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Restorative Justice Approaches in the Workplace: A Systematic Review Protocol

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Abstract

Restorative justice (RJ) is an approach to justice that aims to address unmet needs in traditional retributive justice processes. After a harmful event, needs can arise from the person harmed, the responsible person, and the community. The development of RJ in recent decades has focused on criminal and school contexts. However, other applications have emerged, albeit to a lesser extent, in areas such as socio-environmental contexts, social assistance, and organizational settings, revealing the potential of RJ approaches in these settings. Conflicts and harm also occur in workplace settings, which makes it possible to study the application of RJ in that context. Some studies have addressed this issue, but there is a lack of a systematic review that synthesizes the knowledge, presents the evidence, and provides an overview of the field. This systematic review, therefore, has the following objective: to synthesize RJ approaches with internal participants in the workplace. Secondly, it is hoped that this discussion will highlight the gaps in the field, generating avenues for research, policy, and practice. In this protocol, we present a plan for the systematic review on this topic. The method focuses on synthesis and thematic analysis. Two researchers will refine the database results against the eligibility criteria. We hope to include relevant studies on the topic. This study contributes to the development of research, providing results that offer insight into the current state of the scientific field in this domain.

Keywords

restorative justice, workplace, organization, systematic literature review, protocol

Introduction

Restorative justice (RJ) emphasizes the importance of elevating the roles (which, under the retributive justice vision, are often not achieved) of the person harmed, while holding the responsible person accountable to the individuals who have suffered harm. This involves restoring emotional and material means to the person harmed, providing opportunities for dialogue, and involving negotiation and problem-solving (Umbreit, 2001). In RJ, the person harmed is considered the party who has suffered harm, and the responsible person is regarded as the party responsible for it. In this context, RJ can enhance the sense of community safety, closure, and problem-solving, with attention to three key groups: the person harmed, the responsible person, and the community (Umbreit, 2001).

Considering the variety of applications of RJ as proposed by Menkel-Meadow (2007), in which it can be extended to various social and political arenas, some research has focused

on studying its application in workplace settings and in the organizational field over the last decades (Alcover et al., 2021;

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Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Konradt et al., 2020; Okimoto et al., 2021; Paul, 2017). This highlights the importance and opportunities in this field of study.

Conflicts and harm can occur in organizations, and there are possibilities for applying RJ approaches in this context. Organizational justice, traditionally divided into distributive justice, procedural justice, and relational justice (Goodstein & Aquino, 2009), has seen increasing scientific attention and growth in recent years (Konradt et al., 2020). Paul (2017) argues for the need to develop research on RJ in an organizational context. RJ has been gaining popularity in organizations, as it is positioned to mitigate the “negative” effects of retributive justice (Boskeljon-Horst et al., 2023). Kidder (2007) views RJ as a means of rebuilding trust and repairing harmed relationships in the workplace.

Considering the extensive range of applications RJ (Menkel-Meadow, 2007) has demonstrated, it has emerged to support this possibility in specific workplace (Butterfield et al., 2021). However, after preliminary searches in the Web of Science, Scopus, and PROSPERO databases, no systematic review focused on RJ in the workplace was identified, suggesting a research gap. Given the development of the topic and its emerging characteristics, together with the importance of the precepts of RJ, some of which have personal and relational transformation as their objectives (Zerh, 2002) and, considering the predominance of the retributive view of conflict justice, the future systematic review will make a substantial contribution to the literature, practice, and policy by unraveling this domain, and synthesizing the empirical RJ literature with a focus on organizations and the workplace context. To the best of our knowledge, this is a pioneering review.

Neale et al. (2018) cite worker “wrongdoing” as a broad field that can encompass anything from deviance in the workplace to bullying, revenge, and incivility. Their study focuses on interpersonal relationships and the intention to harm another party and excluded crimes against the organization and property (Neale et al., 2018). The review seeks to find a similar focus, considering studies in which participants are part of an organization and focusing on the workplace within organizations, without being limited to crimes or harm specifically, and also taking into account the preventive or conflict-oriented nature of this justice paradigm.

