a community is relating, so that everyone can be made whole. (Ibid.) Similarly, for cultural healing to occur, Linklater emphasizes the need for individuals and communities that have been subjected to colonization to connect to culturally specific spiritual practices, such as ceremony and tools. [38] In the Australian context, research has found that culturally informed therapies such as art therapy and 'yarning' therapy, which is a therapeutic form of story sharing, have shown promise as Indigenously based healing practices. [49]

Because Indigenous thinking regarding trauma tends to view these harms in terms of misalignment that is fundamentally relational, effective healing approaches need to focus on rebalancing and re-integration and also need to be holistic, which means incorporating spirit as well as heart,

mind, and body in intentional ways. Linklater describes this process as a kind of 'homecoming.' [38] By supporting people in connecting to their spirits, they can feel safer within their bodies and within themselves, which in turn supports healing. Some neuroscientists are also embracing spirituality in the context of well-documented research showing that human experiences of awe or wonder, including spiritual experiences, contribute significantly to individual and collective wellbeing. [36] Specifically, these experts are looking at the role of the Vagus nerve, also known as the *soul nerve* [46], which is the center of the mind-body connection, and is responsible for emotions connected to kindness, caring, and compassion. [36]

5.2. Strengths Orientation

Experts in the field of trauma recognize that one of the most important ways to address trauma and promote healing is to adopt a strengths-oriented approach, which focuses on identifying and building on positive attributes. [51] Examples of this approach include Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciative Interviewing, which invite exploration into what is working and how we can do more of it, instead of only asking what is broken and how we can fix it. [31] Randall and Haskell note that, 'as important as it is to study and understand the effects of trauma, it is equally imperative to study and understand the conditions of wellness and resilience, and how these are achieved.' [51] By viewing trauma-informed practice as an opportunity to help participants harness their own strengths, restorative justice scholars and practitioners can create opportunities to promote healing and connection rather than only minimizing or controlling harmful behavior.

These opportunities for promoting healing by emphasizing individual and collective strengths can also create positive ripple effects well into the future. Just as trauma is transmitted and handed down across generations, the same is true of the potential for human flourishing. Wellness is also a bodily response, one that represents the ability to recover, learn, and even draw strength from adversity or harm. [4, 40, 46, 51] George Bonanno is a leading scholar and researcher who has challenged earlier work on trauma suggesting that wellness is somehow rare or even pathological in the face of adversity. His work indicates that resilience is distinct from recovery and is multi-faceted, meaning it can be experienced through a range of different pathways. [4] Ginwright, whose research and scholarly work is steeped in his lived experience as well as his career as an educator and facilitator, takes a similar view. 'We also have to understand that there's more to me than just that trauma. We need an approach that acknowledges that trauma and heals me from it in ways that are asset based.' [27]

5.3. Relational Worldview

Restorative justice is centrally concerned with restoring and repairing relationships that have been harmed or damaged by conflict, crime, or some other disruption. Healing-centered

work recognizes that recovery from such events can only occur in relationships. As stated by Judith Herman:

Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity.

Healing-centered work also recognizes that healthy relationships are essential to the development and expression of human capacities [32, 51].

As discussed earlier, Indigenous perspectives emphasize a relational and collectivist worldview. This relational orientation shapes Indigenous ways thinking of trauma as well as understandings about sources of healing and growth. [40] McCaslin and Breton note that ‘Indigenous knowledge is based on a profound and thorough awareness of our relatedness in all directions, so it [i]s natural to apply this knowledge to healing harms.’ [45] Such Indigenous wisdom is supported by scientific research, which has consistently shown that the presence of solid relationships and a sense of connectedness support a person’s ability to heal and, at the same time, increase their capacity to cope with future challenges. Researchers refer to these elements as protective factors, which also include a sense of personal agency, the ability to engage in perspective-taking, and hopefulness. [12, 61]

In sum, healing-centered restorative justice requires an expansive, nuanced, and complex view of healing—one that embraces healing as a dynamic, collective, spiritual, political, and often lifelong and intergenerational process. This view recognizes that because the most profound harms of trauma are relational, the nature of healing from trauma must also be relational—to self and other, including one’s community and society.

