**Sustained Restorative Dialogue as a Means of Understanding and Preventing Sexually Harmful Behavior on University Campuses**

This article describes the development, implementation, and outcomes of the Sustained Restorative Dialogue process piloted at Victoria University of Wellington in 2018. The Sustained Restorative Dialogue explored the issue of sexual harm and harassment on campus. It was a “sustained” dialogue in that it was run over four sessions with the same participants. It was a “restorative” dialogue in that it was held in a circle format and the conversation moved in sequential sessions through the main steps of a restorative analysis – What is happening? What are the impacts? What is needed to make things right? The aim of the dialogue was to examine the broader climate that gives rise to sexual harm in the campus setting and beyond, and to explore possible solutions. The model provided a structure for breaking down a complex issue and a space to explore practical ways to strive for a healthier culture, both on campus and in wider society. The process yielded a number of positive outcomes both for participants as individuals and as a larger group, suggesting the implementation of the model in universities could contribute to transforming the climate that gives rise to sexual harm.

Keywords: restorative justice, restorative practices, sexual harm, university, dialogue

# Introduction

Sexual harm is a major issue on university campuses that demands innovative, proactive solutions. In recent years, a number of universities around the world have begun offering restorative justice as a response after an incident of sexual harm has occurred. This has offered a helpful and healing process to impacted students, but there is still a need for preventative measures to address the culture that gives rise to sexual assault and harassment.

This article provides an overview of the Sustained Restorative Dialogue process piloted at Victoria University of Wellington in 2018. The Sustained Restorative Dialogue brought a group of students together for four restorative circle sessions to discuss the issue of sexual harm on campus and what can be done to make things right. The article begins with the background and motivation to pursue the pilot along with a description of relevant influences in the development of the process. It then presents an overview of the four sessions, including the circle structure and thematic questions used during each meeting. Finally, the individual and group outcomes of the pilot and implications for further implementation of the Sustained Restorative Dialogue process are discussed.

The two authors of this article were both involved in the Sustained Restorative Dialogue. Lindsey Pointer led the development of the pilot, arranged logistics, and co-facilitated the process along with Ryan Meachen. Amy Giles-Mitson was a participant observer in the process, recorded audio of the circle meetings for analysis, and conducted interviews with the participants following the completion of the pilot.

# The Problem of Sexual Harm on University Campuses

There is a clear and timely need to address the issue of sexual harm in the university setting. In a recent survey[[1]](#footnote-1) that examined experiences of sexual violence in New Zealand tertiary education, over 80% of students who responded said they thought sexual violence in student communities was a problem, and 53% of those asked indicated that they had experienced some form of sexual harm during their time as a tertiary student. While this is only a partial representation (where respondents may have self-selected based on their experiences), similar statistics have been reported in larger scale surveys in Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission University Report, 2017), the U.K (Bingham & Goldhill, 2015), and the U.S (AAU Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct, 2015). Restorative justice involves a range of processes, as well as a philosophical perspective, that offer a promising way to respond to individual incidents of harm when they occur (Karp & Schachter, 2019). However, there is still a significant need for approaches that both address and attempt to transform the broader cultural contexts that enable harmful attitudes and behavior.

**Restorative Solutions to Sexual Harm on University Campuses**

There is ample scholarship on campus sexual assault and on the restorative justice process, but to date, surprisingly little analysis on the use of restorative justice to address campus sexual harm (Kaplan, 2017). However, in recent years, scholarship is growing, thanks in large part to the work of the Campus PRISM (Promoting Restorative Initiatives for Sexual Misconduct) Project, an international network of scholars and practitioners invested in using restorative approaches to reduce and respond effectively to campus sexual misconduct (Karp, Shackford-Bradley, Wilson, & Williamsen, 2016).

This implementation of restorative processes to address sexual harm on campus follows decades of debate about the appropriateness of using restorative justice in cases of sexual violence. Critics argue that the lack of harsh punitive measures in restorative justice fails to send a clear message condemning sexual violence and furthermore, that the process may be re-victimizing for survivors (Stewart, 2019). Additionally, there is concern about the degree to which the responsible party’s understanding of the impact of their actions relies on the exposure of survivors’ pain, which may make the harmed party shoulder the responsible party’s learning and healing in a troubling way (Stewart, 2019).

Specifically in the university context, there is a risk that both the harmed and responsible party may feel coerced into participating in restorative justice due to the young age of many of these students and the power imbalance between students and university administration (Kaplan, 2017). Responsible parties may further feel coerced to accept a reparation plan by the prospect of harsher consequences in the traditional discipline system and harmed parties may feel pressured to accept a reparation plan that meets the university’s needs rather than their own (Kaplan, 2017).

There is also concern that the restorative justice process may systematically disfavor individuals of color. Students of color may feel coerced into agreeing to restorative justice because they may otherwise face harsher penalties than white students, and therefore may even take responsibility when they are not actually responsible (Kaplan, 2017). These students of color may also face more burdensome restoration plans because ‘restorative processes and their outcomes are subject to the idiosyncrasies of the participants, who are not immune to racial bias’ (Kaplan, 2017, p. 738). In this way, restorative justice processes risk perpetuating racial disparities in school discipline and criminal justice.

There also exists a general lack of public understanding and support of the restorative justice process, as demonstrated by the public backlash experienced at Dalhousie University following the use of a restorative justice process to respond to an incident of sexual harm on Facebook. As Llewellyn explains,

The public response to the situation clearly sought the arc of established justice narratives. The public demanded – in petitions, tweets, blogs, online posts and on talk radio – that the University play its traditional part in the justice story. They were to find the monsters, punish them, ideally by isolating them from the rest of us by expelling them to make them pay and somehow make us all richer for their loss (2015, p. 49).

The experience of Dalhousie University points to a dearth in public understanding (and as a result, support) of the restorative justice process, which may contribute to a lesser acceptance of its use on university campuses.