Considering this gap in research, the review addresses the following research question: What RJ approaches have been empirically researched in the context of the workplace? The review aims to synthesize RJ approaches with individuals internal to the organization (internal participants) in the workplace. Secondly, it is hoped to discuss the gaps that can generate avenues for research, policy, and practice. It also contributes to the development of research in this area. This review could facilitate further theorizing, implementation, and evaluation of RJ approaches in the

workplace, not only by researchers but also by practitioners and policymakers.

Methods

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (PRISMA-P 2015) guidelines were employed in the development of this protocol (Moher et al., 2015). This manuscript presents a systematic review study protocol that aims to synthesize RJ approaches with internal participants in workplaces. Some examples of RJ approaches include Peacemaking Circles, Family Group Conferences, Community Conferences, and Victim-Offender Mediation (McCold, 2000). There is no exhaustive list of RJ approaches; other nomenclatures are defined in the literature and practice. However, as the list of RJ practices and programs is not exhaustive, we will interpret the research landscape on RJ in the workplace broadly. The research strategy will not be restricted to a specific RJ program or approach. We aim to find several new RJ practices or characteristics in this context.

As this study focuses on the social sciences, the PICo (Population, Phenomenon of Interest, Context) approach (Stern et al., 2014) will be used as a guide for research design, guiding questions, and research strategy. The phenomenon of interest is RJ (without specific practices or models), given the recent evolution of this domain in the organizational field in the workplace (understanding the workplace as spaces in formal organizations). The literature on RJ in the workplace often mentions the workplace and organizations, which were considered when defining the eligibility criteria and research strategy.

Regarding the participants, we will consider those who are internally located in the workplace, such as managers, employees, supervisors, individuals, and organizational units. The review does not focus on external participants such as clients, users of the justice system, students, citizens who use public services, RJ, and juvenile justice. The context is the workplace in organizations. The review focuses on RJ (without defining types, considered broadly) in the workplace (with intra-organizational participants and with the macro context of RJ: workplace in organizations).

Search Strategy, Eligibility Criteria, and Electronic Sources of Information

The two databases comprising the largest literature sources for our analysis are Web of Science Core Collection Citation Indexes (topic) and Scopus-Elsevier (title, abstract, keywords). The bibliography will also be searched in the Science Direct database. The search strategy for identifying relevant studies will encompass three blocks of keywords: (I) restorative justice, (II) workplace, and (III) organizations. The draft search strategy string is designed for Scopus and will be adapted for use in other databases. These databases were

chosen because they are the most significant sources of studies on the subject and are international and multidisciplinary.

The review will include studies that address RJ in the workplace, provided that the participants, even in experimental research, are internal to the organization. Only articles from peer-reviewed journals and in English will be included. The choice of peer review encourages a better assessment of bias. The English language is a result of the research team's skills. There will be no time restriction, and only empirical articles (which contain a method, such as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) will be considered. This automatically excludes purely theoretical approaches.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- (i) Studies that address RJ in workplaces, provided that the participants, even in experimental studies, are internal to the organization.
- (i2) Articles with a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed approach from peer-reviewed journals.
- (i3) Articles in English.

Exclusion Criteria

- (e) Duplicate articles.
- (e1) Books, book chapters, opinion articles, conference/congress presentations, commentaries, editorial letters, reviews or similar, dissertations, and theses.
- (e2) Articles not available in open access or by the authors' institution.¹
- (e3) Systematic review studies, scoping, among others.
- (e4) Theoretical articles.
- (e5) Articles that do not address RJ in the workplace.
- (e6) Studies that address RJ in other environments, such as schools, the environmental, criminal, and health sectors, without addressing RJ in the workplace.
- (e7) Studies with participants outside the organization, such as clients, patients, citizens, public services, beneficiaries of the justice system, students, academics, and restorative juvenile justice.
- (e8) No metadata available/studies unavailable.