5.4. Parallel Frameworks

This discussion of the key features of healing-centered restorative justice can be situated with reference to other contemporary movements and frameworks, notably therapeutic jurisprudence (TJ) and procedural justice (PJ). [62] TJ has been described as ‘the study of law as a therapeutic agent.’ The field has generated a global movement of scholars and practitioners, including many judges, concerned with promoting law and legal practice that supports wellbeing. A number of TJ scholars have written about incorporating trauma-informed ideas and practices as one avenue for implementing more effective therapeutic approaches for policymaking and law reform. On the other hand, one important distinction is that TJ generally addresses potential therapeutic reforms within existing legal structures and systems, while healing-centered engagement contemplates the need for recreating and reimagining legal institutions and systems. [27, 46]

Procedural justice emphasizes the importance of the process-related dimensions of law and legal practice, meaning

how participants in legal proceedings experience their treatment by judges and other legal actors. The inclusion of the term *justice* distinguishes this field from the traditional legal concerns around procedural fairness and indicates the field’s posture of advocating for justice enhancing processes. Research in this field by prominent scholars such as Tom Tyler as well as Judge Kevin Burke and others has identified four interconnected principles or pillars: 1) fairness, which includes treating people respect and honoring their dignity 2) acting with transparency 3) creating opportunities for participant’s voices to be heard and validated, and 4) impartiality. [57, 13] The emphasis on processes and treatment of participants that centers the importance of respect, voice, and validation resonates with the healing centered framework outlined above.

Healing-centered restorative justice also aligns with other movements and developments in legal practice and scholarship, including collaborative law [56], comprehensive law [16], and integrative law [65] and writings on relationship-centered/relational lawyering. [7, 8, 9]

6. Wise Practices and Avenues for Further Exploration

To reclaim an experience of justice that is healing, we need to rely on ways that build on the millennia-old foundation of our cultural wisdom and learning as Indigenous peoples. [45]

6.1. Wise Practices

The core elements of healing-centered restorative justice, which include a contextualized, multi-dimensional understanding of trauma, relational worldview, and strengths orientation, point to useful entry points for reflecting on the current state of the field and offering guidance for future directions. With this framework in mind, restorative justice scholars and practitioners can consider the ways in which their current work is healing centered and what additional steps they might take to implement a more healing-centered approach. This section offers some *wise practices* and emerging ideas for further consideration.

The notion of *wise practices* as contrasted with *best practices*, recognizes that specific applications are idiosyncratic and textured, and therefore any proposed practice needs to be contextualized rather than standardized. [1] For instance, Abramson and Assadulah describe a template for *decolonizing* restorative justice that is process-oriented and is *Indigenously-led* by definition. [1] They use the image of a tree and describe four aspects and phases of the process-- the roots, trunk, branches, and fruit. The roots represent the foundation, meaning that the first phase needs to focus on the key tasks of active listening and consultation. The trunk embodies local knowledge and leadership, meaning that the next phase emphasizes relationship building. The branches represent the

next phase, which includes an effort to look outward and identify useful practices from similar socially and culturally relevant settings. And the fruit represents the products that emerge from the leadership of local Indigenous peoples with the input of transferable lessons from similar communities, which result in culturally, socially and spiritually conducive restorative justice practices.

These authors' process-oriented model is similar to McCaslin and Breton's approach, which starts with acknowledging of The First Harm of colonization and emphasizes the need to empower Indigenous peoples to use their own Indigenous means to respond to this and related harms among their people. Similar to those who specifically identify with the CRJ movement, McCaslin and Breton emphasize that the persistence of Eurocentric norms and expectations have constrained the restorative justice field from being truly healing-centered. [45] They go on to state that Indigenous communities must seek to hold a space for deep healing within themselves, so that they can respond in a good way to others, rather than expecting healing to come about from external sources. 'Indigenous perspectives must be listened to and heard outside the assumption of colonial rule, and Indigenous autonomy and competence in handling [their] own affairs through [their] own ways must be unconditionally respected. [45]

This emphasis on the need to place power and resources in the hands of Indigenous and other historically oppressed and marginalized communities represents an essential and yet perhaps also a deeply challenging shift in the ways we often operate in Eurocentric systems, including in the restorative justice field. Implementing change at this structural and systemic level requires a fundamental re-thinking of how we value knowledge and expertise, and a willingness to shift the balance of power and control over these processes into the hands of Indigenous and other historically disempowered communities. In the words of McCaslin and Breton, "instead of handing our conflicts over to 'experts' or 'professionals,' everyone feels equally called to be humble, self-critical, open, self-disclosing, willing to change and prepared to own some role in the dynamics that led to harm." [45]

This discussion brings to mind Tara Yosso's work on 'community cultural wealth,' which she approaches using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective. [68] Yosso's work provides a strengths-oriented view of the cultural wealth of communities of color, meaning 'the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts' possessed by those communities and other socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized. [68] This meaningful acknowledgement and appreciation for the value of cultural knowledge requires a recognition of experiential knowledge or *lived experience*. [68] Yosso's approach resonates with what others have described as the paradigm shift that is necessary for the field of restorative justice to become more healing-centered. [45] The takeaway is that if we truly want to transform the field of restorative justice in ways that center healing, we need

to start by creating structures and processes that allow Indigenous and other historically oppressed and marginalized communities to take the lead in determining what healing-centeredness looks like for them.