Despite these valid criticisms and concerns, restorative responses provide many benefits in the wake of sexual harm in university communities. Broadly speaking, restorative justice fits well with the overarching aim of universities to educate their students and ‘in doing so, prepare them to become informed, responsible, and ethical members of society’ (Kaplan, 2017, p. 717-718). The restorative justice process also offers significant benefits to harmed parties, giving them a chance to be heard and providing acknowledgment of the wrongdoing and a commitment to not repeat the behavior on the part of the responsible party. This is in stark contrast to traditional campus disciplinary procedures, which often fail to meet the needs of harmed parties or provide them with a voice (Karp et al., 2016; Kaplan, 2017). There are also significant benefits for responsible parties, who are also given a voice in the process and a chance to take responsibility, better understand the harm caused, and to express remorse, ultimately leading to increased deterrence (Kaplan, 2017).

This benefit also extends to the broader community, which has an opportunity to examine the norms and policies in campus culture that may contribute to sexual harm. Particularly in the wake of the #MeToo movement, the need for an effective response to ‘grey-area behaviors’ that may not be classified as crimes has become apparent (Stewart, 2019). These behaviors often stem from larger cultural issues. Two of the women, Amanda Demsey and Jillian Smith, who participated as harmed parties in the Dalhousie University incident mentioned above, described the opportunity the restorative justice process provided to examine broader climate and culture issues.

The men still had to be accountable for their actions, but we took the opportunity the restorative justice process provided to develop a deeper understanding of the issues that shaped climate and culture and to empower ourselves to affect the changes we wanted to see because we felt this was also our right and responsibility. Restorative justice processes are about learning and are future focused, and we would not have been fully participating in the process if, by the end, we were preceding exactly as we had before the process began (Llewellyn, 2015, p. 48).

Incidents of sexual misconduct are not solely the isolated acts of individuals, but rather are birthed and perpetuated by social norms and the hostile climate often referred to as ‘rape culture’ (Kaplan, 2017; Karp et al., 2016). In order to address this issue, restorative initiatives on campuses have gone beyond responding to specific incidents to attempt to impact these broader cultural concerns. The Campus PRISM Project recommends that universities undertake a ‘whole campus approach’ that includes three tiers of intervention (Karp, 2017). Tier I provides prevention education and includes circle-based discussions in which community members can work to co-create a safe and responsible community. Tier II provides a restorative intervention after an incident of sexual harassment occurs, either as an alternative or a supplement to formal processes. Tier III provides restorative reentry circles to assist with the reintegration of students who have been suspended. Victoria University of Wellington offers both Tier I and Tier II interventions related to sexual harm, however the focus of this article is on the Sustained Restorative Dialogue, which is one specific Tier I pilot endeavoring to generate wider culture change.

While the Campus PRISM Project clearly advocates for preventative and culture-building uses of restorative processes, there are thus far, significantly fewer examples of these processes in use on campuses than there are Tier II processes. One example is the prevention education curriculum implemented at University of California-Berkeley, which uses a restorative circle process to teach students about consent over the course of ten modules (Karp et al., 2016). This approach offers clear benefits over standard consent education, which often is limited to an introductory online course or one-time, large-group presentation, and is ultimately unlikely to affect broader culture change (Karp et al., 2016).

In addition to providing a space for meaningful consent education, the circle process also provides a space for the community to surface and explore issues related to sexual norms and campus culture. These circles can be implemented as one-time events or can provide a safe space for a more sustained dialogue (Karp et al., 2016). The Campus PRISM Project suggests that these Tier I approaches may ultimately prevent incidents of sexual harm from occurring by providing campus community members with a forum in which to co-create a safer and more respectful culture (Karp, 2017). This was the aim of the Sustained Restorative Dialogue pilot implemented at Victoria University of Wellington to which we now turn.

**The Need for Sustained Dialogue in University Communities: A Personal Account**

As an undergraduate student at Colorado College, I (Lindsey Pointer) joined a student group called Sustained Dialogue. The aim of the group was to recruit students from different backgrounds and perspectives to meet several times over the course of the year to discuss important issues impacting the campus community, with a particular focus on issues related to racial and socio-economic diversity. The Sustained Dialogue process was developed by Harold Saunders, an American diplomat with a background in international peacemaking. In 1999, a group of students at Princeton University began using the process in an effort to improve race relations on campus. Since then, the process has spread to campuses around the world (Sustained Dialogue Institute, 2018).

The repeated gatherings in the Sustained Dialogue process are intended to allow students to build relationships, better understand one another, and develop a network of allies that are committed to community change (Parker, 2006). As Priya Narayan Parker (2006) observes, ‘Sustained Dialogue probes deep into the background and experiences of the individuals in the group, allowing them to understand one another's behaviors and perspectives’ (p. 20). Hearing the personal stories of others often challenges participants’ existing beliefs, ideally leading to a transformation in attitudes, perceptions and outlooks (Steward & Shamsi, 2015).

In their analysis of the Sustained Dialogue process, Philip Stewart and Nissa Shamsi (2015) have noted that the creation of a safe space for the dialogue is essential to its success. They note, ‘It may take considerable time and appropriate conditions for people to feel safe telling such stories, and for others to be ready to “hear” them’ (Stewart & Shamsi, 2015, p. 165). Unless a safe and supportive space for face-to-face dialogue can be created, transformation is unlikely.

While the Sustained Dialogue process was partially successful in establishing this safe space for dialogue, in my experience, it suffered from many of the shortcomings that any loosely-structured discussion will have. The conversation was often dominated by a few voices; outgoing participants who struggled to share the time fairly. Those who were less confident asserting themselves, or who required more time to process internally before speaking, often did not have equal opportunity to contribute to the conversation. Additionally, it was easy for the group to get stuck lamenting a particular aspect of a topic without a distinct structure to move the discussion forward. There is an overarching five-stage process in the Sustained Dialogue, which is meant to provide participants and moderators with a sense of direction and help participants avoid rushing to ‘solutions’ (Stewart & Shamsi, 2015), however, in practice, that sense of structure was often lacking.

