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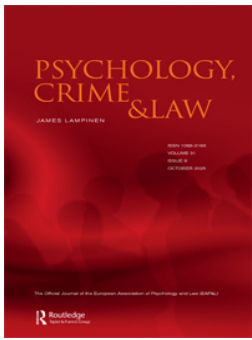
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Asking the offender ‘why’? Victim-survivor views and experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated victim-survivors’ motivation to ask offenders ‘why?’ and the perceived effects of doing so, through interviews with 40 people affected by a range of crimes. Participants reported that uncertainty about the offender’s character and self-blame were triggers for wanting to ask why. Uncertainty arose when participants thought the offender might be remorseful or had categorised them as somewhat of a ‘good’ person, as these perceptions conflicted with a potential account of a ‘bad’ character as the sole cause of the offence. Most of the participants opted to communicate with the offender through a restorative justice process, and where possible they were interviewed both before and after the process. Participants selectively incorporated offenders’ explanations (or lack thereof) into their own accounts and tended to develop more extreme views of the offender as either a good character with somewhat understandable reasons for their behaviour, or as a bad character. For many, this reasoning process was further linked to increased feelings of (1) certainty, (2) self-worth and (3) safety. Potential tensions between these perceived effects are discussed, as well as some implications for theory and practice.

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Asking ‘why?’ is a common human response to events that are intentional and negative (Malle & Knobe, 1997; Wong & Weiner, 1981). Moreover, victimisation challenges assumptions that the world is just or benevolent (Lerner, 1980), or that the victim¹ is a person of worth (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). When these beliefs are challenged, victims actively strive to make the event meaningful by thinking about its causes (Park, 2010). Thus victims – much like forensic psychologists and criminologists – commonly want to understand the motivation of the offender and the reason they were targeted; they often want to ask ‘why?’ or ‘why me?’ or both.

While many victims wrangle with this question of why on their own (Maguire, 1980), some take an empirical approach and ask the offender. Restorative justice processes, which enable communication between victims and offenders, can be the venue for

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victims to ask such questions.² Borton's (2009) study found that 24% of victims who wanted to communicate with the offender mentioned wanting to ask why the crime happened, and many other studies cite victims with this motivation (for just a few examples see Umbreit & Coates, 1992; Wemmers & Canuto, 2002). Researchers have therefore hypothesised that asking why leads to some of the known benefits of restorative justice processes for victims, such as changing perceptions of the offender or of themselves (Shapland et al., 2011), including seeing the offender as less of a monster or less responsible for the offence than they thought (Birkbeck & Smith, 2022; Starbuck, 2016; Walters, 2015), discovering they were not intentionally targeted (Sherman et al., 2005), reducing self-blame (Strang et al., 2006) or increasing confidence (Wemmers et al., 2022). Many have theorised about the mechanisms by which such individual benefits occur for victims, or have attempted to develop comprehensive theories of change (e.g. Bolitho, 2017; Bolívar, 2019; Strang et al., 2006; Suzuki, 2023). However, we do not yet understand the specific benefits of asking why. While the benefits listed above certainly *could* result from asking why, they may derive primarily from other aspects of the restorative justice process.

Even studies which do document the role of asking why in restorative justice processes tend to only superficially discuss the nature of the answers that victims receive and their subsequent thought processes. A systematic review found five (of 35) studies showing that communication with the offender can help answer victims' question of 'why me?' (Nascimento et al., 2022). Some authors report that an important factor in victims' satisfaction with the process was finding out 'why they did it', but with little detail about how this information helped (Armstrong, 2012). Even more vaguely, some authors report victim satisfaction with getting 'answers to their questions' (Boriboonthana & Sangbuan-gamlum, 2013; Murhula & Tolla, 2021). Strang's studies most explicitly asked victims if they felt better about the question of 'why me?' after communication with the offender (Strang, 2002; Strang et al., 2006). For example, one person said the offender's explanation made her realise she had 'not been targeted' (Strang et al., 2006). However, no detail is provided about the content of the offender's explanation, a crucial missing detail given that the victim had in a literal sense been 'targeted'. Halsey et al. (2015) noted that some offenders find it difficult to provide an explanation, and that some victims dismiss explanations as mere excuses. However, Halsey and colleagues do not describe what victims say about the difference between an explanation and an excuse, nor do they present in any detail the contents of the explanations received.

Aim of this study

Asking why and receiving an explanation from the offender appear to sometimes be beneficial for victims. However, the extant literature provides little detail about this process, a gap this study aims to fill by asking two overarching questions: (1) What are victims' motivations for asking the offender why? and (2) What are the perceived effects of asking why on victims' satisfaction and wellbeing?

I approach these questions through the lens of several theories. First, some previous work implies that victims seek to ask why and benefit from doing so because they receive one of a finite list of *specific explanations* from the offender. For example, victims appear to benefit from learning that they were chosen at random (Sherman et

al., 2005), or learning that the cause of the offence is situational rather than located internally to the offender, in other words that the offender is 'not a monster' (Birkbeck & Smith, 2022; Starbuck, 2016; Walters, 2015). Second, in accordance with *procedural justice theory*, victims may benefit primarily from asking why and being listened to with respect, independently of the content of the offender's explanation. This would be congruent with evidence that victim satisfaction and agency often derive from experiencing procedural justice in restorative interventions (voice, neutrality, respect and trust; Barnes et al., 2015; Miller & Hefner, 2015; Tyler, 2006). Thirdly, in accordance with *motivated reasoning theory*, victims may benefit from asking why because it enables them to construct accounts for the offence that align with their existing desires and goals (Kunda, 1990). For example participants may be motivated to achieve 'nondirectional' goals such as accuracy (Kruglanski & Klar, 1987), certainty (Visser et al., 2003) or the ability to justify their reasoning to others (Mercier & Sperber, 2013). Victims may also be motivated by 'directional' goals to construct accounts that provide a sense of security or belonging (Leeper, 2014), for example.