Promising models embodying the core elements of healing-centered restorative justice can be found across the globe and have emerged even in situations of deep cultural divides. Each of the following three illustrations from the author's research exemplifies a core feature of healing-centered restorative justice.

6.1.1. Contextualized, Multi-Dimensional Lens

Hei Tautau Pounau Restorative Justice Trust is a Māori-led post-sentencing program based in Auckland, New Zealand/Aotearoa, which focuses on re-integrating people from Indigenous communities who are currently incarcerated. *Hei Tautau Pounau* is Māori language that translates as the 'jade door' or 'accessway'. [21] The name reflects the program's main goal of creating access across the metaphorical barrier that exists between people in situations of conflict or harm. [21] The fully contextualized nature of the program and its multi-dimensionality are reflected in all its structural and process elements as well as its richly informed content. *Hei Tautau Pounau* has been established and developed under the close guidance of Indigenous elders and is being fully staffed by members of the Māori and other Indigenous communities who have lived experience expertise alongside their other restorative justice and other facilitation experience. Importantly, every aspect of the program incorporates and is informed by Māori language and Māori cultural beliefs and practices, known as *Tikanga Māori*, and all processes will take place on Māori land, known as the *Marai*. Returning these processes to the *Marai* itself has great meaning connected to *Tikanga Māori*, which translates into every detail such that the participants and the processes themselves are held and nurtured by the entire community. The entire community on the *Marai* supports the process and each member plays an integral part. For example, the people behind the scenes, such as those who prepare the food offered to guests, are as much a part of the process as the facilitators, who are simply more visible to the participants. In this way, the program embodies a contextualized, multi-dimensional understanding of the participants and their needs and interests in the broadest sense.

6.1.2. Strengths Orientation

The West Philadelphia Community Dialogue Project, as it is known, is based in the city of Philadelphia in the U.S. and grew out of an initiative to find culturally sustaining ways of helping to repair historically fraught relations between a university community and its neighbors. The goal of the project has been to leverage university resources to draw upon the deep wells of lived experience expertise and center the voices and interests of community members toward addressing concerns related to racial justice and equity.

The program harnesses community strengths toward greater capacity building around dialogue and conflict transformation. Specifically, interested community leaders have received support and mentorship to enhance their existing skillset by using restorative practices to promote relationship-building and resolve community concerns completely outside the criminal legal system [2] The project has also expressly adopted a Critical CRT lens and has applied Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods to center the lived experience and voices of community residents. [2]

6.1.3. Relational Worldview

A unique model exemplifying a relational worldview is known as the Friendship Across Borders program, with connections in Israel/Palestine and Germany. [25] This program was established to bring a fresh perspective to the longstanding and deeply entrenched Israel/Palestine conflict, with a particular focus on engaging young adults in relationship building at an interpersonal level. Rather than focusing on what are typically referred to as the dual or competing narratives of Israelis and Palestinians, this program introduces further complexity and nuance by bringing in a third narrative, that of contemporary German citizens. [25]

The program demonstrates a relational approach by recognizing the interconnectedness of these three sets of narratives and three histories, including historical traumas which have broadly impacted members of these societies, and which continue to impact the current situation and conflicts in Israel/Palestine. [52] By bringing a relational lens that acknowledges the complex and multi-layered narratives rather than taking a reductionist view, the participants are able to open to different perspectives and see themselves in different roles than would likely occur otherwise.

These three programs share a complex, multi-dimensional understanding of trauma and healing that includes its historical, collective, systemic, spiritual and socio-political elements. Second, they reflect a relational worldview, by pursuing restorative practices in ways that are culturally sustaining and are led by local residents who are Indigenous and/or represent historically oppressed and marginalized peoples and groups. And third, these projects all reflect a strengths orientation, which emphasizes cultural wealth and lived experience.

6.2. Avenues for Further Exploration

The wise practices and promising models presented here demonstrate the kinds of changes that are necessary to bring about more healing-centered restorative justice. Restorative justice scholars and practitioners who want to take concrete steps in this direction need to consider three dimensions of transformation: personal, interpersonal, and systemic. [7]

First, the work needs to begin at the personal level, by looking inward and doing the deep work of addressing our own complex and multi-dimensional identities and our own personal and family histories of trauma. [29] Ginwright and

others have emphasized the need to pivot from the ‘lens,’ which is outward-focused and tends to externalize responsibility, to the ‘mirror,’ looking deeply inside ourselves and our own complex histories, identities and stories in order to achieve healing and more meaningful social change. [29, 50, 41] In her earlier work, Willie Ermine described how Western societies needed to use a mirror to reflect back the *indigenous gaze*, meaning essentially that members of dominant groups within those societies need to accept responsibility for addressing the dire circumstances of Indigenous peoples that have resulted from their and their predecessors’ dominance. [24] Similarly, Abramson and Asadullah state that to decolonize restorative justice we must first decolonize ourselves, which includes recognizing our social positionality and naming our areas of unearned privilege as a reflection of the values we bring into our work. [1]