Through my experience in Sustained Dialogue, I saw clearly that university communities need a space for meaningful, ongoing dialogue about important issues with an emphasis on cultivating relationships. However, I wondered about the potential of a more clear structure to better facilitate transformation both for the individuals involved and for the wider community culture.

Following university, I became involved in the restorative justice movement. The restorative justice movement began as an alternative process within the criminal justice system. It arose out of a growing awareness that the mainstream justice system often does not meet the needs of the responsible party (or ‘offender’), harmed party (or ‘victim’) or the wider community. Through focusing on violations of law and what punishment the responsible party deserves, the justice system often increases harm and deepens conflict rather than creating an opportunity for healing (Zehr, 2015). Restorative justice, by contrast, sees crime as a violation of people and relationships and focuses specifically on the needs of the individuals involved.

Since the 1970s, restorative justice programs and innovative restorative practices have emerged around the world and have been implemented in schools, workplaces, and other community organizations. One important restorative innovation that has arisen out of this rapid spread is the circle process. The circle is used both reactively to respond to wrongdoing and proactively as a community building tool. Often, the circle is used to create a space for relationship building or to discuss an important community issue. As I worked as a restorative justice and circle facilitator in the justice system, schools, workplaces, and most recently, at Victoria University of Wellington, I began to wonder about the potential to combine the transformative structure of the circle process, the logical progression of the restorative questions, and the extended format of the Sustained Dialogue. What would be the impact of a Sustained *Restorative* Dialogue?

The remainder of this article includes a history and overview of the restorative circle process and a description of the Sustained Restorative Dialogue pilot at Victoria University of Wellington. The outcomes of the pilot are analyzed, suggesting a promising model for sparking larger-scale culture change in university communities.

**The Restorative Circle Process**

The circle process is inspired in part by indigenous cultures around the world. As Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart and Mark Wedge note, ‘The essence of circles isn’t new but tested over millennia in many different cultures’ (2003, p. xiii). They explain, ‘Circles have a universal, enduring quality, because they operate from a few fundamental premises about human beings and our human condition’ (Pranis et al., 2003, p. 9). Among these premises are that every person wants to be connected to others in a good way, everyone shares core values that indicate what connecting in a good way means, and given a space, we can rediscover these core values and our deep-seated desire to be positively connected (Pranis et al., 2003).

The basic structure of the circle process is remarkably simple. Participants are seated in a circle of chairs or on the floor with nothing in between them. Circle keepers or facilitators introduce the process, setting a calm, respectful, and open tone. They explain basic guidelines or ground rules for the process including to listen and speak with respect, honor confidentiality, and only speak when you have the talking piece in hand. The facilitators introduce a talking piece, an object that carries some significance that is explained to the group, engendering respect for the object and the process as a whole. The dialogue then progresses through rounds of questions, with the talking piece being passed to each person in the circle. The facilitators will pose a question or theme for each round and provide summaries at the end of each round in order to help maintain focus (Pranis et al., 2003). The structure and set format of the circle process helps provide a sense of safety for participants and ensures equal voice (Pranis et al., 2003).

The facilitators are full contributing members of the circle along with the participants. As Pranis et al. explain, ‘They don’t try to maintain a detached, observer role, which would be contrary to the values of inclusivity, equality, and sharing. They engage in the Circle process just like everyone else, which includes stating perceptions, expressing emotions, and sharing personal stories’ (2003, p. 92). This full participation helps to create a sense of equality in the circle and also allows the circle to benefit from the collective wisdom of all present. As Pranis explains, ‘Participants are not divided into givers and receivers: everyone is both a giver and a receiver. Circles draw on the life experience and wisdom of all participants to generate new understandings of the problem and new possibilities for solutions’ (2015, p. 6).

The circle process is used both reactively and proactively in communities. Reactively, it provides a space for involved parties to gather after a crime or conflict to discuss the story of what happened, the impact it has had on those present, and what is needed to make things right. Proactively, the circle process is used as a way to bring people together to understand each other, to strengthen community bonds and feelings of connection, and to address important community issues. In both a reactive and proactive capacity, the circle is used in justice systems, neighborhoods, schools, universities, workplaces, and social service organizations (Pranis, 2015).

The impact of the circle process on participants can be profound. Annie O’Shaughnessy asserts that the circle process is itself a mindfulness practice, encouraging participants to slow down, creating ‘a time outside of time’ where they can simply be (2018, p. 144). Kay Pranis and Carolyn Boyes-Watson note that in the circle, ‘participants learn they can be present with themselves and one another in a way that is different from an ordinary meeting or group’ (2015, p. 29). The space established by the circle process has even been described as sacred (Pranis & Boyes-Watson, 2015).

There are many benefits of using the circle process in community. It builds relationships and nurtures a deep sense of connectedness, which helps to break through isolation and loneliness (Pranis et al., 2003). Loneliness, ‘a condition in which an individual perceives himself or herself to be socially isolated even when among other people’ (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018, p. 426) has been called a major public health problem (Murthy, 2017). The experience of loneliness has a significant negative impact on health and well-being (Cacioppo, Capitanio, & Cacioppo, 2014). The circle process helps people to feel more connected to each other and seen and heard by their fellow community members, thus combatting loneliness.

