

Finding Common Ground on a Journey from Pain to Hope:

CoSA as Restorative Justice

By  
Larissa Doran

A Thesis Submitted to  
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts, Honours in Criminology

April, 2018, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Copyright Larissa Doran 2018

Approved: Dr. Diane Crocker  
Professor  
Department of Sociology and  
Criminology

Date: April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Finding Common Ground on a Journey from Pain to Hope:

CoSA as Restorative Justice

by Larissa Doran

**Abstract**

This thesis examines restorative justice principles and theories in order to determine if the program Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) can be considered a restorative justice program. Six face-to-face unstructured interviews were also conducted with volunteer, core, and staff members of CoSA Halifax using a narrative approach. A thematic analysis of the interviews was then completed. Based on the research, it is concluded that Circles of Support and Accountability can be considered restorative justice.

April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018

## **Introduction**

This thesis examines restorative justice principles and theories in order to determine if the program Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) can be considered a restorative justice program. CoSA works with high-risk sex offenders who are released from prison, and helps them to reintegrate into the community. To answer my research question, I looked at existing literature surrounding restorative justice, programs currently dealing with sex offenders, and theories relating to restorative justice. I also performed six unstructured face-to-face interviews with volunteer, core, and staff members of CoSA Halifax.

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) was developed in 1994 in Ontario by a Mennonite Pastor – Harry Nigh – when a high-profile, high-risk sex offender was released into a very angry community (Wilson, 2005). Nigh agreed to assist the offender, but quickly realized that the offender had too many risk factors for one person to handle. He called on a small group of parishioners and friends to come together as volunteers to assist in the offender's reintegration process (Wilson, 2005). A few months later, an offender with a similar profile was released from prison and another pastor in Toronto, Hugh Kirkegaard, adopted Nigh's approach (Wilson, 2005). Not long after this, the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario accepted a contract from the Correctional Service of Canada to form a pilot project based on Nigh's and Kirkegaard's experience to see if their approach could be used more broadly (Wilson, 2005).

Today, CoSA is practiced in many parts of the world – sometimes as a part of corrections, and sometimes not. Offenders must voluntarily enter into CoSA and express a desire to be a part of the circle. Each circle consists of the offender (known as the core member), and five to seven volunteers. Some circles also have an outer circle involving professionals for when the inner circle requires further support (Wilson, 2005). Together, the members come up with

what is known as a covenant, which must be followed by all members of the circle (Petrunik, 2002). The covenant is not a legally binding document, but holds the same value as a legally binding document within a circle (Petrunik, 2002). Covenants differ in every circle, as they outline the volunteers' expectations of the core member (to abide by court orders, follow a relapse prevention plan, etc.), as well as for volunteer members to ensure confidentiality, provide support, to hold the offender accountable for his actions, and so on (Petrunik, 2002). The circle as a whole meet often to discuss the core member's progress, but with this being said, he will be in contact with at least one person from the circle every day (Wilson, 2005).

Meetings between core members and volunteers can be formal (in circle) or informal. Informal meetings include the volunteer member and the core member going for coffee, going to view apartments, or even just running errands (Petrunik, 2002). CoSA circles provide a core member with a support network available to them 24/7. If core members have thoughts of reoffending, they must reveal this to the circle. If the core member ends up back in prison, the circle remains intact and volunteer members can still provide support. CoSA has two mottos: "No more victims" and "No one is disposable" (Hannem & Petrunik, 2007). Through these two mottos, we can see that CoSA believes that no one is beyond restoration – not even the core member.

By doing this research, firstly, I hope to address the confusion surrounding the proper way to categorize CoSA as a program. It has been referred to as many things, including a community justice program, a community-based initiative, and a restorative justice program – none of these, however, have been used consistently. Hopefully my research will provide CoSA with the proper terminology to describe the program.

Secondly, having CoSA fit into the category of restorative justice may have the potential for CoSA to receive more funding, as the federal government of Canada cut CoSA's funding in 2014 (CoSA Halifax, 2017). CoSA Canada did, however, receive \$7.48 million in funding from Public Safety Canada in May, 2017 (Government of Canada, 2017). This funding was made available under the National Crime Prevention Strategy – in other words, the funding does not fit under the umbrella of the government's restorative justice efforts (Government of Canada, 2017). Having CoSA fit as a restorative justice program may result in the government allotting well-deserved restorative justice funding to CoSA.

Finally, my research will fill the gap that exists in literature surrounding restorative justice and sex offences. Very few restorative programs take an interest in sex offenses, and even so, they mainly focus on issues of gendered violence without considering sex offenses against children or males. My research will also depart from current literature as CoSA is a program that works with sex offenders after their release from prison – existing restorative justice programs deal with sex offenders either pre-sentence or while still in prison.

## **Literature Review**

### **Restorative Justice Principles**

Unlike the traditional criminal justice system, restorative justice focuses on ways to repair harm caused to people as a result of crime, rather than crime as a law violation (Zehr, 2002).

Restorative justice understands crime as a violation of people and interpersonal relationships (Zehr, 2002). These violations then create obligations – the central obligation being to put right the wrongs (Zehr, 2002). A restorative justice process includes the victim, offender, and the

community. Each stakeholder holds an equally important role in the process of putting things as right as possible.

Howard Zehr (2002) outlines three pillars of restorative justice: harms and needs, obligations, and engagement. First and foremost, restorative justice focuses on the harm that people and communities face as a result of crime (Zehr, 2002). Although important to pay attention to the victim's harms and needs within a restorative justice process, the offender and community's needs must also be considered to address the root causes of the crime (Zehr, 2002). Secondly, these harms result in obligations, meaning that offenders must be held accountable for their actions (Zehr, 2002). This does not necessarily mean that the offender receives punishment for their actions, but rather they must understand the harm they have caused others and the consequences of their behaviour (Zehr, 2002). These obligations lead to the "responsibility to make things right in so far as possible, both concretely and symbolically" (Zehr, 2002, pp. 22). Finally, restorative justice promotes engagement or participation of those most affected by the crime. This engagement requires involving key stakeholders in the decision-making process regarding what is needed in order to put things right (Zehr, 2002). Engagement within restorative justice allows for the involvement of multiple parties, something not typically seen in the criminal justice system (Zehr, 2002).

As restorative justice provides an alternate framework for thinking about and approaching crime, Zehr developed five key principles that he believed a restorative philosophy might have: restorative justice focuses on harms and consequent needs; addresses obligations resulting from those harms; uses inclusive, collaborative processes; involves those with a legitimate stake in the situation; and seeks to put right the wrongs (Zehr, 2002). Zehr posits that these five principles remain unemployable unless stakeholders are explicit about their underlying

values of honor, interconnectedness, particularity, and respect. (Zehr, 2002). When an offender accepts their obligation and works the victim and community to make things right, it instills honour in victims, communities and offenders (Zehr, 2002). Interconnectedness is demonstrated in the sense that we are all connected to each other through a “web of relationships” – disrupting this web affects everyone (Zehr, 2002, pp.38). Though important, we must balance interconnectedness through an appreciation for particularity. Particularity recognizes that though we are all connected, we also have our differences – we must appreciate diversity (Zehr, 2002). The most important underlying value is respect. Everyone in the process must be respected, even those who differ from us or who we consider our enemies (Zehr, 2002). Without having respect for different opinions and feelings, restorative justice would not flourish.

### **Restorative Justice Practices**

According to Howard Zehr, three distinct models tend to dominate the practice of restorative justice: victim offender conferences, family group conferences, and circle approaches (Zehr, 2002). Each practice involves an encounter between key stakeholders, and sometimes other community and justice people. In the case where a victim does not want to participate – or it is not appropriate or possible for them to participate – a victim surrogate may contribute (Zehr, 2002). Facilitators – a neutral party who guide and oversee these processes – ensure that everyone gets a chance to tell their story. All participants are encouraged to “tell their stories, to ask questions, to express their feelings and to work toward mutually-acceptable outcomes” (Zehr, 2002, pp.47). Participation in restorative justice should be completely voluntary for all parties, and reaching a consensus about how to move forward in repairing the harm is the main

goal. Though similar in basic outline, these practices differ based on the number of people participating in the process, as well as in the facilitation style (Zehr, 2002).