In addition to analysing the data through the lens of specific explanation theories, procedural justice theory and motivated reasoning theory, I also draw on two theories that allow analysis of victims' perceptions of the offenders in more depth. First, the social cognition literature distinguishes character judgements made on the basis of morality (or warmth), from character judgements based on perceptions of agency or competence (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske et al., 2002). Second, I explore victims' changing attributions using Malle's typology of explanations – or what he calls 'folk explanations' (Malle, 2001). The typology suggests that lay people³ tend to use three types of explanation for intentional actions, depending on the context and what they are trying to explain. The proposed three categories of cause to which we attribute actions are: the actor's immediate motive or rationale – what Malle calls mental state reasons (R); factors that combine to make the act more likely – called enabling factors (EF); and explanations for how the offender became the kind of person who would commit such an act – called the causal history of reasons (CHR).⁴

Methodology

This study explores victims' expectations and experiences of asking why through qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. Participants were interviewed either before or after a restorative intervention in which they at least considered communication with the offender, or at both time points where possible. This enabled some observation of the change in participants' reasoning between two time points, and enabled analysis of participants' motivation for taking part to be based on pre-intervention interviews rather than requiring people to retrospectively reflect on how they had felt beforehand. Not all participants were interviewed at both time points, so the claim that the study is longitudinal should not be overstated, but 16 people were interviewed both before and after the restorative intervention. Ten people were interviewed only beforehand (Time 1, henceforth labelled T1), and 14 people were interviewed only afterwards (Time 2, henceforth T2).

This study is part of a larger mixed-methods research project, whose other findings are discussed elsewhere (Batchelor, 2023a, 2023c, 2023b). Victims were invited to be

interviewed on the basis that the aim was to understand the psychological changes expected and experienced by victims who communicate with offenders. Participants were asked broad questions at both time points such as 'In what ways has the crime affected you?' At T1 participants were asked about their desire to communicate with the offender, for example 'How would you describe your expectations of the process?' At T2, they were also asked about the perceived effects of the restorative justice process, and the extent to which it had met any expectations they mentioned at T1. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed using the data analysis software NVivo.

The study was approved in advance by Oxford University Medical Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Ref R45251/RE001), and a great deal of consideration was given to conducting the study in an ethical manner appropriate for a vulnerable, traumatised sample. As interviewer and author, I drew on my training and previous experience both interviewing and supporting people affected by a range of offences. Applying trauma-informed principles of care, an approach increasingly recognised and labelled as trauma-informed research (Campbell et al., 2019), I prioritised responding with empathy and without judgement during the interviews, as well as allowing participants as much choice and control over the process as possible. Among other measures, procedures were put in place to ensure participants knew the research was independent from the service provision, and that as well as providing initial written consent, participants expressed ongoing and informed consent at all stages. Several interviewees commented that they had felt it useful to talk about their experience with someone external to the service-providers.

Recruitment and data collection

Two of the three restorative justice organisations I approached agreed to participate. A youth offending service agreed to participate but only referred one participant for the study, the rest of the participants were recruited through a charity delivering restorative justice services with adult offenders, covering one police force area in South-East England. The restorative justice service could be accessed by any offenders and victims in the geographical area, as it received funding from a variety of sources. Of the cases in the current study, the process was initiated by victims in approximately three-quarters of the cases. The other cases were pre-selected by a professional, or initiated by the offender, and tended to have been referred into the service by probation or police officers. Facilitators used their discretion when inviting victims to participate in the current study, and unfortunately no records were kept of the number of service-users who were not invited or declined. No financial incentives were offered.

In total, 57 people gave the facilitators verbal consent to participate in the research. Of these, 17 changed their minds or did not respond to contact. The 40 participants were provided with information about the study, and they gave written consent to participate before being interviewed. The final sample size resulted not from monitoring saturation but from collecting the maximum amount of data in the allotted timescale: April 2016–Sep 2018. A sample of 40 participants is considered relatively large for studies analysing qualitative data (Ahmed, 2025), and the consistency and high prevalence of the identified subthemes across the reasonably heterogenous group confirmed that it was sufficient for

the purposes of this research. The interviews lasted on average 55 minutes, ranging between 15 minutes and two hours. Most were conducted in person, eight were conducted by telephone.

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 40 direct and indirect victims of crime, aged between 16 and 73, with a mean age of 42 years. Two participants identified as Asian British, two as Black British and the rest as White (36). Most of the participants identified as women (34 cisgender), six identified as men (5 cisgender and 1 transgender). The 40 participants were either the direct victim (35), bereaved by homicide (2) or indirectly affected by the crime (3 mothers of the direct victim, interviewed together with their children). Just under half of the participants (19) had been affected by sexual offences, ranging from a single incident of voyeurism to sustained childhood abuse. The others were affected by burglary and theft (8), physical assault (8), harassment (1), slavery (1), fraud (1), manslaughter and murder (2). Most of the victims knew the offender well (25), the rest said the offender was an acquaintance (6) or stranger (9). All the crimes had been reported to the police except one (Faye), seven offenders had received a caution or community sentence, the other 28 offenders had served or were serving custodial sentences with a mean duration of approximately 6.5 years. The research took place between 5 months and over 40 years after the offence; with approximately a quarter of the offences having taken place in the past year, just over half having taken place within the past 3 years, three-quarters having taken place within the past 9 years and the final quarter having taken place 10 or more years prior to the interviews.

All participants had at least considered communicating with the offender. The extent of the communication that occurred ranged from none (e.g. in one case the participant only had a conversation with the facilitator about the possibility of communication with the offender) to multiple meetings between the victim and offender. Further details of each case and the extent of their communication with the offender can be found in the supplementary materials.

Analysis

The current study is exploratory, and intentionally draws on interviews with victims who have experienced a range of crime types and a range of restorative interventions. With such a sample, the aim is to explore the range of victim views, not to quantify relationships between variables or compare subgroups. Rather as Maruna notes, 'qualitative research is best suited for exploring similarity, not for establishing systematic differences' (Maruna, 2001; drawing on Ragin, 1994). Accordingly, the current study records similarities across victims' descriptions of their motivation to ask why, and identifies clusters of perceived effects. Where there is similarity between victims whose experience differs so vastly, this is an *indication* that this aspect of their experience might be important to other victims too. It of course does not make the sample representative or allow us to generalise, but it is a firm foundation for filling in at least some of the important gaps in our knowledge about the process of asking why and victims' perceptions of the effects of doing so.