The circle also has a great deal of potential for resolving large scale, systemic issues. This is because the process helps to provide a full picture of an issue by giving voice to the perspectives and experiences of all present. This allows for the circle process to address the deeper causes of crime and conflict (Pranis et al., 2003). In addressing these larger issues, the circle structure also allows for innovative problem solving. As Pranis et al. explain,

When we’re alone and isolated, our view is limited. Instead of seeing many options, we think we have few, if any. Again, relationships put us on a different track. By bringing together diverse perspectives, Circles foster creative problem-solving. They generate alternatives that those in crisis either couldn’t previously imagine or assumed were impossible (2003, p. 221).

These creative solutions for systemic issues are generated in large part through the opportunity to tell stories. As Pranis advises,

Circles are a storytelling process. They use the history and experience of everyone in the Circle to understand the situation and look for a good way forward – not through lecturing or giving advice or telling other what to do but through sharing stories of struggle, pain, joy, despair, and triumph. Personal narratives are the source of insight and wisdom in Circles (2015, p. 40).

The circle structure allows each person equal opportunity to voice their story, background, and perspective. Through these stories, a big picture view of the issue is formed and creative solutions emerge.

In addition to being an attempt to harness these positive impacts of the restorative circle process, the motivation to pilot a Sustained Restorative Dialogue approach also arose as an attempt to address a prominent critique of restorative justice. This critique is that in its focus on making amends at an interpersonal level, restorative justice fails to address larger, structural injustices. As David Dyck explains,

One of the most persistent critiques of the field of restorative justice as it is manifested in the practical activities of community programs around the world is that it still fundamentally fails to address the structural dimensions of criminal conflict. Its critics argue that current restorative programming focuses too much energy on the interpersonal dimensions of crime and ignores the deeper roots of the trouble as found in class, race/ethnicity, and gender-based systemic conflict (Dyck, 2008, p. 527).

This critique challenges the degree to which restorative justice accomplishes transformative justice goals. Transformative justice is concerned with getting to the root cause of an issue, inquiring beyond the immediate situation into ‘what are often unrecognized and unchallenged assumptions and paradigms underlying current economic, political, criminal justice and social arrangements’ (Harris, 2008, p. 559).

Dyck and other critics assert that restorative justice needs to move beyond considering just the immediate crisis and response, to also consider prevention and understanding the root causes of behavior in the responsible party and society at large (Dyck, 2008). Courakis and Gavrielides (2019) argue that the new target for restorative justice policy and practice should be social justice, moving into new project areas including a fairer distribution of social goods and a greater solidarity with marginalized members of society.This more radical vision of restorative justice would consider and address the broader macro causes of conflict (Clamp, 2014).Sullivan and Tifft (2001) assert that this expansion in focus would not be at the expense of interpersonal healing and transformation, rather it would seek to affect social-structural arrangements, while simultaneously helping those whose lives have been affected by interpersonal harm. The Sustained Restorative Dialogue pilot emerged in part as an experiment in the potential of restorative processes to achieve this larger social and structural transformation.

**Case Study: The Sustained Restorative Dialogue for Understanding and Preventing Sexual Harm Pilot**

The Sustained Restorative Dialogue was piloted in a community that has already made a significant commitment to restorative practices. In recent years, Victoria University of Wellington has taken important steps towards becoming a Restorative University. This has involved the use of restorative processes both in a reactive way (as a response to misconduct or incidents of harm) and a proactive way (to build community, enhance belonging and mutual responsibility, and identify shared community norms) (Pointer, 2017). The Victoria University of Wellington Chair in Restorative Justice team has led these efforts.

The Sustained Restorative Dialogue method was designed by the Chair in Restorative Justice team and piloted in July 2018 as a proactive restorative process to hold difficult conversations about important community issues. Using the restorative circle model, the inaugural dialogue explored the issue of sexual harm on campus. It was a “sustained” dialogue in that it was run over four sessions with the same participants. It was a “restorative” dialogue in that the conversation moved in sequential sessions through the main steps of a restorative analysis: What is happening? What are the impacts? What is needed to make things right? The aim of the dialogue was to understand the broader climate that gives rise to sexual harm in the campus setting and beyond, and to explore possible solutions to it. In the wake of the #MeToo movement and given the great deal of energy and motivation to address the issue of sexual harm on campus, the pilot topic was a clear choice.

Before reaching out to students, the Chair in Restorative Justice team met with student counseling, the campus sexual violence prevention network, and the student association leadership team in order to get their input and approval of the pilot. There was initially some nervousness about encouraging dialogue on such a sensitive issue, but reassurance about the safe space generated by the circle process helped to alleviate these worries.

Once approval was received, students from within the Faculty of Law were invited (by email) to participate in the sustained restorative dialogue pilot. Law students were considered to be a particularly appropriate cohort, in part, due to the recent Russell McVeagh scandal,[[2]](#footnote-2) which illuminated the toxic culture that still exists in many corners of the legal profession. The dialogue group was comprised of nine law students (five female, four male), two facilitators, and a researcher, and met for four evening sessions over the course of a week. An optional fifth session was held at the request of the student participants one month later.[[3]](#footnote-3)

## Rationale

Within a broader movement to address sexual harm it is necessary to pay close attention to what is happening in the university setting, where factors such as varying degrees of sex and consent education, a culture of substantial alcohol consumption, and less obvious power imbalances mean dynamics can be more complex than in the workplace. A number of campus initiatives aimed at addressing sexual harm have been implemented at Victoria University of Wellington recently, including the Students' Association’s anonymous #MeToo blog,[[4]](#footnote-4) where students were invited to share details of their sexual violence and harassment experiences. Such initiatives serve as a powerful reminder of the magnitude of the issue and an invaluable way of giving victims of sexual harm a voice. In addition to such initiatives, however, there is a need for dialogue that addresses the culture that engenders harmful behavior, and takes practical steps to attempt to transform it.

A high level of communication is needed in the university setting to establish and promote sexual conduct norms and expectations that are appropriate and consensual, however, in practice there are very few spaces where students are encouraged to have frank and open conversations about what these norms and expectations look like. The Sustained Restorative Dialogue provided a space for students to have an intentional conversation about sexual harm and sexual conduct.