**Victim Offender Conferences/Mediation** originated in Ontario in 1974 and take place pre- or post-sentencing (Bouffard, Cooper, & Bergseth, 2016). This type of restorative justice practice involves the victim, the offender, and a facilitator or mediator. Victim offender mediation (VOM) typically occurs face-to-face and allows both the victim and the offender to express their sides of the story (Bouffard, Cooper, & Bergseth, 2016). VOM places strong emphasis on victim healing, offender accountability, and restoration of losses (Maxwell & Morris, 2001).

As with all restorative justice processes, victim-offender mediation requires a preparation stage in which the facilitator meets with both the victim and the offender separately to ensure the suitability and readiness of both parties to engage in the process (Zehr, 2002). The parties then convene to discuss the harm that occurred, and to try to come to an agreement on how to make things right. During the session, the victim and offender each have an opportunity to explain their sides of the story, and what happened leading up to and after the offense. The offender also has the chance to take accountability for the harm that he/she caused to the victim. After the session, the mediator or caseworker performs a follow-up, which involves checking in with both the victim and the offender to ensure the upholding of the plan – if not, the parties may need to re-convene.

Bradshaw and colleagues examined fifteen studies on approximately 9200 youths, which concluded that the use of victim-offender mediation accounted for a 34% reduction in recidivism in comparison to those who did not participate in these programs (Bouffard, Cooper, & Bergseth, 2016, p. 3). Not only does VOM reduce recidivism rates, it also increases levels of both victim

and offender satisfaction due to the fairness of the process, and the high rates of compliance with restitution agreements (Bouffard, Cooper, & Bergseth, 2016).

**Family Group Conferencing (FGC)** originated in New Zealand and was initially introduced as an alternative to court proceedings, as well as a guide for sentencing (Maxwell & Morris, 2001). This practice involves participation and engaged dialogue with the victim, offender, their family members, and a justice system representative (Zehr, 2002). Family-group conferences take an interesting approach to crime, allowing parents (or other family members) to have a say in the appropriate response to their child's offending (Maxwell & Morris, 2001).

This model supports offenders in taking responsibility for their actions and changing their behavior (Zehr, 2002). Facilitators determine the inclusion and exclusion criteria for those involved in the process, and design the process in a way appropriate for all involved (Zehr, 2002). Reintegrative shaming – a strong aspect of FGC's – involves those who care about the offender most shaming his/her actions (Laprairie, 1995). During the conference, family members leave the room to have a private meeting to discuss what has happened and to develop a proposal to bring back to the rest of the group (Zehr, 2002). The facilitator must ensure that the plan appropriately addresses the harm, is fair to all parties, and successfully holds the offender accountable for their actions (Zehr, 2002). Since FGCs often replace formal court processes, they must develop a complete plan for the offender that includes reparations, prevention methods, and sometimes punishment (Zehr, 2002). When used as a way to develop sentencing, a consensus on the decision must be reached by all members of the FGC, including the offender. (Zehr, 2002).

Evidence surrounding family-group conferences shows high participation levels and high consensus levels on the structure of reparation agreements (Bouffard, Cooper, & Bergseth, 2016). Youth who participated reported being treated with respect, were more involved in the

FGC process compared to traditional criminal justice processes, and had the opportunity to express themselves (Bouffard, Cooper, & Bergseth, 2016). A study from New South Wales revealed that family-group conferencing resulted in reduced recidivism among offenders when the process was fair and maximized restorative dimensions (Bouffard, Cooper, & Bergseth, 2016). Family-group conferences currently exist as the standard response to most serious juvenile crime in New Zealand (Zehr, 2002).

**Circles** are associated with peacemaking and have an Indigenous origin (Zehr, 2002). They emphasize the story-telling aspect of restorative justice, and involve victims, offenders, family members, justice representatives, and the community (Pranis, 2005). A variety of circles exist including: sentencing circles, healing (also known as support) circles, talking circles, community building circles, conflict circles, celebration circles, and reintegration circles. Some key values include: respect, humility, sharing, courage, inclusivity, empathy, trust forgiveness, and love (Pranis, 2005). Circles represent interconnectedness, and the impossibility to isolate an event and act on it without affecting everything or everyone else (Pranis, 2005).

A circle's key elements include the opening and closing, guidelines, talking piece, facilitation, consensus, and story-telling (Pranis, 2005). The opening helps participants shift from the pace and tone of ordinary life into the pace and tone of the circle (Pranis, 2005). Closing acknowledges circle's efforts, affirms the interconnectedness, conveys a sense of hope for the future, and prepares participants to return to ordinary life (Pranis, 2005). The circle guidelines articulate the commitments or promises that participants make to one another about how they will behave in the circle, for example surrounding speaking and listening (Pranis, 2005). The person holding the talking piece has the opportunity to talk while the others listen (Pranis, 2005). It usually carries a symbolic meaning to the group, and whoever possesses the talking piece can

offer silence, or simply pass the talking piece if they do not feel like sharing (Pranis, 2005). The facilitator's responsibility does not involve finding solutions or controlling the group, but rather initiating a respectful and safe place, and engaging participants in sharing (Pranis, 2005).

Consensus is essential in a circle, as all participants must be willing to live with the decision they make, and to support its implementation (Pranis, 2005). Finally, the story-telling portion involves relaxed, open conversation that engages everyone emotionally and mentally, and allows for self-evaluation (Pranis, 2005).

Just like every other restorative justice process, circles have certain stages including determining suitability, preparation, convening all parties, and the follow-up. In order to determine suitability, the facilitator needs to ensure the appropriability of a circle, the participation of all key stakeholders, the proper time frame for the meeting, and the maintenance of physical and emotional safety (Pranis, 2005). Preparation involves identifying the key players of the circle, familiarizing these key players with the circle process, and beginning to explore the issue at hand (Pranis, 2005). When convened, all parties must identify their shared values, develop guidelines to follow, engage in story-telling, probe underlying causes of the conflict or harm, come up with ideas for addressing the harm, and reach a consensus on an action plan to repair the harm (Pranis, 2005). Finally, the follow-up stage is very important as it assesses the progress on the agreements, and looks for causes of any failure to fulfill an obligation (Pranis, 2005). If the offender fails to follow the agreed upon plan, another circle may need to form to address next steps towards figuring out a better agreement (Pranis, 2005). Follow-ups can also constitute as a check-in on the progress of the agreement, or to celebrate the success of an agreement (Pranis, 2005).

As it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss every type of circle in detail, I will only describe one of the most commonly used circles – sentencing circles (Zehr, 2002). Sentencing circles are community directed and in partnership with the criminal justice system (Maxwell & Morris, 2001). Set guidelines as to how a sentencing circle should take place do not exist, as each community adapts a model that fits their circumstances (Stuart, 1996). These circles develop a consensus on an appropriate sentencing plan that addresses the concerns of all parties involved (Maxwell & Morris, 2001). Some essential pre-requisites for an offender to participate in a sentencing circle include accepting responsibility, a guilty plea, connection to the community, desire for and concrete steps towards rehabilitation, support for the offender within the community, and input from the victim (Maxwell & Morris, 2001). The sentencing circle process boasts inclusivity, and encourages everyone in the community to participate (Maxwell & Morris, 2001).

Barry Stuart (1996) describes the sentencing circle process that takes place in Yukon, in which offenders must be accepted into circle sentencing by the Community Justice Committee. Before the circle can begin, the offender must plead guilty and accept full responsibility for their actions (Stuart, 1996). Then, the offender must apply to the Community Justice Committee, where they are paired with an Elder who will become part of their support group (Stuart, 1996). The offender will then attend meetings with the Justice Committee and their support group in order to develop a preliminary rehabilitative plan (Stuart, 1996). Next, the offender will initiate his plan in order to show commitment to the process – this may include beginning treatment or counselling (Stuart, 1996). Before the sentencing circle can take place, the victim's interests are taken into consideration, information is exchanged in order to keep all participants informed, and the Justice Committee makes a decision on how to proceed with the application (Stuart, 1996).