Data Management, Extraction, and Selection

The identification of studies in the databases will be conducted by two independent members of the research team using the search strategy. The identified studies will then have their metadata transferred to the Rayyan® software (Rayyan Systems Inc., Cambridge, US) - available at <https://www.rayyan.ai/>. The use of this software is common in systematic reviews due to its user-friendly interface and extensive resources. The choice of the Rayyan® software for managing the study selection process was based on its widespread use and suitability for systematic reviews (Oliveira et al., 2025). Rayyan® offers an intuitive interface that facilitates efficient screening (Reis

et al., 2023), duplicate detection, and collaborative review by multiple researchers. This aligns with our requirement for independent screening by two reviewers and arbitration by a third.

After transferring the metadata to the software Rayyan®, it will be screened by Reviewer 1 to detect and exclude duplicates (e) and document types that fall under the exclusion criterion (e1). The resulting articles will then be screened against the eligibility criteria by two reviewers analyzing titles and abstracts. A discussion will be held in case of disagreement. If the two reviewers cannot agree, the matter is referred to a third reviewer for arbitration. After this process in the Rayyan software, the potentially eligible articles and those marked as 'maybe' undergo full-text analysis. At this stage, Reviewer 1 will analyze all the texts for eligibility. Of these potentially eligible articles, Reviewer 2 will analyze a random sample of 20%. Any differences of opinion are referred to the Reviewer 3.

The selected articles will be included in the study. This general process involves selection and evaluation by two researchers, as well as a third reviewer for issues of disagreement. This, combined with the inclusion of only studies from peer-reviewed journals, will contribute to the assessment of the risk of bias. The general selection process will be outlined in a PRISMA flowchart, which is to be included in the review article. The articles selected for inclusion in the review will have the following data prioritized in the reading and data analysis: study participants, method, country, RJ approach, and main results. Metadata is also included in an extraction spreadsheet, such as the title of the study, the authors, the vehicle, and the year of publication. The purpose is to focus on the most relevant characteristics of the studies.

Data Analysis and Quality Assessment

An evaluation of the methodological quality of the studies will be conducted to assess potential bias. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) checklist applicable to both qualitative, quantitative and mixed studies (Hong et al., 2018; Pluye, 2011) will be applied to the studies included in five strands: list one for qualitative studies, list two for randomized quantitative studies, list three for non-randomized quantitative studies, list four for descriptive quantitative studies and list five for mixed-methods studies, combined with list one on the qualitative aspect or two, three or four for the corresponding quantitative aspect. However, given the development of the topic and the fact that a dichotomous list may not accurately reflect the true value of qualitative research, and considering the descriptive nature of the systematic review, even if the answers to some questions are negative, the studies may still be retained in the review. Any failure to meet the criteria will be reported in the review article. The initial filter questions will be applied before questions from qualitative, quantitative, or mixed studies, as shown in Table 1.

Given the focus of the review on the characteristics and gaps in the field, combined with the protocol's design, two approaches to analysis will be employed. The analysis of quantitative studies will rely on a narrative synthesis (textual description) to report the main results. The qualitative and mixed-methods studies will be subject to thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) to report the results and findings. Coding will be provided free of charge, line by line. The set of data with semantic similarity will be grouped into larger, categorical themes manually through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Discussion

RJ is commonly viewed as a set of values, principles, and guidelines that guide practice and can be implemented as an alternative paradigm of justice. It is currently studied in various contexts: school, environmental, criminal, youth, and work, for example (Amarini et al., 2024; Martinez et al., 2022; Paul, 2017; Zhang & Zhang, 2024). Its origin as a justice movement is linked to the need to rethink the roles and needs implicit in violations, which in the traditional Western justice process were not the primary focus (Zerh, 2002). For those who suffer harm, the needs center on four points: the need for information, truth-telling, empowerment, and restitution or vindication (Zerh, 2002). The practice and theory of RJ have been shaped by and have their origins linked to an effort to address these needs.