## Overview of Sessions

The first session provided an opportunity for the group to build relationships and establish group norms to guide the circle process over the subsequent sessions. The circle questions invited the group to share a bit about themselves, what drew them to participating in the dialogue process, and what they needed in order for the group to be a safe and supportive space to talk about the issue of sexual harm. After the first session, the facilitators made a visual of the group’s agreed upon guidelines, which was re-visited at each following session.

*Session One (Relationship Building and Norms) Circle Outline:*

* Welcome
* Introduction to the Process
* Introduction to the Restorative Approach and Three Restorative Questions Format
* Ground Rules
* Round 1: Your name and a story connected to your name.
* Round 2: If you could have one item with you at all times (no size constraint), what would it be and why?
* Round 3: What drew you to participating in this group? What do you want to talk about?
* Round 4: What do you need in order for the group to feel like a safe and supportive space to talk about this issue?
* Closing Round: Chance for a final word.

The second session addressed the first restorative question: What is happening? After a couple of relationship-building rounds to establish comfort, the circle questions invited participants to reflect on the messages they received about sex growing up, the state of the community’s culture in relation to sexual harm, and what aspects of the culture are preventing healthy sexual relationships. The circle participants stayed for nearly an hour after the culmination of the circle, continuing the discussion. The facilitators noted that even after the circle structure was suspended, participants continued to speak one at a time, without interruption, and with relatively equal voice. There seemed to be a lasting impact of the circle on the nature of the dialogue.

*Session Two (What is Happening?) Circle Outline:*

* Welcome back
* Round 1: Where are you from and what is your favorite thing about where you are from?
* Round 2: If you could live in the world of a book or movie, what book/movie would it be and why?
* Ground Rules and re-visit guidelines set during session one (share visual)
* Today we will be asking the first restorative question: What is happening?
* Round 3: What messages (from parents, teachers, etc.) did you receive about sex growing up?
* Round 4: Looking around at the state of the community culture in regards to sexual relationships, what are some things you think people are just not getting?
* Round 5: What is preventing healthy sexual relationships (this might go beyond just individual lack of understanding)?
* Round 6: What are you taking away from today?

The third session addressed the second restorative question: Who is affected and how? After reflecting on their days and what had stuck with them since the last session, participants were invited to reflect on who is affected by the issue of sexual harm and how they have been personally impacted. The final round offered an opportunity for participants to reflect on the circle. Notably, in round two, when participants were asked to talk about what had stuck with them since the last session, most talked about the experience of the circle, rather than the specific content. It was not what was said, but rather how it was discussed and the nature of the circle dialogue that had stuck with the students.

*Session Three (Who is affected and how?) Circle Outline:*

* Welcome back
* Round 1: Share a rose and a thorn from your day. Something that was great and something that was not so good.
* Round 2: What is something that has stuck with you since the last circle?
* Last session we talked about what is happening. Today we will be talking about impacts. This is the second restorative questions: Who is affected and how?
* Ground Rules and re-visit guidelines set during session one (share visual)
* Round 3: Who is affected and how?
* Round 4: What is the impact on you?
* Round 5: What are you taking away with you from today?

The fourth session addressed the third and final restorative question: What is needed to make things right? The circle questions invited participants to reflect on the previous sessions, and then brainstorm together what is needed to make things right in their community, including what they as individuals could do, and what the group as a whole could do. The students expressed interest in the potential of restorative justice to meaningfully address issues of sexual harm and a desire to be proponents for restorative justice on campus and in their future law careers. Students shared a desire for the conversation to continue and for others on campus to have the opportunity to participate in a Sustained Restorative Dialogue. The group also made a plan for an optional fifth meeting to discuss next steps more specifically.

*Session Four (What is needed to make things right?) Circle Outline:*

* Welcome back
* Round 1: What have your reflected on since last session?
* Today we are diving into the final restorative questions: What is needed to make things right?
* Ground Rules and re-visit guidelines set during session one (share visual)
* Round 2: First, we want to talk about what we are working towards. Drawing on your own history, ideals, culture, what is the basis of a healthy sexual relationship and a healthy sexual culture?
* Round 3: What is needed to make things right (big picture)?
* Round 4: What can you as an individual do?
* Round 5: What can we (as a group) do?
* Round 6: Chance for a final word.

**Outcomes and Findings**

The pilot produced a number of positive outcomes, with encouraging implications for future Sustained Restorative Dialogues and the implementation of the model at Victoria University of Wellington, and further afield. In the following section we provide an overview of participant feedback, before evaluating the outcomes of the process for individuals and the group as a collective.

## Participant Feedback

Immediately following session four, the circle participants were sent an online feedback form in order to gain impressions of the process while still fresh in their minds. All of the participants indicated they were satisfied with the process, with eight of the nine (excluding the two facilitators and the researcher) selecting the ‘very satisfied’ option. Furthermore, all participants said they would both recommend the Sustained Restorative Dialogue to others, and that they would like to see it offered to others on campus. When asked to elaborate on their answers, the majority of participants’ responses focused on the circle process as a valuable tool for communication, and how the experience changed the way they think about sexual harm.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In addition to the online feedback forms, eight of the nine participants took part in a follow-up interview approximately three months after the main dialogue sessions had taken place. These interviews provided invaluable information as to how the members of the circle viewed the dialogue retrospectively, and what aspects of the experience had continued to have an impact. This was of particular salience when evaluating the project in terms of its potential to enhance people’s understanding and awareness of the issue (i.e. a necessary prerequisite for a shift in the culture), and proved to be a source of rich insight into the outcomes of the Sustained Restorative Dialogue pilot.