If the Justice Committee decides that the circle will take place, a presiding Judge or Justice of the Peace may act as the facilitator or “Keeper of the Circle” (Stuart, 1996, pp. 299). Steps in a sentencing circle include: welcoming remarks; prayer; teachings of the circle; introductions; legal facts of the case; offender support group report; report from victim; circle discussion; summary of circle consensus; final word; and closing prayer (Stuart, 1996). When executed correctly, a sentencing circle will have produced a plan that takes the victim’s views and harms into account, but also maximizes the offender’s rehabilitation (Stuart, 1996). The support group will help with the offender’s success in carrying out their sentence. After the hearing, a follow up occurs in which community members check-in to ensure the offender continues to meet the requirements of the sentencing plan (Stuart, 1996). If the offender gives up or abuses the circle process, the justice system will intervene to either tighten the conditions of the sentencing plan, or lay a formal breach (Stuart, 1996).

### **Restorative Justice Programs Dealing with Sex Offenders**

Literature surrounding restorative justice programs that deal with sex offenders is scarce. The existing literature mentions three programs: RESTORE in Arizona, Project Restore-NZ in Auckland, and Sten Madsen’s work in Copenhagen (Koss, 2014). Many scholars believe that restorative justice processes involving sex offenses open the victim up to revictimization, and it is difficult to “exact sufficient accountability for wrongdoing” (Koss, 2014, pp. 1625). Much of this literature specifically focuses on gendered and domestic violence situations, and there exists a huge gap in research surrounding other types of sexual offenses (Koss, 2014).

**RESTORE** is a restorative justice program in Pima County, Arizona which receives referrals from prosecutors including misdemeanor and felony sex crimes (Koss, 2014). Felony

crimes include sexual assaults involving “oral, anal, or vaginal penetration against consent, forcibly or when incapacitated” (Koss, 2014, pp. 1626). Misdemeanors include “primarily indecent exposure with or without public masturbation” (Koss, 2014, pp. 1626-7). RESTORE was primarily implemented as a strategy to reduce the number of sexual assault cases dealt with through the justice system, resulting in a lack of victim satisfaction (Koss, 2014). RESTORE refers to victims as “survivor victims,” and offenders as a “responsible person” (Koss, 2014).

The RESTORE program has four stages: referral and intake, preparation, conferencing, and accountability and reintegration (Koss, 2014). Referral and intake requires program personnel to contact the victim to let them know the options that they have moving forward (Koss, 2014). If the victim decides to continue with the program, consent documents are carefully explained to them, and they will have the option to sign (Koss, 2014). Program personnel then contact the offender to explain the program. If the offender agrees to participate, they must undergo a psychosexual evaluation in order to determine their suitability (Koss, 2014). Once approved, the case will proceed to the preparation stage in which the whole process is separately explained to each the victim and offender by program personnel (Koss, 2014). The program personnel also meet with the support networks (family or friends) of both parties to prepare them for what to expect (Koss, 2014). Program personnel and a facilitator conduct the conferencing stage at a secure location (Koss, 2014). At this stage, all parties share their stories about how they were affected by the incident, and an agreement for a redress plan is made (Koss, 2014).

The final stage – monitoring of the offender’s redress plan fulfillment – includes phone contact and face-to-face meetings with RESTORE staff, and appearances before the Community Accountability and Re-Integration Board (Koss, 2014). This board consists of volunteers who

support the offender's progress, and they have the ability to terminate participation if the offender does not comply with the redress (Koss, 2014). RESTORE concludes with an exit meeting in which the offender presents a statement of accountability and reintegration to the board, summarizing the lessons they have learned and making a formal apology (Koss, 2014).

Two thirds of felony and 91% of misdemeanor offenders in the RESTORE program followed through with their redress plans and requirements successfully (Koss, 2014). More than 90% of participants were satisfied with the preparation, conference and redress plan (Koss, 2014). Victims were very satisfied with the program, and a significant number of victims and victims' surrogates revealed that they would recommend the RESTORE program to others (Koss, 2014).

**The Center for Victims of Sexual Assault** is located within the University Hospital of Copenhagen, and began in 2000 as a service for women and men ages fifteen and over who have been exposed to rape or attempted rape (Brunilda & Karin, 2011). Restorative dialogues began at the center in 2002 in response to the requests from several women who wanted to face their offender (Brunilda & Karin, 2011). The center sets up facilitated restorative dialogues, not only for members of the centre, but also women who are non-members and would like to have the opportunity to come face-to-face with their offenders (Brunilda & Karin, 2011).

As part of the health system (rather than the criminal justice system), the center is not allowed to contact the offender to ask them to participate in the dialogue – the woman must reach out herself (Brunilda & Karin, 2011). If the offender agrees to meet, the facilitator goes through a preparation phase with both the woman and the offender individually (Brunilda & Karin, 2011). In this preparation phase, both parties will go over their expectations for the dialogue, and their needs are discussed in order to find out what needs to happen during the

session in order to make things right (Brunilda & Karin, 2011). This procedure allows a woman to express the harm that the offender has caused her.

None of the women who participated felt as if they regretted the process (Brunilda & Karin, 2011). Though forgiveness is not the aim of a restorative process, nor a way to reach closure, many women found it very helpful to have the ability to take control over that part of their lives. Participating in restorative dialogue aided women in their journey through healing and regaining dignity after a sexual assault (Brunilda & Karin, 2011). These dialogues are not done as a means of reconciliation, but rather to attempt to provide answers to questions that the women may have.

**Restore-NZ** is a restorative program in Auckland, New Zealand based on project RESTORE, which is mentioned above (Jülich, 2010). Restore-NZ provides justice to adult survivors of gendered violence, and is supported by ASAH and the Safe Network (Jülich, 2010). ASAH is a community group that provides counselling and support to sexual assault victims, whereas the Safe Network provides treatment for child sexual abusers (Jülich, 2010). Funded by the Ministry of Justice, the program receives referrals from the court system in Auckland (Jülich, 2010).

Restore-NZ's focuses primarily on victim, however it also involves community experts – one representing the victim and one representing the offender – who work with the facilitator to ensure that no power imbalance within the process occurs (Jülich, 2010). The team works together to prepare all participants for the conference and selects a safe location for all involved (Jülich, 2010). During the conference, the victim and offender experts act as community members who challenge any minimization of the offense, as well as to inform participants about victim and offender issues (Jülich 2010). Upon conference completion, a debrief takes place in

order to plan a follow-up with both the victim and the offender (Jülich, 2010). Any outcomes developed in the conference are not legally bound, therefore it is the offender's moral obligation to uphold them (Jülich, 2010).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Capital**

To possess social capital, a person must be part of a group that has direct benefits, such as social status. As originally defined by Bordieu (1986), social capital is: “membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (pp.21). Further, Bordieu (1986) mentions that the amount of social capital that a person has depends on the size of the network of connections they make, and the amount of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) that they gain based on the relationships they form. In other words, to have social capital, a person must be considered a member of a group that provides them with access to other types of capital, and the larger the social network a person has, the more social capital he/she will have.

When released from prison, high risk sex offenders become isolated from society due to the amount of fear and outrage that the public has towards them (Hannem & Petruinik, 2007). Many sex offenders no longer have relationships with their family members, and end up having to fend for themselves in an unknown community. These communities may have high levels of incarceration, poverty, and other negative social conditions, which are highly unlikely to possess enough social capital to support a newly released offender (Settles, 2009). A sex offender's release coexists with intense media coverage, forcing the offender into hiding, leaving them with

no support networks (Wilson, 2005). The stressors of social isolation and stigma, paired with negative media coverage can increase the likelihood of re-offense (Hannem, 2013).

Restorative justice enhances an offender's social capital, which could have positive outcomes on the re-entry process (Settles, 2009). This is accomplished by allowing an offender to form relationships with people in the community that he may have not otherwise have had the chance to connect with, which also provides him with access to services.

CoSA is a program that “targets social isolation as the risk factor and the creation of social capital as its goal” (Fox, 2016, pp.74). CoSA allows a core member to develop relationships with the volunteer members, giving him what Bordieu (1986) refers to as “collectively-owned capital”. Membership in CoSA also provides the core member access to other types of capital, such as economic capital, as volunteer members may help him to find a job. Improving the core member's social capital is considered a very prominent circle effect (Hoïng, Bogaerts, & Vogelvang, 2013).