For those persons responsible, their needs primarily focus on addressing the harm, promoting personal transformation, and providing encouragement for reintegration. The community, which is often the object of secondary harm and has its own concerns, may also have responsibilities towards the persons harmed, the responsible persons, and itself. Its own needs may involve opportunities for building a sense of community and mutual responsibility, welfare obligations, and preventive actions (Zerh, 2002). The theoretical and practical founders of RJ (John Braithwaite, Howard Zehr, and Mark Umbreit) emphasize that it aims to transform our understanding of punishment (Menkel-Meadow, 2007), moving beyond conventional retributive justice.

RJ is also viewed as a method of conflict resolution, where the parties involved work to address the root cause of the conflict and meet the needs arising from the harm caused by the dispute, taking into account the interests of both the individuals involved and the community (Pfander, 2019). It encompasses various foundations and concepts that can be applied to diverse social and political contexts (Menkel-Meadow, 2007).

Some of these foundations focus on characteristics such as participation in a process of speaking and listening, narration of the facts that motivated the conflict, acknowledgement and understanding responsible person about responsibilities, voluntary apology, restitution to the person harmed,

Table 1. Initial Filter - Criteria for Methodological Quality - MMAT. Source: Pluye (2011)

N°	Filter questions (for all types)
1	Are there clear qualitative and quantitative research questions (or objectives*) or a straightforward mixed-methods question (or objective*)?
2	Did the data collected answer the research question (objective)? E.g., consider whether the follow-up period was long enough for the results to occur (for longitudinal studies or study components).

reintegration of the responsible person, reconciliation between the parties, among other characteristics in a process aimed at the future, to correct past facts, and rebuild new relationships (Menkel-Meadow, 2007).

McCold (2000) proposed a typology of RJ practices, categorizing them as “fully”, “mostly”, and “partially” restorative, based on their ability to meet the needs of the person harmed, the responsible person, and the community. Those that address all three aspects are considered “holistic restorative programs”; those that address two aspects are mainly restorative, and those that address one set of needs are partially restorative (McCold, 2000). Among the types described by McCold (2000) that are fully restorative are Peacemaking Circles, Family Group Conferences, and Community Conferences. The other classifications involve programs such as Victim-Offender Mediation, Therapeutic Communities, Positive Discipline, Victim Services, Reparative Councils, and Community Service for Offenders. “Restorative processes”, such as mediation, conciliation, conferencing, and sentencing circles, are cited in a resolution on restorative principles in criminal matters (United Nations, 2002). An RJ program combines restorative processes and results (United Nations, 2002).

RJ in organizations focuses on repairing harm and restoring relationships after harmful actions, and is particularly appropriate when one party has been offended by another, regardless of their organizational position or status, especially after a personal offense (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). The RJ approach of Zerh (1995), one of its precursors, when applied to organizations, involves aspects such as promoting and restoring personal trust (Alcover et al., 2021). A “restorative organization” would be geared towards negotiating tensions that can arise in spheres such as relationships, power, identity, and work, and involves a process of reflection and continuity characteristics (Paul, 2017).

In a context where the majority of systematic reviews are focused on health and related topics, what is the importance of this review? The results will support policy and practice. This review can facilitate the theorization, implementation, and evaluation of RJ in the workplace by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. The substantial contribution will be to identify gaps that can foster policy, research, and practice. This study is critical because it provides considerable benefits: it encourages the development of systematic reviews in the social science areas/research, it contributes to broadening public awareness of the diversity of possible approaches to RJ, the gaps identified provide insights for future research, managers of organizations will have current evidence of the application of RJ in work contexts, and it contributes broadly to the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. It is a study that provides policymakers with a basis for decision-making regarding RJ, and contributes to the development, consolidation, dissemination, and expansion of the topic at a global level.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Two of the authors (KBN e JT) have a published study potentially eligible for review.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated during the current study.

Note

1. The exclusion criterion (e2) was included to ensure the feasibility of accessing full-text articles for data extraction and analysis within the scope of our research resources.

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