## Individual Outcomes

An understandable concern is that the ardent sentiments the participants reported feeling during and immediately after the dialogue might be temporary, due to the somewhat intense nature of both the subject matter and the process itself. However, the following excerpts taken from two of the male participants’[[6]](#footnote-6) interviews suggest that the process can have significant effects on the way people view sexual harm, even after a period of time has elapsed.

Excerpt 1

1. Samuel: it's definitely had an impact on the way I sort of look at 2. the issue and consider it… like you can look at sexual 3. violence in isolation and think it's something that you can 4. sort of draw a line around but it's really not 5. it's like kind of pervasive in the culture

6. and I'm seeing way more manifestations of that now

7. …like I'm seeing patterns and it's just really I suppose

8. made me aware of how huge, complex, and pervasive the 9. issue is and I think that that was a pretty unique way of 10. getting insight into that

Excerpt 2

1. Cameron: if like I read a news article or something on an issue that's

2. affecting people but doesn't necessarily affect me

3. I'm more likely to kind of have a think about it

4. and try think about like

5. putting myself in their shoes…

6. I guess I kind of take a bit of a step back now

7. and just try think about it a bit more

8. which I don't think I would've done as much

9. before we did those sessions…

10. just hearing kind of even just like the stories and

11. seeing all the emotion and stuff and like

12. you know people sharing

13 and I guess people that I didn't know as well

14. just like complete strangers some of them

15. so like that was quite powerful

16. and that definitely has had a lasting impact

As the above excerpts indicate, aspects of the process were continuing to have an impact after several months, and crucially, have enhanced some of the participants’ perceptions of sexual harm and the culture that surrounds it. In Samuel’s comment, *I'm seeing way more manifestations of that now…like I’m seeing patterns* (lines 6-7),we can see a heightened awareness of the issue and how his perception has shifted from sexual harm being *something that you can sort of draw a line around* (lines 3-4), to an issue that is *huge, complex, and pervasive* (line 8). It seems clear that such a shift is motivated by taking part in the dialogue (as opposed to, for example, reading statistics on sexual violence), as Samuel remarks, *I think that that was a pretty unique way of getting insight into that* (lines 9-10).

In Excerpt 2, we see evidence of Cameron consciously evaluating how the position he takes in relation to sexual harm has changed since participating in the dialogue. Comments such as *I'm more likely to kind of have a think about it* (line 3), and *putting myself in their shoes* (line 5), show that there has been a shift in the way Cameron considers and responds to the issue. Like Samuel, he makes reference to the dialogue group being the catalyst for such a shift (*I don't think I would've done as much before we did those sessions*, lines 8-9), and he makes explicit those parts of the process that motivated it (*seeing all the emotion and stuff; you know people sharing*, lines 11-12).

Cameron’s reflections here refer to the fact that several women in the group expressed that they had been sexually harmed, and there is some compelling indications (as seen in Excerpt 1 and 2 above) that listening to people share their experiences can be a powerful way to gain a deeper understanding of the realities of the problem, or as one participant posed it, ‘putting a face to that number.’ This concept of putting a face to the statistics is exemplified in the following excerpt taken from the follow-up interview with one of the female participants, Bianca.

Excerpt 3

1. Bianca: it has such a profound impact on people to be able to

2. humanize something like that because

3. people you know like they- I know um I was-

4. I'm quite close friends with one of the guys

5. who actually in the group and um

6. afterwards we did kind of have a conversation about it

7. and he was like

8. I look at you and you're not exactly

9. like what you are doesn't-

10. like it doesn't make sense in his head cause he was like

11. how can you still be this person

12. who's doing all these things and yet- you know?

13. and so that was quite a powerful moment

14. I think for me is that it really did ((pause)) push him

15. to kind of be like oh shit this is a thing that happens and 16. these are these strong women who are around me

17. and this is- you know?

18. Amy: mm so not the sort of victim stereotype kind of thing?

19. Bianca: yeah exactly like I do think it's um it's powerful for not 20. only like victim but it's also powerful for the perception of 21. the victim

As Bianca states, *it has such a profound impact on people to be able to humanize something like that* (lines 1-2). Rather than this being speculation on Bianca’s part, it seems evident that putting a face(s) to the experience of sexual harm has had an impact on the way it is perceived, for her friend in the group at least. That is, it has illuminated that the effects of sexual harm are pervasive, and those that have been affected do not necessarily fit into a stereotypical perception of ‘victim,’ (*how can you still be this person who's doing all these things and yet-*, lines 11-12; *these strong women who are around me*, line 16). Bianca’s use of the phrase *push him* (line 14) suggests that, in her view, being able to link the experience of sexual harm to a person he perceives as strong or successful resulted in her friend having to actively re-evaluate his understanding of the issue.

A further point of interest that can be observed in this excerpt is the reference Bianca makes to the process being ‘powerful’ for victims of sexual harm (line 19-20). This became especially notable in the data collected from session four and the post-dialogue interviews, and will be discussed below.

An observation that was repeatedly made by participants was how atypical simply having a conversation about sexual harm was. Indeed, this was a sentiment that was echoed by nearly all the members of the circle at one stage or another, ‘this is a conversation that is never had.’ This seemed particularly salient for the males in the group, who expressed it was rarely discussed among their male peer groups.

Several of the group members reported that after taking part in the dialogue they felt more motivated to have these sorts of conversations with others outside of the circle, which suggests that creating a space to have a discussion about sexual harm (and other topics of emotional impact) can encourage dialogue beyond the scope of the initial circle participants. Evidence of this can be seen in the excerpt that follows, taken from the interview with another female participant, Jade.