In relation to CoSA, Hoïng et al. (2013) define social capital as “the quality of the social network of the offender in terms of bonding within intimate relationships, linking him/her to external resources, and the quality of the environment he/she lives in” (pp. 271). Volunteers within CoSA strive to encourage an offender towards a “good life” – one that is free from offending, while also meeting his needs and goals (Hannem, 2013). Unlike the rest of society, volunteers humanize a core member by realizing that he simply made a mistake, and has the ability to change (Lowe, Willis, & Gibson, 2017). In addition to providing friendship, volunteers help the core member in their circle to gain access to aspects of social life that advance his social capital such as a job, or a house in a good community.

Some refer to social capital as the “missing link that differentiates communities of health and happiness from those torn by conflict, poverty, and strife” (Settles, 2009, pp. 287).

Restorative justice approaches such as CoSA effectively reintegrate sex offenders, as it provides the offender with the social capital that they might not have otherwise gotten due to social isolation. This not only allows an offender to succeed within his community, but also to desist from crime (Fox, 2016).

### **Reintegrative Shaming**

As mentioned in the previous section, when sex offenders are released from prison, they often receive mass amounts of negative media attention and frequent public shame. Sex offenders are portrayed as the “modern folk devil,” and a strong shaming component correlates with community notification (Hannem & Petrunik, 2007; Petrunik, 2002). In some places in the United States, sex offenders are even required to place signs on their cars or lawns, informing people that they are a sex offender (Petrunik, 2002). The stigma associated with the sex offender label often leads to exclusion from many aspects of citizenship, including applying for certain (or most) jobs, and access to housing benefits (Fox, 2017). Shaming such as this – disintegrative shaming – tends to lead to an escalation of deviance (Hannem & Petrunik, 2007).

Braithwaite (1989) developed reintegrative shaming, which “labels the act as evil while striving to preserve the identity of the offender as essentially good” (pp.101). Reintegrative shaming controls crime, whereas stigmatization only pushes offenders toward more criminal subcultures (Braithwaite, 1989, pp. 13). Reintegrative shaming is typically followed by efforts to reintegrate the offender back into a law-abiding community of respectable citizens (Braithwaite, 1989). This theory suggests that “rather than be tolerant and understanding, we should be

intolerant and understanding (Braithwaite, 1989, pp. 166). By this, Braithwaite (1989) believes we should shame what we currently do not shame, but at the same time maintain bonds of communication, affection and respect. Braithwaite suggests that a key to ensuring that shaming is reintegrative rather than stigmatizing is to uphold the continuum of love and respect – even when there is conflict – and to use praise in conjunction with shame (1989).

CoSA uses reintegrative shaming in relation to a family model, wherein the act committed is shamed, but the actor remains part of the family (Fox, 2016). Volunteer members never let a core member stand alone, no matter what he may do. They let him know that the actions he committed were wrong, but they will not shun him for it. This is similar to a family in the sense that even though a child may do something wrong, their parents will not disown them – they will teach them how and why their actions were wrong while still supporting their growth.

Braithwaite believes that shaming is more deterring when administered by those of importance to us (1989). Core members value the volunteers as they are most often some of the only people who believe in and humanize them. In this sense, volunteers' respect and affection is something that a core member would be afraid to lose. Shaming is most effective when the core member honours the respect of the one shaming him (Braithwaite, 1989). With reintegrative shaming, a society should be one where retreat into a world of exclusion is very difficult – not only for the offender themselves, but also for the rest of society (Braithwaite, 1989).

## **Relational Theory**

Llewellyn (2012) believes that restorative justice is best understood as a relational theory of justice. She states that the goal of justice is to “enable and promote the well-being and flourishing of the parties involved” (Llewellyn, 2012, pp.91). The requirements for this to happen include relationships marked by equal respect, concern, and dignity. (Llewellyn, 2012). She then posits that everyone is interconnected, and that crime is not an individual issue, but rather a violation of relationships (Llewellyn, 2012).

Llewellyn believes that no one exists in this world without a connection to others, and in this sense, no one can stand alone (2012). After the commission of a crime, relational justice looks toward a set of practices that, when used, have the ability to restore equality in the context of the relationships involved (Llewellyn, 2012). With this being said, an offender must recognize the larger ripple-effects of his or her crime to be able to thrive during reintegration. They must recognize that their actions have caused harm to not only those directly affected (victims), but also those who were indirectly affected (wider community).

Relationships are a key part of reintegration, in that an offender – especially a sex offender – who is released from prison, typically does not have any form of support system. Having a connection or relationship with others is the best way to understand the self, as well as to make and remake the self (Llewellyn, 2012). When reintegrating into a community, offenders need to discover who they are as a person, but also who they are in relation to others. This is not easy to do, and almost impossible if the offender is isolated. Not only is it important for the offender to realize the value of relationships, but the community as well. Communities need to be open-minded and accepting of a newly released sex offender in order for the relationship to work.

CoSA allows a core member to truly take accountability for his actions, and realize the harms he caused to the victim and the community. Repairing the harms may not always be completely possible, but sometimes repairing relationships with the community is. One of CoSA's two mottos is "No one is disposable" – this includes the core member (Hannem & Petrunik, 2007). Volunteer members provide support for the core member in repairing and maintaining relationships, which will in turn promote his well-being and flourishing within the community (Llewellyn, 2012). CoSA helps a core member to recognize that he is not alone, but rather he is connected to everyone in his community in one way or another.

## **Method**

I conducted six unstructured, face-to-face interviews with volunteer members and core members who are a part of CoSA in Halifax, Nova Scotia. During these interviews, I asked participants to tell me stories about their experiences with CoSA, as well as to provide me with a title for their story. I then analyzed the stories in search for common themes and related them to restorative justice principles.

Unstructured interviews are conversations with participants surrounding a general topic or agenda, but with no specific format or questions to be asked (Wilson, 2013). These interviews gather in-depth data about the topic at hand, and allow participants to express their full and true experiences without putting a limit on what can be said (Wilson, 2013). Using this type of method, I was open to the fact that the conversation may lead to unanticipated topics. I was also conscious of when a participant was repetitive or rambling and going off-topic. I had questions prepared as part of my interview guide, so that I would stay focussed on the main topics of the research and gather stories rather than opinions.

Unstructured interviews can last anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours (Wilson, 2013). If an interview is too short, it may prevent me from establishing rapport with the participants or from gathering enough information about CoSA. If too long, however, people may not agree to participate as they simply do not have the time to. With this in mind, I aimed to have my interviews last around half an hour to an hour each – the recommended time for unstructured interviews (Wilson, 2013). I audio-recorded these interviews so that I could actively listen to the stories as they were being told, as well as to allow me to go back and listen to and take notes on the interviews to help with the analytical process.

Some strengths of unstructured interviews include establishing rapport with participants, flexibility when wording questions, and participants describing issues in their own words (Wilson, 2013). Establishing rapport with participants in unstructured interviews is much easier than with semi-structured or structured interviews, as they require a less formal and more relaxed environment (Wilson, 2013). This allows the participant to feel more comfortable in expressing their opinion, and provides more opportunity for conversation. Flexibility when wording questions allows the opportunity to probe the participants for more details (Wilson, 2013). This is not as easily done with more structured interview styles, and helped me to gather information that I might not have otherwise thought of. Finally, allowing participants to describe issues in their own words was beneficial as it allowed me to pick up on the vocabulary used in CoSA, as well as to discover metaphors CoSA uses that are relevant for my research (Wilson, 2013).

With my interviews, I found that establishing rapport with the participants was key to getting them to divulge information to me. This more relaxed interviewing style did allow participants to feel comfortable in expressing their opinion, as Wilson (2013) suggests. Not having a strict interview guide to follow proved beneficial to me, as I did in fact get information

I would not have otherwise gotten – the more interviews I did, the more probes I was able to come up with. Finally, hearing participants’ experiences allowed me to understand what happens in a circle without ever having participated in one. I could also pick up on terms that they use such as a “check-in,” which I had not found throughout my research.