To analyse the data collected for the larger project, I first coded the transcriptions and identified themes according to the six steps of thematic analysis outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in line with my dual goals of assessing whether the data supported existing theories, and building new theory where relevant. During this process, I noted that participants frequently described their thoughts and questions about why the offence had occurred, thus what Braun and Clarke call 'initial codes' began to coalesce into a single theme. For the purposes of the current study, I reviewed the data to check I had collated all excerpts relevant to participant attributions about the cause of the offence. I then repeated the six-step process for only the data gathered under this overarching theme. I primarily took what Braun and Clarke refer to as 'reflexive' thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021), developing codes into themes according to my interpretation of participants' subjective experiences and the importance they assigned to them. I also investigated whether the theories mentioned in the introduction were relevant to participants' experiences: i.e. specific explanation theories, procedural justice theory and motivated reasoning theory. I used two additional theories to aid in clarifying and organising the findings: the 'big two' of agency and morality, and 'folk explanations' of intentional actions. I chose not to observe the victim-offender meetings to enable participants to freely report on their experiences from their own perspective.

Results

The first part of this results section presents participants' motivation to ask why, as they described in interviews at T1. The second part presents participants' reflections on the effects of asking why, drawing primarily on interviews at T2. The second part focuses initially on participants' descriptions of how asking why affected their perceptions of the offender, then on how asking why was related to their views of themselves and their own wellbeing. Extended extracts from each participant are available in the online supplementary materials, to provide context for the short quotations presented here.

1. Why ask why?

When considering motivation to ask why as discussed at T1, most participants indicated that they wanted to ask why because they felt uncertain about the offender's character, and they were hoping for a sense of certainty. Some suggested that they felt (partially) to blame for the offence and they hoped that asking why would reduce their sense of self-blame. A few people who wished to communicate with the offender did not specifically want to ask why, and their views are considered briefly at the end of this section along with those who chose not to communicate with the offender at all.

To resolve uncertainty about the offender's character

All the participants who wanted to ask why expressed at least some desire to resolve uncertainty about the offender's character. Participants displayed uncertainty when the seemingly logical inference that the offender must be morally 'bad' (because they committed a crime) conflicted with any reason they had to believe that the offender might be somewhat 'good'. There were two primary circumstances that cast doubt on an

account of the crime as caused solely by a 'bad' offender: (1) when the participant had observed at least some good in the offender's character during a relationship prior to the offence; and (2) when the participant had been told the offender was remorseful.

Many of the participants expressed uncertainty about the offender's character because their prior relationship suggested the offender was not entirely a 'bad' person. Sadie, whose father raped her sister and mother, had also experienced him as a somewhat caring father.

I'm kind of thinking ... who even is he? Why did he do this? And why does he have to be gone? I can't hate him, so it's very difficult.

Sam, who was sexually abused by her stepfather, and described him unflinchingly as a 'born paedophile', nevertheless also described her uncertainty in similar terms:

It's also hard for me because he was my dad for so long. You know, it's a Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde situation. One hand you've got what he is, on the other hand you've got the father figure. It's very hard.

Some participants who had been in a romantic relationship with the offender said they had previously loved and trusted them (Marie, Naomi, Willow, Emma, Lisa). Naomi, whose boyfriend distributed indecent images of her, said, 'From what I know of him before he did it, I would have said he's kind, generous and would look out for people. But now I'm not sure.'

Even when the relationship with the offender had been less intimate (Rose, Kaitlyn) or very distant (Dorothy), some participants still questioned how someone they knew could have committed such a morally bad deed. Rose, who was sexually assaulted at knife point by a client she had worked with for some time, wondered about the offender's intentions because the act was at odds with the person she had known previously. She suggested that her previous view of him as a good person may have been correct if he did not intend to harm her, saying he may have thought that 'I was strong enough to live with what he did to me'. However, she conveyed this explanation did not resolve her ambivalence about his character because he was wrong, saying, 'if he thought that I would come away unscathed, forget it mate.' Dorothy had been told that her son knew his murderers prior to the offence. She said, 'I cannot say at any point, even through the trial, that I felt, those people are wicked'. She was nevertheless confused by the incompatibility of her son's injuries and the police description of the offence as a 'robbery gone wrong', and as a result said one motivation for meeting them was simply to understand 'why they did what they did.'

Some participants were contacted and told that the offender wished to apologise, which created uncertainty about the offender's character that they had not previously experienced. Mona, Owen, Rachel, Philip and Nita, for example, had no intention of seeking out communication with the offender until they were contacted by the restorative justice service. Owen and Rachel, who were burgled, both said that the offer had provoked in them 'curiosity' about the offender whom they had previously written off as a drug addict. Mona said she had previously felt anger towards the man who burgled her house, but that the facilitator told her he was remorseful and 'mentioned that he, Mr. [offender] has been poorly and he was off, again homeless. That kind of melted my heart a little.' Philip, who experienced a burglary, explained that he and his family had

previously caricatured the offender as a 'drug addict idiot' and moved on, but that 'being contacted by restorative justice opened some of those feelings towards him ... it's challenged me quite a bit.' Nita, a victim of voyeurism, had seen the offender cry in court, received a letter of apology, and had been contacted by the restorative justice facilitators because the offender wanted to apologise in person. Nita said that she wanted to go to the meeting to find out if 'he's a predator' because 'I don't really understand how he can have done it', implying that his actions were incompatible with his displays of remorse. She said she intended to:

Keep pressing him why he did it. And different questions, no similar questions but worded differently. To see if I can get the sense that he's lying or not.

Nita and other participants suggested they wished to resolve the conflict between a previous view of a 'bad' offender and the proposed view of a remorseful (and thereby 'good') offender, by asking why they had committed the crime in the first place.

Reducing self-blame

Some participants expressed the hope that asking why would enable them to reduce their sense of self-blame. Four participants who were under 18 at the time of the offence specifically wanted to ask whether they had provoked the offence in some way (Sam, Casey, Willow, Naomi). Sam said she wanted to ask her stepfather 'what could I have done to prevent it?', 'was it my fault?' and said the only answer to the question of why he did it she would find satisfying would be if he said "'because I'm a dick-head'" (i.e. a 'bad' character and the sole cause of the offence). Willow, raped by an older boyfriend, said, 'I always just think why me, why did he come? Is it anything I done? I feel guilty sometimes, and I just want to know'. Similarly, when asked what questions she wanted to put to the offender, Casey, abused by a family friend as a young child, replied:

I just really want to know why. Why was it me? Why then? Was it something that I done, or, just the usual kind of questions.

Interviewer: Getting some answers as to why. And do you think there is an answer that would satisfy you ... ?

That there was nothing I done to encourage him really.