Excerpt 4

1. Jade: I think I have had more conversations

2. like along those lines since then and yeah

3. I definitely think it's had a positive impact

4. cause I think once you've had the conversation

5. once or a few times and with a number of different people

6. it makes you feel more comfortable about it…

7. I know that I definitely started having conversations with 8. like my family and stuff since the restorative justice thing

9. I talked to my mum about my experience for the first time

10. and I don't think I would've done that without that

11. cause I hadn't really talked to anyone about it before then

Here we can see the clear trajectory of one effect of the process on Jade, that is, since participating in the dialogue group, she has had more conversations about the topic (line 1, 7), making her feel more comfortable discussing it (line 6), which ultimately resulted in a significant outcome, *I talked to my mum about my experience for the first time* (line 9). Again (as we saw with Samuel and Cameron in Excerpt 1 and 2), Jade makes an explicit reference to the process as the impetus for the change that has taken place, *I don't think I would've done that without that* (line 10). As one of the key goals of the Sustained Restorative Dialogue is to promote communication around difficult topics such as sexual harm, these initial indications that the practice can motivate discussion are extremely encouraging.

Although not specifically intended in the design of the Sustained Restorative Dialogue, there is some compelling evidence to suggest that the process can be of benefit to those within the circle who have experienced harm. In session three (prompted by the question *how have you been impacted?*) several of the female participants shared their experiences of sexual assault. In both session four (Excerpt 5) and the follow-up interviews (Excerpt 6 and 7), the women reflected on the impact that sharing their experiences (and listening to others’) had had on them.

Excerpt 5

1. Kala: I think I just really appreciated everyone

2. you know sharing their stories

3. and that sort of made me feel like safe and comfortable

4. to share my experience

5. and so I sort of left ((pause)) I can't find the right word 6. but in ways I also felt- left feeling liberated

Excerpt 6

1. Gina: it just feels really good to just get it off your chest

2. and like you're not saying it to someone who's going to 3. say anything shitty like but you did this or anything

4. it's just like putting it out there and now other people

5. know and yeah don't have to answer to it

6. you don't have to explain yourself…you don't have to like 7. ((laughs)) analyze it ((laughs))

8. you just like get it off your chest

Both Kala (*left feeling liberated*, line 6) and Gina (*get it off your chest*, line 1, 8) convey a sense of liberation in sharing their experiences and hearing the experiences of others’. Kala communicates how people telling their own stories made her feel *safe and comfortable* (line 3) to share her own, while Gina implies that the group was a safe place to speak without judgment (*you're not saying it to someone who's going to say anything shitty*, lines 2-3). Arguably, both Kala and Gina are expressing that speaking about (and listening to) experiences of harm had a positive impact on them, which was largely due to the safe and supportive atmosphere the group had created. Evidence of this can be observed in a further excerpt taken from the follow-up interview with Bianca.

Excerpt 7

1. Bianca: I think the structure of the circle and what we did inside

2. of it is that we built that rapport anyway

3. like we built that connection

4. cause I came into it being like oh nah if I got asked that I 5. wouldn't say anything…but all of a sudden it was just like

6. this domino effect of people being like

7. yeah me too kind of thing

8. and that in of itself I think was quite a big moment for me

9. to be like oh it's safe it's okay

10. like um I don't know these people from a bar of soap 11. but that doesn't necessarily matter because they're here

12. they're listening

13 they're obviously invested in the same sort of things

In this excerpt Bianca echoes Kala’s feeling of safety (*oh it's safe it's okay*, line 9) brought about by the sharing of stories and the way in which the group had *built that rapport* (line 2) and *built that connection* (line 3). Interestingly, Bianca expresses that she had considered the possibility of being asked about her experiences before taking part and felt that she would not be comfortable doing so (*I came into it being like oh nah if I got asked that I wouldn't say anything*, lines 4-5), suggesting that the group was able to build (for her at least) an unexpected level of connection and community.

While the process is designed to be inclusive of all students regardless of their experiences, it may be the case that people who have been affected by sexual harm are more likely to take part, resulting in many of the participants of the circle having personal experiences of harm, as was the case in the pilot group. As the above excerpts suggest, the use of Sustained Restorative Dialogue has the potential to be a helpful tool for individuals within the circle who have been directly impacted by sexual assault or harassment by offering a safe space to both share and listen to others. Furthermore, for those members of the circle that had not been harmed, hearing the experiences of those that had produced significant outcomes in terms of heightened awareness and understanding of, and engagement with, the issue. This suggests that having a combination of people with and without personal experience of sexual harm (as is likely to be the case in many mixed groups, based on sexual violence statistics and anecdotal evidence) can result in an effective dialogue group, where a diverse range of perspectives can contribute to producing practical strategies aimed at social change.

## Group Outcomes

Positive evaluations from participants and the capacity for individuals to benefit from the process are excellent outcomes, however, the Sustained Restorative Dialogue also has the potential to cultivate something that extends beyond the individual. Due, in likelihood, both to the nature of the circle process and the highly emotive topic, the group developed a sense of community, within which ideas and possible actions were jointly constructed.

Central to a wider study, of which this Sustained Restorative Dialogue is the focus, is the theme of agency; a concept Ahearn (2001, p. 112) has provisionally defined as ‘the socioculturally mediated capacity to act.’ Agency is currently of interest in a diverse range of scholarly areas, and is an important consideration in research that examines discourse around sexual harm. Speech data taken from the dialogue sessions reveals evidence of the group co-constructing an action or idea, which is expanded or modified as it moves around the circle. This construction can be seen as a kind of group agency, that is, a way of conceptualizing agency as collaborative and interactive (Zidjaly, 2009). A potent example of this is demonstrated in session four, as the group discussed the notion of ‘calling out’ people whose speech or actions are deemed inappropriate.

Excerpt 8

Context: Session 4: What is needed to make things right? Round 4: What can you as an individual do?