Though there are many strengths to using unstructured interviews, weaknesses include the amount of data collected, the difficulty with taking notes, and that every interview is different (Wilson, 2013). Wilson (2013) states that even small numbers of unstructured interviews can take hours to analyze due to the amount of data produced from them. For example, they mention that one hour of audio tape from a talkative person can take up to ten hours to review and transcribe, and the analysis of this data can take much longer (Wilson, 2013). Note-taking during unstructured interviews is very difficult and sometimes not possible, as the participants have a lot to say – stopping to take notes might result in a loss of rapport (Wilson, 2013). This may also be considered a weakness because thoughts that arise during the interview are easily lost if not written down. Finally, the fact that every interview is different can be viewed as a problem because there is no real way to prepare for what to expect.

In terms of weaknesses, Wilson (2013) was correct in saying that note-taking during interviews is difficult, and sometimes not possible. I did not take any notes during my interviews because I did not want to seem as if I was not fully paying attention to the participants. This was also an issue because sometimes I would think of probes as they were telling a story, but I would forget what I wanted to ask by the time they were finished. I do not necessarily think that Wilson (2013) was correct in considering the fact that every interview is different a weakness – I think find this more of a strength. Although admittedly difficult to go from interviewing a talkative

participant to one who is very shy, I think that each experience is unique, and important for collecting rich data.

I have taken a narrative approach to my interviews by asking participants for their stories rather than their opinions. I asked participants to tell me about both positive and negative experiences that they have had in their CoSA circles, as well as activities that they may have done related to CoSA outside of the circle meetings (See Appendix A for Interview Guide). Other research has found this approach provides richer, more useful data, and that the process is more satisfying to participants, especially marginalized or vulnerable populations (Crocker 2015; Crocker and Chartrand 2015). It is arguable that traditional methods do not account for the differences in experience that may occur in programs such as CoSA, as no two circles are the same. Narrative provides “a route into people’s experiences that traditional methods may miss” (Crocker, 2015, pp. 50). Asking participants to tell me their story rather than their opinion changes what they recount (Crocker, 2015).

In order to recruit participants for my interviews, I reached out via email to Rob Elford, the coordinator of CoSA Halifax. He reached out to volunteers and core members of CoSA Halifax to invite them to participate (see Appendix B). Rob contacted volunteer and core members who he believed would be willing and most comfortable to participate using the recruitment script that I provided him with (see Appendix C). Rob then provided me with a list of any volunteer or core members who agreed to release their information to me. Once I received the list, I reached out to the potential participants via email or telephone (whichever they preferred) to invite them to be interviewed and to set up a date, time, and location for the interview (see Appendix D).

At the beginning of each interview I briefly explained the research and went over the informed consent forms with the participants (see Appendix E). I then asked if they had any questions – once answered, I asked participants to sign the consent forms, and let them know that their participation was voluntary. Next, I asked if they were comfortable with having the interview recorded before I began the interview.

To analyze the data that I received from the interviews, I listened to each recording three times: the first just to listen; the second to transcribe or take note of important quotes or sections of the interview; the third to listen again, making sure that I did not miss anything. Next, I took the notes that I had written down, and wrote them onto cue cards. I then separated the cue cards into piles by identifying common themes. Finally, I took the piles of themes that I had and aligned them with Howard Zehr's principles of restorative justice.

## **Findings**

I interviewed six members of CoSA Halifax – three volunteer members, two core members, and one staff person. Three participants were male and three were female. The participants had been involved with CoSA for anywhere between four months and four years. Each interview took place in a more private area of a public location, such as a coffee shop or the Halifax Central Library. The interviews lasted anywhere between twenty and forty minutes each.

When a new CoSA circle is formed, the first circle meeting consists of the volunteer and core members introducing themselves to each other. This was described as the most difficult circle by both volunteer and core members. They go around the circle, each member revealing their background and what brings them to CoSA. During this stage, the core member must also tell the volunteer members about their offense(s). Participants found this difficult as, essentially,

everyone in the circle is still a stranger – the trust and bonds between members have not yet been developed. Also during this circle, all members form a covenant together. To do this, volunteer members lay out what they expect of the core member, and the core member lays out what they expect of the volunteer members. All circle members must sign the covenant.

After the first meeting, volunteer and core members will meet as much or as little as they decide is necessary. One core member revealed that during his first circle he was very defensive and angry, and he found life outside of prison difficult. His circle decided to meet once every week until they saw progress. Once they all noticed improvements in the core member, together the volunteer and core member decided how often to meet.

Meetings that follow after the first often begin with what is called a “check-in.” Check-ins involve going around the circle and simply talking about how their week was. Here, volunteer and core members might share a conflict that they faced, or simply share a positive story. If a volunteer or core member decides to share a negative story, often they will talk through it as a group – especially if it is the core member that is struggling. An example of an issue that has come up is when a core member was sent back to jail for three weeks for “failing to report a relationship.” The core member revealed to me that he actually did report the relationship, and was wrongfully sent back to jail. He explained to me that during his first circle meeting after getting out of jail, his volunteer members helped him to work through what had happened. They also assisted him in getting a legal team to support him in filing an appeal.

Outside of circle meetings, volunteer members can participate in activities with the core members. Some examples of these activities include golfing, attending church services, going for coffee or a meal, canoeing, and even attending a concert. All participants found partaking in these activities extremely beneficial. Core members believed that it helped them realize the true

commitment of the volunteers. Activities proved that the volunteer members are there for the core members whenever they need them, and made the core members feel as if they were truly part of the community. Volunteer members thought that the activities were beneficial because it allowed them to see the core members with their “mask off,” and view them in a different, more relaxed setting. Participating in the activities also allowed volunteer and core members to form stronger relationships.

The most common theme that came from the interviews was friendship. Every participant mentioned friendship at least once throughout their interview. One participant stated that CoSA is based on a friendship model as it allows core members to “learn about healthy friendships by participating in healthy friendships.” Other participants discussed the connections between volunteer and core members, and how their circle meetings or activities feel like a “group of friends just getting together, talking.” A participant recalled an example of a time when a core member had a recent death in his family and was very upset. This participant knew that this particular core member enjoyed going on walks, and described their experience as “going for a walk in the park with a grieving friend.” A core member also noted that the volunteer members of his circle are there whenever he needs them as he said, “You know they’re there for you. If you need them, you can contact any one of them. They’ll drop anything just to come support you, or listen, or help you with something.” In this spirit of friendship, many members also stated that decisions made in the circle are discussed with all members of the circle – they weigh the costs and benefits of a decision together.

Accountability was another common theme. Every participant mentioned accountability in one form or another. CoSA circles generally begin with the core member telling their story to the volunteer members. One of the core members recounted the difficulty of the first meeting

because he had to own up to his not-so-good background. Volunteer members acknowledged how painful it must be for a core member to tell others about his offences. Volunteer members also hold the core members accountable for their actions by “challenging some of their behaviours and statements,” and “getting him to dig deeper and go step-by-step to explain why.” A core member referred to CoSA as the “main support and accountability for who I am and the way I act, think, feel, talk to people around me, and basically conduct myself within society.”

One core member told a story that vividly exemplifies how the CoSA process promotes accountability. His brother had recently passed away. During a circle meeting, this core member derailed and became verbally abusive towards his volunteer members. This circle meeting ended abruptly, and the core member left angrily. A few days later, the core member came home to his volunteer members standing outside his home. The circle decided to have an emergency meeting to let the core member know about his abnormal and unacceptable behaviour. The core member noted that the volunteer members “held me accountable for my actions,” and helped him notice that he may have been falling back into his crime cycle.

Stigma or barriers that the core members face when reintegrating into society emerged as another theme in the interviews. Both core members and volunteer members spoke to the stigma surrounding sex offenders. Stigma was primarily an issue among the core members, as they remembered constantly worrying about “how society would react when/if they found out what my title was, because society judges one from the title and not from the person.” Another core member stated “I hate my past, I hate what I’ve done. My past is my past but it’s not me.” Similarly, volunteer members spoke to the stigma associated with being a sex offender by saying that they too are human beings, and deserve “dignity, respect, support and love.” They added that the core members carry “so much heaviness and shame,” and that “stigmatizing and shunning

them is so unhelpful.” On top of the stigma that core members face, many of them also face other barriers, including mental illness, and difficulty finding housing and employment. Many core members have also been harmed or victimized themselves (i.e. in and out of foster care system, bad or no relationships with family members), which make it extremely difficult for them to reintegrate into society.