Emma and Lisa, abused in the context of adult intimate partner relationships, displayed even more complex self-blame, for example Emma wondering at T1 'I'm hoping that I haven't made him like that'. Lisa said she 'knew' the offence was not her fault, but she still cared whether the offender *thought* it was her fault: 'I'm a bit scared that he somehow blames me for making him this angry. I know I didn't ... [but] I've got no way of knowing what his feelings or thoughts are.'

Two participants who had relationships with the offender that had not previously been abusive (by their own accounts) nevertheless wished to find out if they were somehow responsible for their own vulnerability. Kaitlyn, raped by an acquaintance, worried that she had made herself 'more vulnerable' by trusting the offender. Kathy, violently assaulted by a man she had considered a friend, suggested he may have assaulted her to encourage her to get the lock on her back door fixed.

No motivation to ask why

Everyone who wanted to ask why appeared to be motivated by uncertainty about the offender's character, and in some cases this was accompanied by a desire to reduce self-blame. However, not everyone who experienced uncertainty or self-blame wanted to ask why. This was not a comparative study, but it can tentatively shed some light on the reasoning of those who did not want to ask why through the views of participants in this study who did not wish to meet the offender, and those who wished to meet the offender but did not express a wish to ask why.

Two people interviewed at T1 chose not to meet the offender. One expressed a view of the man who burgled her house as entirely 'bad', saying that 'he's a bit of a druggie, he will bloody rob his own mother' (Lydia). The other, Terri, explored aloud the possibility that the reason her father sexually abused her as a child was that he was himself abused. She expressed some doubts about this line of reasoning, because while 'they say abused become abusers', she struggled with the implication that it would also make her more likely to abuse her own children. She concluded after a period of thinking aloud that 'he was violent, he was cruel, he was mentally cruel'. Some people had other goals for communicating with the offender and did not express a desire to ask why, for example, wanting to talk about the impact (Megan), to obtain an apology (Razik, Marie) or acknowledgement (Faye, Michelle). Overall, the people who did not want to ask why tended to have a clear view of the offender's character and did not blame themselves.

2. The perceived effects of asking why

This section presents participants' perceptions of the effects of *asking* why rather than receiving an *answer* to why, because the accounts that participants constructed did not necessarily match explanations given by the offender. Some explanations received from the offender were integrated into participants' own reasoning about the offence, while others were rejected or challenged. Sometimes no explanation was offered by the offender, and offenders' unwillingness to explain informed participants' accounts about why it happened. Participants indicated that asking why helped them to develop their own account of what happened, leading to three main perceived effects: (1) an increased sense of certainty about the offender's character, (2) a greater sense of self-worth and (3) a sense of safety. From participants' descriptions of this process, it seems more accurate to say that asking why tended to enable them to construct accounts of the crime that met their existing goals, rather than that they sought and received specific explanations.

Certainty about the offender's character

Participants frequently implied that asking why led them to develop a more extreme view of the offender's character – either towards seeing them as more of a 'good' person, or as more of a 'bad' person. The change towards a less nuanced and more binary perspective seemed to resolve some of their uncertainty, regardless of whether participants developed more positive or more negative views of the offender's character.

A view of the offender as 'good'. Some participants settled on a view of the offender as 'good' because the process of asking why led them to believe that the offender's *character* was not the primary cause of the crime. As predicted by previous research, some participants achieved this goal through receiving a situational explanation for the crime, i.e., learning the offender was not a 'monster' (Birkbeck & Smith, 2022; Starbuck, 2016). However, a situational explanation was not the only route to this view of the offender, and Malle's typology of 'folk explanations' for intentional acts, outlined in the introduction, can help us understand their reasoning (Malle, 2001). Participants were able to view the offender as of 'good' character when they developed one of Malle's three types of explanation: (1) Enabling Factors (EF) that influenced a good person to carry out a bad act; (2) Mental State Reasons (R) for the crime that could be considered logical or reasonable responses to the circumstances; or (3) a Causal History of Reasons (CHR) which explained how someone previously of good character became 'bad' enough to commit the crime.

Most in line with a situational explanation theory, some participants appeared to conclude that a person of good character had been influenced at the time of the offence by enabling factors (EF) outside of their control (Carol, Tasha, Kathy, Mike, Philip, Francis). Carol said the man who burgled her house was 'a nice chap without the drugs, just obviously with the drugs he can't be trusted'. Tasha said, 'I didn't really get a reason behind it' but she said the offender is 'in her heart, a really good person' and that 'she wasn't in the right place' at the time of the offence. Kathy also offered descriptions of the offender as being a good person, saying at T2 that 'underneath that idiot that was here that night, is a kind, a caring person, who was hurting.'

Demonstrating participants' own role in the construction of their explanatory accounts, three participants settled on a view of offender as a good character who had an understandable mental state reason (R) at the time of the offence, even though they did not accept the offender's explanation. Denise rejected the offender's reason that the harassment was 'just a joke', but demonstrated her belief that the offender could nevertheless be a 'good' person by engaging in a dialogue to persuade her that the reason was not valid. She said, 'I needed [the offender] to realise that it wasn't a joke and how many people it affected', indicating a belief that the offender was capable of such a realisation. Dorothy also attempted a dialogue with the offender about his mental state reason for the crime, but rejected his explanation that he had murdered her son in self-defence. She nevertheless returned to her view from T1 that the offender was 'not wicked', and said at T2 that she resorted back to the police's initial ambiguous explanation that the murder had been a 'burglary gone wrong'. Oliver, violently attacked 17 years previously, was concerned that the offender might want to 'continue it' (i.e. the conflict between them). Oliver, although apparently unconcerned about the content of the offender's reason, nevertheless was pleased to learn that there had been a specific reason at the time, and that the reason was no longer operative, i.e. it was no longer motivating him to cause Oliver any harm.

Some people indicated that they had received a causal history of the offender's reasons (CHR) which explained how a person of good character could become the kind of person who would commit the offence (Faye, Rachel, Owen). When they met, Faye's brother told her he had sexually abused her because 'he was angry [about] what had happened in our lives' – referencing abuse they had both experienced from other family members.