1. Mia: I think calling out culture is something that

2. we're working on and improving

3. and I think we need to keep doing that um ((pause)) yeah

4. ah instead of like laughing at something or letting it slide

5. Kala: I feel like just building on what you said

6. calling out um people when these sorts of things happen

7. it's really easy for people to put out statements

8. saying oh we're working on fixing that

9. but actually what does that mean in practical terms

10. Aaron: people might not of taken any wrong actions yet

11. but they have wrong ideas

12. those ideas need to be not only called out but corrected

13. and I think corrected in a way that you're educating

14. not trying to demonize those ideas

15. Gina: in terms of calling people out I think that's really really 16. important…because I think it's you know

17. too hard to create massive change immediately

18. and it has to come from the ground up

19. but I think that being it like calling people out

20. or maybe it shouldn't even be called calling people out

21. but you know calling people up I don't know

22. in a way that isn't um ostracizing or like blaming them…

23. so I think yeah calling people out

24. in a more constructive way

25. Rio: I think one thing that we all need to be conscious of

26. or like brave enough to do is um

27. be able to call these sorts of things out irregardless of 28. wherever you sit among the hierarchies of your 29. workplace…

28. and understanding that there can be fears for personal 29. repercussions if you call um your boss out for a 30. misogynistic comment or something like that

Mia introduces the concept of calling out as an action that individuals can take, which needs to be continued and improved. Kala builds on Mia’s notion of calling out by extending it beyond individual action to the actions of organizations or institutions (*it's really easy for people to put out statements*, line 7), i.e. those with the tendency for policy to take precedence over practical responses. Aaron then contributes by agreeing that calling out is necessary but it’s not sufficient, *not only called out but corrected* (line 12), and corrected in the right way (*in a way that you're educating not trying to demonize*, lines 13-14). Gina builds on Aaron’s point (*in a way that isn't ostracizing or like blaming them… calling people out in a more constructive way*, lines 23-24), and questions the term ‘calling out’ (*maybe it shouldn't even be called calling people out*, line 20), offering a more inclusive option (*calling people up*, line 21). Finally, Rio agrees that calling people out is the right action to take, yet makes the point that doing so can be challenging and problematic in certain situations (*personal repercussions if you call um your boss out for a misogynistic comment*, lines 28-30).

By jointly establishing a concept of calling out that aims to be constructive, the circle participants are exercising a collective agency and a sense of accountability, i.e. they are constructing a pro-social action that can be taken by them and others to respond to inappropriate speech or acts. While it is possible that a similar outcome could be achieved in a less structured discussion, it is arguably the circle format itself that engenders this particular dynamic. Group members must first listen, and then have the opportunity to revise or expand on what has been said, and the passing on of something (both physically and verbally) results in the conversation becoming layered. That is, the moving around the circle allows an idea to be amplified and transformed.

This sense of a shared commitment to, and construction of, pro-social action was culminated in the additional fifth session of the dialogue, which focused on how the university community could actively address some of the key issues that contribute to sexual harm and the culture that exists around it. The group produced a number of tangible, practical recommendations that centered around an increase in relatable consent education, resources and people to reach out to, and opportunities for experiences akin to the dialogue group.[[7]](#footnote-7) These recommendations were then sent to the university’s Sexual Violence Prevention Group, who expressed that some of the suggestions echoed findings from research on effective sexual violence prevention strategies at universities overseas.

## Further Considerations

As the Sustained Restorative Dialogue was a pilot, it would be necessary to analyze future groups in order to determine whether the aforementioned outcomes are indeed typical of the process. However, some important ideological themes were repeatedly raised by participants that can be viewed as representative of both their peer group and our wider societal norms. Arguably the most noteworthy of these was the fact that talking about sexual harm (and in some cases sex in general) is still very much taboo in many areas of our society. As mentioned above, there was frequent reference to how anomalous it was to discuss sexual conduct (both positive and negative) and the culture that surrounds it. When participants were asked what messages they received about sex in their younger lives, their responses revealed that discussing it with parents was uncommon, and only two people in the group felt that their sexual education at school had been sufficient. In an age where exposure to online pornography is a normative experience for young people (Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008), this reported lack of open and candid communication around sex is hugely problematic, as both pornography and inadequate sex education can reinforce the types of hegemonic masculinity ideologies that give rise to sexual harm (Grose, Grabe, & Kohfeldt, 2014; Phipps, 2008; Sun, Bridges, Johnson, & Ezzell, 2016).

Using the Sustained Restorative Dialogue model to address sexual harm, therefore, can be viewed as a strategy to counter the lack of discussion and the taboo that still exists around sexual conduct. This would be particularly useful for first year students entering university and student halls, where some people may have had little opportunity to engage in open and honest conversation about sex, consent, and the culture as a whole.

**Conclusion**

The events of the past year have illuminated, both globally and locally, the unequivocal need for more dialogue, and action, around sexual harm. The Sustained Restorative Dialogue model has huge potential for addressing sexually harmful behavior, and (in all likelihood) other issues that have emotional impact in the campus community. The model provides a structure for breaking down a complex issue and a space to explore practical ways to strive for a healthier culture, both on campus and in wider society. The process yielded a number of positive outcomes both for participants and in terms of the overarching goal of the dialogue, suggesting the implementation of the model in universities could contribute to transforming the climate that gives rise to sexual harm.

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2. https://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/105261284/russell-mcveagh-the-scandal-the-fallout-the-eventual-apology [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The fifth session included three law students (two male, one female), the two facilitators, and the researcher, as other participants had prior commitments. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.metoostudents.org.nz/ The blog has had 75 submissions to date (10/31/18). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a detailed summary of feedback please see: https://lindseypointer.com/2018/08/25/sustained-restorative-dialogue-understanding-and-preventing-sexual-harm-on-campus/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All participant names have been pseudonymized. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A comprehensive account of the recommendations for VUW can be found here: https://lindseypointer.com/2018/08/25/sustained-restorative-dialogue-understanding-and-preventing-sexual-harm-on-campus/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)