A fourth theme surrounded victims. Core members and volunteers discussed strategies that they use to ensure victimization comes to an end. They described talking about the possibility of relationships, what a healthy relationship looks like, and figuring out how to prevent the core member from falling back into his crime cycle. Something very interesting that came up was that one core member is now in a relationship, and his girlfriend often participates in his circle meetings. This ensures not only that his girlfriend is completely aware of his crimes, but also that she has support from the volunteers if needed. Healthy relationships are often considered in the circles. One participant mentioned that a core member brought up his interest in a much younger woman. In this case, the volunteers helped him to understand what an appropriate age gap looks like, and why this is important.

Although core members are typically not allowed to contact their victims, the victim’s harms are addressed in circle meetings. One core member commented on this by saying “It’s one of those things where in order to understand everything, that’s gonna come up. If it doesn’t, then what kind of work are you putting in?” In this sense, the circle will talk about the harm to the victim, and how the core member feels about it. The circle also discusses the core member’s crime cycle and how to defer it – the volunteers help the core members to realize what causes them to enter in to the crime cycle, and how to prevent that and stay “on the positive path of a good life.”

Finally, the fifth theme surrounded community building/healing. One participant described the way CoSA works as: “You need to feel that there’s safety to truly be yourself, and then through that process build community, and then from that comes real meaning.” CoSA circles involve people from the community from all walks of life. Each circle serves as a “community” for the core member and consists of people who are willing to support him on his journey. Keeping this in mind, it is also important to acknowledge the “victimization that happens to communities who are impacted by sexual crimes.” Some circles involve volunteer members who were victims of sexual assault, and the core member is aware. This may help healing on another level by “giving the perspective of what victimization looks like, but at the same time still willing to see the core member’s humanity.”

To end off the interview, I asked each participant to give their experience with CoSA a title – if they were to write a book about their experience, what would they title it? The responses that I received included: “Being Human”; “CoSA: The Calm, Happy Period Between the Shitshows”; “Finding Common Ground on a Journey from Pain to Hope”; “Making Connections with Someone Your Life Wouldn’t Have Touched Otherwise”; “Truth”; and “Seeing Beyond the Label”. These titles happen to fit very well into the themes mentioned above, especially those relating to accountability, stigma, and friendship. This is significant as it gives a total and complete outlook on the way that the participants view CoSA, summed up into a few words. It takes what the members see as being most important and highlights it.

## **Analysis**

Zehr’s five principles of restorative justice: restorative justice focus on harms and consequent needs; addresses obligations resulting from those harms; uses inclusive, collaborative processes;

involves those with a legitimate stake in the situation; and seeks to put right the wrongs. The themes that I pulled from the interviews – friendship, accountability, stigma and barriers that core members face, victims, and community building/healing – fit under each of these principles.

Restorative justice focuses on harms and consequent needs. It is important to remember that the victim is not the only person harmed when a crime is committed – the offender and the community are also affected. In this sense, the themes of stigma/barriers that core members face, and community building/healing fall under this principle. As mentioned in the interviews, sex offenders face a significant amount of backlash from the community as a result of their crimes. Stigma constitutes a harm because it often prevents core members from finding employment or stable housing. The main needs that result from stigmatization include support and acceptance. As stated in the interviews, CoSA does an excellent job at making core members feel like “part of the society,” and “expanding [their] network of support.”

The second type of harm that core members face may sprout from their childhood or younger years. Some core members may have even been victimized themselves. The interviews brought up harms such as being in and out of the foster care system, broken relationships with a father, depression, and addiction. A CoSA circle looks at these harms and tries to pinpoint what the core member needs to repair them. This could include getting core members involved in other programs such as Celebrate Recovery (a 12-step program located at Deep Water Church in Halifax), having discussions about how to mend the relationship between the core member and his father, or simply providing support to the core member when he needs it most.

As a participant revealed in their interview, communities are also victims of sexual offences. Because of this, they too have harms and needs. CoSA allows a group of volunteer members from the community to get together with a core member to discuss the harm, and how

the community is affected. One specific community – victims of sexual offences – are particularly harmed. Someone who has been victimized may represent a victim's voice and the that specific community's harms and needs in the circle.

The second principle – restorative justice addresses the obligations resulting from those harms – matches with my theme of accountability. Howard Zehr (2002) describes obligations as offender accountability and responsibility. This encourages an offender to understand the harms or consequences of their behaviour, and that they have a responsibility to make things as right as possible (Zehr, 2002). As demonstrated through my interviews, CoSA holds core members accountable for their actions in many ways. When a new CoSA circle forms, core members must tell the volunteer members about their offense(s) and their history – this is seen as taking accountability for their actions and acknowledging their part in the harm. Volunteer members will also challenge core members' behaviours and statements, and get them to think through their decisions. In this sense, the community plays a role in the core member's accountability as often the core member cannot take on this task alone (Zehr, 2002).

The third principle of restorative justice – uses inclusive and collaborative processes – is extremely evident in my theme of friendship. Everything that CoSA does involves using inclusive and collaborative processes with volunteer and core members. All decisions are made as a group, issues are discussed as a group, and activities outside circle meetings are done to ensure that the core member feels included. CoSA circles provide support for the core member, and many participants in my interviews felt as if it was just a group of friends getting together.

Restorative justice involves those with a legitimate stake in the situation, as is apparent in the theme of community building/healing. Howard Zehr (2002) explains that not only the immediate victims and offenders can be considered key stakeholders, but the community, family

members, friends, or “secondary victims” can as well (pp.26). CoSA thoroughly involves community members and of course the immediate offender, but unfortunately the immediate victim is unable to be involved. This is where “secondary victims,” others who have been victims of sexual offenses, may represent the perspective of a victim. Two other circles that were brought up in the interviews involve a core member’s mother and a core member’s girlfriend. Family and friends are important stakeholders as they are also continuously affected by what happened, and having their voice and their support are key.

The final principle of restorative justice seeks to put right the wrongs. This principle relates to the theme of victims. Zehr (2002) explains this fifth principle as the offender acknowledging the wrongdoing and taking “active steps” to repair the harm to the victim and community (pp.27). He does, however, clarify that in more serious offenses the harm cannot be repaired, so symbolic steps such as acknowledgement and responsibility are helpful for victims.

In this case, harms to direct victims cannot be repaired, however CoSA helps a core member to ensure a crime like that will not happen again. Core members often discuss their victims in the circle, and how to prevent further victimization. One core member noted that “At the end of the day, the only things that we can really do to repair that harm [to the victim] is just to prove that we’ve put in the work and that we’ve been doing good, and not ever fall back into something like that or hurt anybody ever again.” This same core member revealed that he ran into his victim once while he was walking back to the halfway house, and said that he avoided eye contact with her and continued to walk past. He acknowledged that he did not want her to feel unsafe just because he was no longer in prison, as “what she went through is bad enough.” Things such as taking accountability for their actions and preventing their crime cycle from reoccurring would be helpful to victims in terms of putting things right.

Putting things right also involves addressing the causes of crime (Zehr, 2002). As I claimed earlier, core members have also been victims of harm and these harms may contribute to the cause of their crimes (Zehr, 2002). Though this does not excuse a core member's actions, it is important for the community or volunteer members to acknowledge the core member's victimization or harms. In order to change a core member's behaviour, sometimes these harms may require repairing (Zehr, 2002). I believe that the volunteer members do a great job at addressing a core member's harms in the circle, and that they provide the tools necessary to put right the wrongs done to the core member. This could be as simple as providing him support when he does not get it from anyone else, or finding him a counsellor/program to help him overcome his harms.

The interviews also supported the theoretical framework of my thesis. CoSA does an excellent job at providing a core member with social capital. When a core member is involved in a circle, their support and social network grows extensively. Not only does a core member form friendships with volunteer members, but they also become connected to other community resources such as church groups or counselling. Sometimes core members are able to get a job or find a good place to live with the help of their volunteers, which is something they might not have previously had access to. Social capital can be seen in the themes of friendship and community building.