Although at T1 Faye said she had not been looking to ask why, at T2 she said, 'it explained it to me, it was a good explanation.' Rachel and Owen accepted the offender's 'life story' (Owen) as an explanation for the burglary. Rachel said she realised that the offender was 'exactly the same as us', and Owen said the experience made him appreciate how easy it had been for he himself to 'keep his nose clean' because of his 'reasonable childhood, living in middle-class circumstances' compared to those of the offender who 'never had any support in doing anything that wasn't criminal'. Further demonstrating participants' active role in constructing their own accounts, some people did not receive a causal history of reasons from the offender, but created them informed by the process of asking why. Beatrice said of the man who sold the drugs that killed her daughter, that 'he was 17 at the time, chances are he might be vulnerable himself in some ways.' Brenda was disappointed about her step-son's lack of ability to answer why he had sexually abused her son, but she reasoned that her stepson – who had been a 'lovely ... soft, sweet little boy' – was influenced to commit such an act because she had read that during teenage years young men's brains are 'doing all these weird things', his mother and father were divorced, and his birth mother's negative influence.

A view of the offender as 'bad'. The process of asking why led some participants to develop more negative views of the offender's character, usually when the offender did not offer an explanation, or offered an explanation which the participant thought was insufficient. If, as suggested by previous research, receiving a situational explanation from the offender makes victims feel better, we might expect an account of the offender as *more* of a 'monster' to harm victims rather than help them. However, developing a negative view of the offender appeared to benefit some of the participants in this study through an account of a 'bad' offender as the sole cause of the offence.

When the offender refused to meet or was denying the offence, some people's views shifted significantly (Casey, Kaitlyn, Willow), and others just a little (Rose). For example, according to Willow's mother, when the offender declined to meet her, Willow concluded that he was 'not very nice' and 'a liar' which helped explain how he could have committed the offence, and 'made her quite against him'. Casey similarly reasoned that because she had only wanted 'an hour of his time, but he couldn't even give me that', the offender was therefore 'not sorry' and he must be the sole cause of the offence. Rose, said at both T1 and T2, that she believed the causal history of the offender's reasons (CHR) to be that he was 'psychologically damaged' and maintained her belief in his good side, saying 'he could have done something worse, but he didn't'. Nevertheless, his refusal to meet confirmed the bad side of his character, and her motivation changed from wanting to meet for the offender's benefit, to holding him fully responsible and wishing primarily to communicate her anger. Sadie's father denied the offence and so she did not receive an explanation, but she said the process had enabled her to 'figure out' three aspects of who her father was; who he really was, who he was to her, and who he is now:

Who he really was - a manipulator, a liar. Who he was to me - was this wonderful dad. Because even though there wasn't much backing up what I thought, I was a kid, and it was my dad ... And who he is now, is a mixture of the two, I think.

Two people who did meet the offender said their view of the offender changed because they had the chance to reject the offender's explanations in person (Hannah and Karen).

Hannah, sexually abused as a child by her mother's partner, laughed about the 'pathetic' explanations he gave, amounting to nothing but 'excuses' in her view, such as 'the puff' (drugs), 'feeling isolated' or that he said he had carried out the abuse to 'strengthen our bond'. Similarly, Karen, whose lodger stole from her over some months, said she felt better about having been deceived by the offender because the meeting 'confirmed that he was a liar. Absolutely a liar' and that 'it not only confirmed things, but confirmed things with his knowledge', thereby placing responsibility for the offence fully and publicly on his shoulders.

Uncertainty about the offender's character. The three participants whose view of the offender did not appear to change implied that the ongoing absence of certainty about the offender's character at T2 was a major contributing factor towards their dissatisfaction (Nita), ongoing rumination (Lisa) or disappointment with one aspect of an otherwise adequate process (Michelle). Nita rejected the explanation offered by the man who took and shared indecent photos of her without consent, because she did not know what he meant by having 'demons in his head'. She also rejected the implication that abuse he had experienced was the causal history of his reason for behaving that way (CHR) because, 'I was abused as a child and raped in my 20s, I've never considered using it as an excuse for abusing anyone.' Lisa rejected the explanations she received in a letter from the boyfriend who physically attacked her with a brick, saying at first that he 'just sort of skirted around it' and later that 'I guess his blanket answer is "oh I had too much to drink and that's bad for me"'. Michelle who expressed satisfaction with some elements of the meetings she had with her father, nevertheless said:

I think a lot of the offenders, unless they've had a lot of treatment, they can't articulate what they have done, what led them to do what they did. I never got that from my father, I never got any of that from this process. I think that's probably a negative.

Self-blame and self-worth

Some participants constructed accounts that reduced their sense of self-blame, as they had hoped to do at T1, through learning or confirming that they had not caused the offence themselves. Seemingly unanticipated by participants at T1, some found that the opportunity to ask why not only reduced negative feelings (self-blame) but also created positive ones, which I call here a sense of self-worth.⁵

Two people described benefiting from the specific explanation that they were chosen at random, in line with previous research. Bridget and Gemma said they felt better after the offender explained they were not targeted due to their own vulnerability or particular characteristics. Bridget said she did not receive an explanation from the man who raped her, but he told her that she had not been stalked, which she found reassuring because the offence had just been 'a random thing.' Gemma rejected several different explanations from the man who physically assaulted her son, such as that he was drunk or that he was defending his friend, and she appeared to have a relatively fixed view of the offenders as 'scumbags'. However, she was reassured by the offender's explanation that her son was not targeted because of his sexuality.

Many of those who had previous relationships with the offender said at T1 that they hoped to find out they had not accidentally provoked the offence, and one person said

at T2 that this had been the case. Zoe said she was relieved to hear from the offender when they met that the cause of the violent offence against her 'was nothing that I did, it could have been anybody.' Others reached the same conclusion, but not directly through the offender's explanation. Willow and Casey, for example, said that unwillingness to meet conveyed that the offender must be a bad person, and so it was more likely that the offender was the cause of the crime than that they themselves had provoked it. Willow's mother said that the offender saying no to a meeting was 'a kind of a closure' because it allowed Willow to conclude that he was 'not very nice ... whereas in her head beforehand it was all "he's a nice person and maybe it was me."' Casey reasoned that because he 'hasn't done a, b and c to at least try to prove that he is remorseful' this showed he was solely responsible for the offence, and therefore she was not.

Some explanations appeared to have the potential for negative effects on participants' self-worth, and these tended to be rejected. For example, some offenders explained their actions with enabling factors or historical reasons that were shared with the participant – e.g. substance use, childhood adversity, or having experienced abuse. These explanations were accepted by some participants but were rejected when they were shared. Incompatibility with their own experience may simply have made the explanation less credible to participants, or may even have introduced a conflict of identity because it would make them more similar to the offender. For example, Gemma rejected the explanation that the offender was drunk because 'well I get drunk, and I don't get like that'. Francis said he rejected the offender's explanation that he had a 'shit childhood' because 'I had a shit childhood. You can still do something positive with your life.' Nita and Terri both rejected the offender's history of abuse as an explanation because they had also been abused.