These practices of beginning our work with situating ourselves comport with longstanding traditions among many Indigenous peoples that also have been adopted by many restorative justice practitioners. For instance, Māori peoples traditionally begin conversations with their *pepeha*, which is a way of introducing themselves that tells the story of the people and places they come from, including their ancestry. [53] Becoming healing-centered requires that we commit to ongoing and essentially lifelong practices that allow us to stay as self-aware as possible, including self-reflection, consultation, supervision, and feedback.

At the interpersonal level, restorative justice scholars and practitioners need to consider what it means to invest in deep and meaningful relationships as a core aspect of healing-centered work. Ginwright refers to this pivot as moving from transactional to transformative connections. [29] Further, investing in transformative relationships can support efforts to decolonize restorative justice. Eurocentric culture tends to be transactional, by focusing on values such as *efficiency* and *outputs* and relating to time in extremely narrow and constricting ways. Doing meaningful healing-centered work requires embracing more spacious ways of thinking about time and practicing slowness. As adrienne maree brown has advised, we need to ‘move at the speed of trust’ [10].

Another aspect of slowing down is the need to pivot from ‘hustle’ to ‘flow,’ which requires increasing our presence. Greater presence in turn can lead to more intentional choices that contribute to healing. Specifically, the field of restorative justice needs to become more intentional around creating *ethical space*, meaning a field of convergence for authentic dialogue across the cultural divides between Western and Indigenous worldviews. [24] This convergence necessitates a shift from ‘the status quo of an asymmetrical social order to a partnership model between world communities.’ [24]

One important way non-Indigenous restorative justice practitioners can demonstrate this level of intentionality and ethical behavior is by exercising care to avoid engaging in cultural appropriation when referencing or using Indigenously sourced ideas, practices and tools. [55] Researchers and

practitioners using or referring to such tools or practices need to be mindful of considering forms of invitation, permission and accountability. [42] As Fania Davis has stated, ‘respect requires at a minimum fully understanding and explaining the meaning of the cultural practice and identifying the individual who authorized its use.’ [19] Davis and others further encourage non-Indigenous practitioners to do ancestral research to learn about the healing practices within their own cultural and spiritual traditions. [19, 8] Valandra advocates that if non-Indigenous practitioners want to use a talking piece, they can create one that incorporates soil from the stolen land and use it to acknowledge the land’s true origins and ownership. These ideas and suggestions exemplify the difference between hustle and flow. [58]

At the systemic level, restorative justice scholars and practitioners need to think about what it will take to engage in broader structural change that places Indigenous peoples and communities and other historically oppressed and marginalized communities at the forefront and empowers them to recreate and reimagine restorative justice in more healing-centered ways. Ginwright suggests that communities committed to social justice can move in this direction by pivoting from ‘problem solving to possibility creating,’ which is about reframing systemic issues in ways that allow more space for creativity, dreaming, and imagining beyond immediate conflicts and harms. [29]

The restorative justice field’s understanding of healing-centeredness at the systemic level can also draw wisdom from voices within the abolitionist and transformative justice movements. [34, 35, 26] For instance, Mariame Kaba speaks and writes about how abolitionists ‘must imagine and experiment with new collective structures that enable [them] to take more principled action, such as embracing collective responsibility to resolve conflicts.’ [34] Additionally, abolitionists emphasize the need to promote historically oppressed and marginalized communities through collectivizing care rather than reinforcing capitalist notions of self-care. As Kaba famously has said, ‘hope is a discipline,’ meaning we need to think of hope in ways that support specific actions toward incremental change and take the long view, rather than simply wishing for a different future.

7. Conclusion

This discussion has demonstrated the ways in which restorative justice field has begun to incorporate contemporary understandings of trauma and healing, including perspectives that go beyond individualistic definitions and respond to Indigenous, abolitionist, and transformative justice critiques. It has proposed a healing-centered framework that incorporates a multi-dimensional understanding of context, strengths-orientation, and relational worldview. Further, it has emphasized the importance of shifting power and resources to center Indigenous and Critical Race voices and perspectives and finding other meaningful ways to take account of past and

ongoing harms at the systemic level. By applying this framework using wise practices and ideas, the field of restorative justice can continue to progress in a healing-centered direction that can contribute to its larger goals of promoting peaceful conflict transformation in relational and culturally sustaining ways.

Abbreviations

ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
TJ	Therapeutic Jurisprudence
PJ	Procedural Justice

Author Contributions

Susan Lori Brooks is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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