CoSA also supports Llewellyn's relational theory. Volunteer members of CoSA help a core member to understand the ripple-effects of their crime. The connection that the core members form with the volunteers allows the core member to truly understand themselves and what they have done wrong. Llewellyn states that in order for those involved to be well and flourish, relationships marked by "equal respect, concern, and dignity" must be involved (pp.93).

CoSA succeeds at this as the core members truly respect their volunteers, and the volunteers have respect and concern for the core members, and see their true human dignity. CoSA certainly does not allow a core member to stand alone, and they help to repair the community relationships that were fractured as a result of crime. The relational theory relates to my themes of friendship, accountability, and community building/healing.

Finally, CoSA volunteers use reintegrative shaming with the core members. When a core member tells the volunteer members what they have done, volunteers let them know that their actions were wrong, but they still value the core member as a person. The volunteer members also hold the core member accountable for their actions, but do not judge them in the process. All of the participants spoke to the harmful effects of labelling a core member, and this can be seen in my theme of stigma. Volunteer members acknowledged the fact that a core member is still a human being and deserves to be treated with love, support and respect just like everyone else.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the interviews that I performed with volunteer and core members of CoSA Halifax, I can conclude that Circles of Support and Accountability can be considered restorative justice. The five themes that I gathered from the interviews aligned with Howard Zehr's five principles of restorative justice as well as theories relating to restorative justice. While CoSA cannot involve the core member's direct victim(s), it does involve "secondary victims," as well as the community, the core member (offender), and family members or friends of the core member in order to address the harms that resulted from his crimes. The core member's circle does an

outstanding job at holding them accountable for his actions, and also provides them with the support necessary for staying on the path of a crime free life in the community.

I found the research method (unstructured, face-to-face interviews) extremely beneficial. By using a narrative approach and asking participants to tell me stories, I gathered much more information than I might have if I used a different method. The interviews felt like more of a conversation than an interview, and some participants revealed that the interviews were almost therapeutic. Without having a strict interview guide, I could probe for more information where I felt necessary. This allowed me to hear about different experiences that I would not have expected otherwise (for example, learning about a core member's girlfriend attending his circle meetings). Although difficult to get a detailed response from participants at times, overall this method was a great fit for my research.

Limitations to my research include the small sample size, bias in analysis, lack of time, recruiting method, and lack of experience. First, I used a very small sample size for my interviews, and all participants were members of CoSA Halifax. This is an issue because some of my participants may have been members of the same CoSA circle, and would have had similar experiences. I also may have gotten very different responses had I interviewed members of CoSA from all over Canada. Second, my analysis may have been biased, as I was the one who interpreted the interviews and came up with my own themes. Third, I had a very limited amount of time to conduct my research, as this is an honours thesis. By the time I received ethics approval, I only had two months to complete my research. If I had more time, I could have performed more interviews and had different results. Fourth, the recruitment method could have resulted in bias. The coordinator of CoSA Halifax selected participants who would be interested in participating in my study – for this reason, I only heard from those who had a positive attitude

toward CoSA. I did not get any information from those who might not have had the best experience with CoSA. Finally, prior to doing this research, I had no experience conducting interviews. Perhaps if I were a more experienced interviewer I would have received more in-depth responses to my questions.

Implications of my research suggest that since CoSA is classified as a restorative justice program, it should be funded by the federal government as such. My research has also filled the gap in literature surrounding restorative justice for sex offenders after they are released from prison. Finally, my research proves that CoSA is a restorative justice program, and solves any confusion about the labelling of the program.

In terms of future research, I would expand my sample size and population. I would like to use the same method, but interview core, volunteer and staff members of CoSA programs across Canada (possibly even worldwide). I think it would be interesting to see how members' experiences differ depending on the location and beliefs of the communities they are in.

## References

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In Richardson, J. (Ed.) *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). NY: Greenwood. Retrieved from <http://www.socialcapitalgateway.org>
- Bouffard, J., Cooper, M., Bergseth, K. (2016). The effectiveness of various restorative justice interventions on recidivism outcomes among juvenile offenders. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*
- Braithwaite, J. (1989). *Crime, shame and reintegration*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Brunilda, P., & Sten, M. K. (2011). Dangerous liaisons?: A feminist and restorative approach to sexual assault. *Temida*, 14(1), 49-65. doi:10.2298/TEM1101049P.
- CoSA Halifax (2017). CoSA Funding Cut. Retrieved from <http://www.hcc-cosa.ca/cosahalifax/>
- Crocker, Diane. (2015). Implementing and Evaluating Restorative Justice Projects in Prison. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 26(1), 45-64.
- Fox, K. J. (2016). Civic commitment: Promoting desistance through community integration. *Punishment & Society*, 18(1), 68-94. doi:10.1177/1462474515623102
- Fox, K. J. (2017). Contextualizing the policy and pragmatics of reintegrating sex offenders. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 29(1), 28-50. doi:10.1177/1079063215574711
- Government of Canada. (2017). Funding announced for expansion of circles of support and accountability model across canada. Retrieved from [https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2017/05/funding\\_announcedforexpansionofcirclesofsupportandaccountability.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2017/05/funding_announcedforexpansionofcirclesofsupportandaccountability.html)
- Hannem, S. (2013). Experiences in reconciling risk management and restorative justice. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 57(3), 269-288. doi:10.1177/0306624X11432538
- Hannem, S., & Petrunik, M. (2007). Circles of support and accountability: A community justice initiative for the reintegration of high risk sex offenders. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 10(2), 153-171. doi:10.1080/10282580701372046
- Höing, M., Bogaerts, S., & Vogelvang, B. (2013). Circles of support and accountability: How and why they work for sex offenders. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice*, 13(4), 267-295. doi:10.1080/15228932.2013.808526

- Julich, S. (2010). Restorative justice and gendered violence in New Zealand: A glimmer of hope. In Ptacek, J. (Ed.), *Restorative justice and violence against women* (pp. 239-254). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Koss, M. P. (2014). The RESTORE program of restorative justice for sex crimes. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 29(9), 1623-1660. doi:10.1177/0886260513511537
- Laprairie, C. (1995). Altering Course: New Directions in Criminal Justice: Sentencing Circles and Family Group Conferences. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 28, 78-99.
- Llewellyn, J. (2012). Restorative justice: thinking relationally about justice. In Downie, J. & Llewellyn, J. (Eds.), *Being relational: reflections on relational theory and health law* (pp. 89-108). Vancouver, B.C: UBC Press.
- Maxwell, G.M., Morris, A. (2001). *Restorative Justice for juveniles: conferencing, mediation & circles*. Portland, OR: Hart Publishing.
- Petrunik, M. G. (2002). *Managing unacceptable risk: Sex offenders, community response, and social policy in the united states and canada* doi:10.1177/0306624X02464009
- Pranis, K. (2005). *The little book of circle processes*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.
- Settles, T. (2009). Restorative reentry: A strategy to improve reentry outcomes by enhancing social capital. *Victims & Offenders*, 4(3), 285-302. doi:10.1080/15564880903048560
- Stuart, B. (1996). Circle sentencing in Canada: a partnership of the community and the criminal justice system. *International Journal of comparative and applied criminal justice*. 20(2), 291-309.
- Wilson, C. (2013). *Interview Techniques for UX Practitioners: A User-Centered Design Method*. Burlington: Morgan Kaufmann.
- Wilson, R. J. (2005). In Picheca J. E., Prinzo M., Correctional Service Canada. Research Branch and Canadian Electronic Library (Firm) (Eds.), *Circles of support & accountability an evaluation of the pilot project in south-central ontario*. Ottawa, Ont.: Ottawa, Ont.: Correctional Service of Canada.
- Zehr, H. (2002). *The little book of restorative justice*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Guide

Finding Common Ground on a Journey from Pain to Hope: CoSA as Restorative Justice

Introduce myself and the project

Review the consent sheet and checklist

Opening Questions:

1. How long have you been involved with CoSA?
2. How did you find out about/get involved with CoSA? (Who told you/contacted you?)