Some participants were dissatisfied with explanations from the offender that they did not believe (e.g. Nita). However, in line with procedural justice theories of the importance of voice, the ability to challenge the offender's explanation appeared to give other people a sense of power. For example, Hannah said that after meeting the offender she identified more as a survivor than a victim because she had rejected his self-pitying explanations as excuses and was able to 'go and tell him that he's not the victim.'

Safety: protection of self and other

The participants in this study tended not to explicitly say at T1 that asking why might make them feel safer.⁶ However, participants at T2 indicated that asking why had helped them feel safer in a variety of ways. Increased certainty and self-worth appeared to lead to a sense of safety, not only when the offender was perceived more positively, but also when the offender was perceived more negatively. In addition, some of those who experienced reassurance based on a more positive perception of the offender, also sought specific reassurance that the reasons or enabling factors that allowed the offence to occur were no longer operative.

Participants indicated that increased certainty about the offender's character was beneficial because it gave them a sense of agency and thereby made them feel safer, regardless of the direction in which their view of the offender shifted. This sense of agency translated to the feeling that they could protect themselves; sometimes with a specific plan, sometimes without. Some participants used their new knowledge to prepare themselves for future offences and take 'evasive action' (Malle et al., 2014), such as ceasing lone working (Rose) or being more careful with locking doors (Kathy, Rachel). Others, even

without any specific plan to keep themselves safe, felt a greater sense of agency. For example, after the facilitator communicated to Kaitlyn that the offender did not want to meet and denied the offence, Kaitlyn said she was at least more ready for him to come out of prison 'because I know [that he is still denying the offence, and by implication is a bad character] ... at least I know how the land lies now.'

Some felt safer via a reduction in self-blame, either through perceiving the offender's character more negatively, through learning that they were chosen at random, or learning that they did not provoke the offence. A view of the offender as 'bad' helped some participants to feel less responsible, and thereby indirectly to reason that it would be less likely to happen to them again. Others reasoned that if they were chosen at random they were not especially vulnerable so there would be no reason to suppose the same offender or other offenders would target them in future (Gemma, Bridget), or that if they had not inadvertently provoked the offence then they would not be in danger of provoking future offences (Zoe, Casey, Willow).

A more positive view of the offender made some participants feel safer, but sometimes was insufficient for a sense of safety because the question remained as to whether the reasons or enabling factors that caused the crime would lead to reoffending. Philip, for example, accepted that drug use had been an enabling factor, but wanted to know whether the man who had burgled his house would be able to avoid drug use in future, 'I challenged him really hard about "look, it's all very well you tell me you're not going to do it again, how are you not going to get into drug seeking cycles?"' Similarly, Francis reasoned that the man who had committed a violent hate crime against him had been 'led by other people', but wished to understand whether the offender could be similarly influenced again in future. Francis described how he met someone who knew the offender, and 'I just found myself giving him money and grilling him, to kind of find out if [the offender] was bullshitting me I suppose'. Conversely, when participants were convinced that the offenders' reason or enabling factors had changed since the offence, then the specific content of the explanation appeared much less important (e.g. Oliver).

Discussion

The participants in this study were motivated to ask the offender 'why' when they doubted that the offender's bad character sufficiently explained the offence, such as when they knew of good in the offender's character from a prior relationship, when they were told that the offender was remorseful, or when they blamed themselves. Some participants received an explanation, while others did not, either because the offender was unable to give one or because no communication took place. Most participants resolved at least some of their uncertainty through either a positive or negative shift in their view of the offender's character. Developing certainty about the offender's character appeared closely linked to two other perceived effects of asking why that were intrinsically linked to each other, yet at least sometimes achieved independently. First, some participants indicated that asking why helped them blame themselves less, and even increased their own sense of self-worth. Second, many participants expressed that they felt safer after the opportunity to ask why, whether indirectly via increased certainty and self-worth, or more directly through indications that the offender was a good person and would not reoffend. These relationships are depicted in [Figure 1](#).

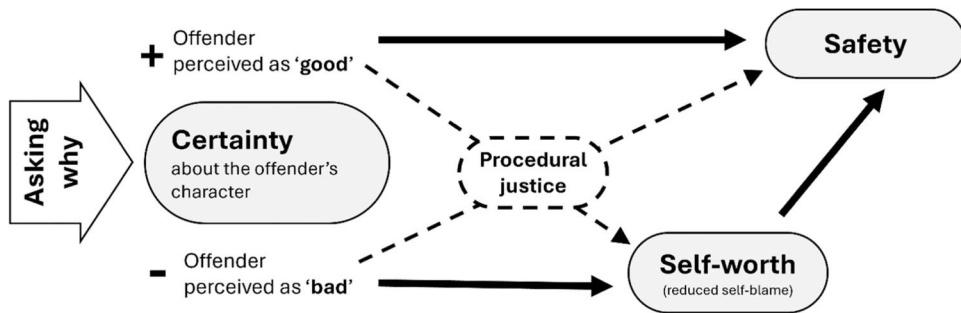


Figure 1. A conceptual map of the goals achieved through participants' motivated reasoning processes (grey ovals), the direct relationships between them (bold arrows), and the indirect relationships via procedural justice (dashed arrows).

This study has demonstrated the inadequacy of suggestions that victims benefit from asking why primarily through receiving specific explanations from offenders; a finding which highlights the importance of longitudinal studies when investigating questions of change. While this study confirms previous findings that victims' motivation to take part in restorative justice is often to ask 'why?' or 'why me?', it challenges the assumption that they benefit by receiving explanations. If we only ask victims about their motivation for taking part prior to the process, then find overall satisfaction afterwards, we might logically *but incorrectly* assume that they are satisfied because they receive an answer to their questions. In the T2 interviews in this study, participants focused very little on the specific explanations given by the offenders, and many completely rejected them. Most participants did not tend to report receiving an explanation in the sense that we usually use 'explanation' to mean the actor's rationale (R) for the act (Malle, 2001; Malle et al., 2000), nor did they express disappointment when such explanations were not forthcoming. Rather, participants described how their attempts to ask why had enabled them to resolve uncertainty about the offender's character, in turn affecting their self-worth and sense of safety. Based only on the T1 interviews, the bidirectional changes in victims' views of the offender's character would be obscured, along with the active role the victims played in reasoning until their uncertainty was resolved. While it is already known that character judgements both inform and are influenced by inferred motives (Carlson et al., 2022), and we know that human reasoning is often motivated by our own emotions and needs (Kunda, 1990), this study demonstrates the central role these very human processes play in victim-offender communication.

Previous post-intervention interviews with victims may have overestimated the role of situational explanations and the extent to which victims' views of the offender become more positive (Birkbeck & Smith, 2022; Starbuck, 2016; Walters, 2015). While this type of change certainly does appear to benefit some victims, it is not the only possible outcome of restorative processes, and some participants in this study described benefits from developing a more negative view of the offender's character. Perhaps because of the religious and philosophical roots of restorative justice, alongside its links to mediation and conflict resolution, we may have assumed that 'successful' restorative justice interventions entail participants having more positive views of one another at the end than at the beginning. Yet perceiving the offender to be a 'good' person could

cause victims to infer a negative self-concept, given the binary portrayals of 'good victims' and 'bad offenders' that are prevalent throughout society. People frequently receive societal messages that they will only be considered legitimate victims if they were carrying out respectable activities whilst attacked by a 'big and bad' offender (Christie, 1986), consistent with messages directly from perpetrators who often argue the victim is to blame because the offender was a good person 'forced' into acting against their better nature (Craven et al., 2007). It should perhaps not surprise us then that in this study some participants benefitted from a more negative view of the offender, even though this is not an outcome of restorative justice that has been previously documented.

If victims can benefit from accounts of the crime that entail both more positive and more negative views of the offender's character, this raises the question of whether their motivating goals might conflict with one another. For example, if a more positive view of the offender's character can lead to feelings of safety, can a shift in the reverse direction (which might help with certainty and self-worth) inadvertently make victims feel *less* safe? If a more negative view of the offender's character can reduce self-blame, can the reverse (which might help with certainty and safety) inadvertently *increase* self-blame? While there was little evidence of these outcomes in the current study, it is impossible to rule them out. As in many intervention studies, some participants withdrew from the study between the T1 and T2 interviews, and it could be that those people were made to feel less safe or more to blame by asking why. As we can only speculate on their experiences, however, let us turn instead to look for clues among those who remained in the study.

First, could a more negative view of the offender's character make victims feel less safe? Participants explicitly sought certainty at T1 and said they appreciated achieving it at T2, and this is consistent with studies demonstrating that people often seek to manage or eliminate incompatible beliefs, also known as cognitive dissonance (Bos & Lind, 2002; Festinger, 1957), by communicating with others (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Change in participants' views of the offender in either direction on the morally good-bad spectrum seemed to increased certainty. A few participants suggested that certainty was all they had achieved (and not a sense of safety), but that it was better than not having tried at all. Others suggested that certainty led to safety through a sense of control and an increased ability to protect themselves. This is consistent with studies showing that when people feel uncertain, they are especially concerned with aspects of procedural justice such as fairness, and that experiencing fair treatment not only reduces their sense of uncertainty but also increases people's view of their own agency (Bos & Lind, 2002). It is important to note, however, that most of the participants who were able to derive benefits from a more negative view of the offender's character, were not at risk from the offender; in most cases because the offender was in prison, or in a few because the offender lived far away. It is possible then that a more negative view of the offender's character would be much more threatening for victims who were in any kind of ongoing relationship with the offender, or those whose address, workplace, or routine were known to the offender. For example, although Kaitlin suggested that some certainty was better than no knowledge at all, her more negative view of the offender led her to express concern at what might happen when he was released from prison.

Next, could a more positive view of the offender's character lead to an increase in self-blame? While there was no evidence of this among the participants, the changes that participants experienced from communicating with offenders in this study (usually from a

view of the offender's character as partially good to more wholly good) may not have introduced any internal conflict because it only confirmed or strengthened a view the participant already held.⁷ It remains a possibility then, that if someone whose view of the offender was entirely 'bad' developed a more positive view of the offender, this could increase self-blame. In this study, none of the participants experienced this type of change as a result of taking part in the restorative justice process, but we can consider the reactions of those who had been victimised by strangers and had their view of the offender changed by the *offer* of restorative justice. As we have seen, Rachel, Owen and Philip all suggested that being told the offender was remorseful had *introduced* uncertainty. All three then went on to resolve some of this uncertainty by meeting the offender, and Rachel and Owen appeared to consider their more ambivalent view of the offender's character to be a benefit of the process. Philip was more uncomfortable with this change, and implied that he would rather have been left with his pre-process caricatured view of the offender as morally bad. While none of the three experienced an increase in self-blame as a result of their more positive view of the offender, it is notable that these participants were middle-class homeowners who had been burgled by offenders they knew to be relatively socio-economically disadvantaged (e.g. homeless, with addictions). In other words, in some domains they had more power and agency than the offender. Philip's mild internal conflict implies that other victims with less power relative to the offender might find the process of learning that the offender is 'not a monster' more damaging, not only by increasing self-blame but perhaps also reducing certainty and safety. We cannot know from this study because these subtleties imply a complex phenomenon that none of the participants articulated explicitly, but power dynamics and the potential for ongoing contact might have played a role in Nita and Lisa's unwillingness to accept the explanations offered by the offenders in their cases, which might have led to more positive views of the offender and thereby potentially to more self-blame.

Limitations

A study of this nature cannot quantify, compare, or comprehensively identify the full range of goals which motivate victims' reasoning about the causes of the offence and their desire to ask the offender why. It was not possible to analyse the reasoning processes of subgroups because there were too few participants in each subgroup to build specific theories, for example the three participants who were dissatisfied by their experience of asking why, or the two participants who experienced a hate crime. The sample lacked diversity with respect to gender, ethnicity and other identity characteristics, meaning that different clusters of motivations and perceived effects might be found among other groups of victims. For example, safety was important to participants in this study at T2 but was not explicitly mentioned at T1. We cannot know if this would be the same among other groups of victims, as willingness to express this concern could be influenced by participants' gender, culture, education, or socio-economic status.