Story Questions:

1. Can you please tell me about the first time you attended a CoSA circle?  
Prompts: What happened? And then what happened? Ok, what happened next?
2. Can you tell me about the best CoSA circle meeting you have ever had?  
Prompts: What did you like about it? Was there anything specific about this circle that stood out to you?
3. Can you tell me about the most difficult CoSA circle that you've attended? / Was there ever a circle that made you feel as if you might quit?  
Prompts: What wasn't working for you?
4. Could you describe some other activities that you have done related to CoSA? Something that you might have done outside of the circle?  
Prompts: Did you enjoy it? What did you like/dislike?
5. Looking over my notes and going backwards a bit, can you tell me more about <INSERT SPECIFIC EVENT/EXPERIENCE>?
6. If you had to give your experience with CoSA a title, what would it be?

#### Probes:

How did you feel about that?

How would you describe the experience?

What was significant about it?

What influenced this story and how it played out?

What might have made this experience better or worse?

## APPENDIX B

**\*Recruitment script to send to Rob Eldford\*** electronically

Dear Rob,

As you may know, I will be conducting a research project for my undergraduate honours thesis in criminology. For my thesis, I will be looking at CoSA. This research will involve interviewing 5-6 volunteer and core members from CoSA Halifax in order to gain insight into their experiences with the program.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in the research as someone to be interviewed. The interview will ask open-ended questions relating to your experience with CoSA. I am interested in knowing about your best circles, and some that may not have been so great. The interview should last around an hour and will take place in a local coffee shop.

I would also like to invite you to reach out to some core members and volunteer members of CoSA Halifax who you think might be interested in participating in the research. I will provide you with a recruitment script to send to those members asking them to give their permission for me to contact them. Please note that I will not be letting you know whether or not they decide to participate in the research.

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,  
Larissa Doran

## APPENDIX C

**\*Recruitment script for Rob to send to CoSA members\*** electronically or verbally

Dear <INSERT NAME OF CORE/VOLUNTEER MEMBER>,

An undergraduate student at Saint Mary's University will be conducting a research project about CoSA as part of her honours degree in criminology. This research will involve interviewing 5-6 volunteer and core members from CoSA Halifax in order to gain insight into their experiences with the program.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in the research as someone to be interviewed. The interview will ask open-ended questions relating to your experience with CoSA. She is interested in knowing about your best circles, and some that may not have been so great. The interview should last around an hour and will take place in a local coffee shop.

If you are willing to participate in the research, and would like to give her permission to contact you, please let me know and I will provide her with your contact information. If you have any other questions or would like to contact her about the research directly you can contact her at:

Larissa Doran  
larissa.doran@smu.ca

**APPENDIX D**

**\*Recruitment script from me to CoSA members\*** electronically or verbally

Dear <INSERT NAME OF VOLUNTEER/CORE MEMBER>

Thank you for your interest in my research project! As you may already know, I am an undergraduate student at Saint Mary's University doing my honours degree in criminology. For my research, I will be studying CoSA and would like to know more about the program from a volunteer/core member's point of view.

If you are willing, I would like to invite you to participate in an interview. It should last no longer than an hour, and I will be asking you about your experiences with CoSA Halifax. Please let me know what days and times you would be available, and we can discuss a local coffee shop to meet at that works for both of us.

Thank you in advance,  
Larissa Doran

**Appendix E: Consent Form**



**Finding Common Ground on a Journey from Pain to Hope: CoSA as Restorative Justice**

**Would you like to be part of this research?**

I invite you to be part of a research study to explore restorative justice and CoSA members' experiences with the program. This form will tell you a bit more about the study, the kinds of questions I will be asking and how I will protect your identity. It will ask your permission to participate.

**Who is the researcher?**

The project is being led by Larissa Doran, an Honours student in the Department of Criminology.

**What is this study about?**

The study is about restorative justice and whether or not CoSA can be considered restorative justice.

**Who is being included in the research?**

Volunteer and core members of CoSA Halifax.

**What are you asking me to do?**

An unstructured, face-to-face interview about your experiences with CoSA.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at any time, prior to the interview, without any consequences.

**Will I be compensated for my time?**

No

**What kinds of questions will you be asking?**

I will be asking for stories of your experience with CoSA Halifax. I will be asking you to tell me about circles that you have been a part of that were good, and some that might have been difficult. I will also be asking you to tell me about other experiences that you may have had that were related to CoSA.

**Will you be taping the interview?**

Maybe. If you agree, then the interview will be recorded. If not, I will take notes.

**How long will it take?**

Each interview will take between one to two hours.

**What if I decide that I don't like the questions?**

You can decide not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable but still participate in the interview.

**What if I do not want to finish the interview?**

You can leave at any time without penalty

**What if I decide later that I don't want to be included in the study?**

Once the interviews are done it will not be possible for you to withdraw. The information taken away from the interview will be de-identified within 2 weeks.

**Are there any risks to me doing the interviews?**

The risk is very low. It may be that you find some of the stories uncomfortable to talk about. If you think you will be uncomfortable talking about your experience you may want to reconsider taking part in the research. There is also a risk that someone in your circle may be able to identify you based on the information/story that you provide.

**Are there any penalties if I refuse?**

No. I will not share with anyone your decision to participate or not to participate in this research.

**Why should I do the interview?**

Taking part in the study may not help you directly. The research may contribute to a better understanding of the CoSA program, as well as more funding for the program.

**What will you do with the information I give you?**

Without your explicit permission to share your story beyond this interview, I will not share with anyone else.

**How will you protect my identity?**

I will protect your identity in several ways:

- I will store the signed consent forms in locked filing cabinets;
- I will store paper records in locked cabinets at the university;
- Anything stored on a computer will be password protected;
- I will destroy records of these interviews five years after I have completely published the results;
- I will hide your identity in anything I write or say about these interviews (will not use real names, any identifying information in recordings will be recorded over, consent forms will be stored separately from recordings, I will not report things about you that are unique);
- I will not circulate any data that include identifying information about you or anyone else.

**Are there any limits to confidentiality?**

Yes. I am obligated to report any disclosures of child abuse. Also, if the police have any reason to subpoena my records, I may be obligated to provide them. But remember, I am asking about your experiences in the CoSA circles, NOT your offenses.

**How will you protect the identity of the people in my circle?**

You should avoid using any names when talking about your circles. If you do use names, I will delete them from the recordings right away after the interview.

**Will I be able to review the information collected at the end of interview?**

No.

**Who do I contact in case this interview is upsetting?**

Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team – (902) 429-817 or 1-888-429-8167 (toll free)

Rob Elford – [cosahalifax.coordinator@gmail.com](mailto:cosahalifax.coordinator@gmail.com) or (902)-292-7995

**Who do I contact if I have complaints?**

Saint Mary's University Research  
Ethics Board

902-420-5728  
[ethics@smu.ca](mailto:ethics@smu.ca)

Diane Crocker  
Professor

902-420-5875  
[Diane.crocker@smu.ca](mailto:Diane.crocker@smu.ca)

Jason Ivanoff  
Chair, Research Ethics Board

902-491-6345  
[jason.ivanoff@smu.ca](mailto:jason.ivanoff@smu.ca)

reference REB file #18-167

**This research has been reviewed and  
approved by the Saint Mary's  
University  
Research Ethics Board.**

Please keep a copy of this sheet for  
your records.

**Appendix E**  
**Restorative Justice and CoSA: Unstructured Interviews**

Please review the following and put checks in the boxes indicating your agreement and consenting to participate in the research.

- The researcher has described this study and has answered my questions to my satisfaction
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may leave the interview at any time or I may choose not to answer any questions
- I agree to have the interview audio taped
- I understand that the researcher will remove any identifying information from transcripts
- I agree that the researcher may use direct quotations from this interview, but they will use them in a way that protects my identity
- I agree to allow the researcher to share records from this interview with other researchers involved in the project. I understand that he/she will be sure that any information that may identify me has been removed first.
- I understand what this study is about, appreciate the risks and benefits, and that by consenting I agree to take part in this research study and do not waive any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

I have consented to participate in the interview under the terms outlined on the consent form.

---

Name

Signature

Date