Interviewing at two time periods somewhat minimised the effects of selection biases. However, this study remains susceptible to the possibility – common to all intervention studies – that those who declined an interview at T2 did not do so at random, but because they had negative experiences. This study has focused on participants' own understanding and perceptions of the process; future studies with alternative designs

and more participants could attempt to corroborate the existence (and investigate the size) of the effects mentioned. This study emerged within a larger project that was not focused on asking why; future studies could include more consistent and in-depth questions specifically on this topic. Finally, these findings are specific to victims who at least considered asking the offender why; there is yet a great deal more to learn about other victims' reasoning processes over time, and how their own accounts can be affected not only by communication with the offender, but also by interactions with the criminal justice system, friends, family and the media.

Implications

These findings have implications for best practice in restorative justice and victim services, as well as for theoretical considerations about the role victims play within the criminal justice system. This research demonstrates, for example, that the opportunity to ask why can be beneficial to victims, above and beyond the contents of the offender's explanation. Facilitators and gatekeepers may not be able to predict whether victims will benefit on the basis of the explanation the offender is offering, because some victims benefited from the process even when the offender gave an 'unsatisfactory' explanation or did not agree to meet. Victim benefits seemed to sometimes surpass a sense of satisfaction or short-term wellbeing, because some victims said that asking why had a positive impact on their fundamental sense of self. Yet some potential risks may also be hard to predict, because offenders' explanations could negatively affect victims' self-worth, even in the absence of explicit victim-blaming. The demonstrated complexities of predicting both the benefits and the risks suggest that the priority must always be helping victims make informed choices at each stage of the process. Experienced facilitators know the importance of discussing with the victim how they might respond to a range of eventualities (e.g. if the offender declines to participate). This research suggests it may be especially important for victims to consider during preparation how they might respond to different explanations from the offender (or lack thereof) and how these could affect their sense of certainty, self-worth and safety. To ensure victims can really make informed decisions about participating, communication with the offender should not constitute the victims' only option for asking why. We should also consider how else the criminal justice system might help them meet their goals.

While there is plenty of evidence that victims want restorative justice options to be offered early and often (Van Camp & Wemmers, 2016), this research suggests it may *not* be appropriate for the 'offer' to include information about the offenders' remorse or willingness to participate. As we have seen, such information can effectively constitute 'communication' with the offender that can introduce uncertainty and potentially affect victims' self-blame and sense of safety. To avoid this problem, professionals could first offer restorative justice processes to victims without any specific information about the offender, and only once they receive informed consent from the victim would they discuss the offender's remorse or willingness to participate.

Conclusion

This study has identified goals and desires that motivated participants' reasoning and interacted with experiences of asking the offender 'why': a desire for certainty, self-

worth and safety. While some victims may be motivated by a desire for accuracy, i.e., receiving a 'true' explanation, this did not emerge as an important goal for the participants in this study. Nor did participants appear to seek specific explanations from the offender. Rather, participants tended to focus on assessing the offender's character as proxy for an answer to 'why?'. Reasoning about the offender's character appeared to constitute most participants' direct route to developing a sense of certainty, and an indirect route to greater self-worth and safety.

Participants tended to construct accounts of the offence that met their existing goals in accordance with motivated reasoning theory, but their success at constructing such accounts appeared at least partially dependent on their experiences of procedural justice. While motivated reasoning theory suggests that victims are *unlikely* to reason in such a way that undermines their own goals, it does not seem true to say that victims would *always* construct accounts that lead to a positive outcome, regardless of the nature of the process or the explanation offered by the offender. Procedural justice, in particular victims having agency, voice and respect throughout the process, appeared to be a key factor in enabling victims to grapple with the offenders' explanation (or lack thereof) and construct accounts of the crime that allowed them to attain their personal goals.

The experiences of victims in this study shed some light on the motivations of those who spend time trying to understand why people commit crime. Forensic psychology and criminology have undergone repeated cycles of revision as each generation of researchers highlights how previous theories have been influenced by inaccurate assumptions, systemic biases and structural injustices.⁸ Yet, compared to our understanding of the psychological motivations underlying victim-blaming⁹, we know little about the psychological motivations underlying different degrees and patterns of 'offender-blaming'. The victims in this study have much in common with those who research crime, as they are not content to merely wonder why crime occurs but take sometimes extraordinary measures to find out. I therefore hope that these findings – and future studies with victims who ask offenders why – will prompt further reflection on the goals that *motivate* reasoning about the causes of crime, for victims and researchers alike.

Notes

1. Many people prefer the term survivor to victim, but not all, and when referring to individuals I try to use their preferred language. For brevity, however, when discussing people affected by crime as a group category, in this article I use the term victims.
2. For a definition of restorative justice and an overview of its components, see (Daly, 2016).
3. By 'lay' people Malle and colleagues mean the general population, as distinct from those who analyse the causes of human behaviour in a professional capacity.
4. I opt not to use traditional attribution theories, because from participants' descriptions it appeared that the type of *explanation* was of more importance to their own reasoning process than the type of *cause* to which they attributed the crime. An alternative analysis could perhaps have focused on where participants' thought the cause of the crime featured on dimensions of locus, stability, controllability or globality (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985). However, this framework did not appear sufficient for understanding participants' roles in negotiating offender explanations and constructing their own.
5. This study focuses on self-worth as an effect of *asking why*, for an exploration of how the restorative justice intervention as a whole affected participants' self-perception see also (Batchelor, 2023b).

6. A desire for safety was present as a motivation for communicating with the offender more generally, demonstrated by participants' expressed hope that the process would itself prevent the offender from reoffending. However, they did not express expectations that asking why or hearing the offender's explanation would affect their sense of safety.
7. Given that many participants simply maintained or strengthened their early views of the offender, might we conclude that the process operated primarily through confirmation bias? Certainly evidence shows that we often seek, pay more attention to, and better remember information that confirms our existing views (Nickerson, 1998). However, communication with the offender did not always confirm participants' early views. Significant shifts from one end of the moral spectrum to the other occurred when participants were told that the offender was remorseful, and when the offender's behaviour challenged the participants' view. For example, participants with similarly uncertain views of the offender at T1 developed views of the offender as 'bad' if they were unwilling to meet or 'good' when the offender was willing to meet.
8. For an in-depth discussion of these developments see Parmar et al. (2022)
9. Described, for example, in Eigenberg and Garland (2008)

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Data availability statement

The full interview transcripts cannot be made public, as participants only gave their consent for extracts to be quoted. To provide readers with access to more of the original context while respecting participant wishes, an extended version of the short quotations in the article can be found in supplemental materials.

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