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**Sweeney, Rowan ORCID: 0000-0003-4697-3302 (2023)  
Stretching the criminological imagination: the value of  
restorative justice as a topic and pedagogical tool. In:  
European Society of Criminology 23rd Annual Conference, 6th -  
9th September 2023, Florence, Italy. (Unpublished)**

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Stretching the  
criminological  
imagination:

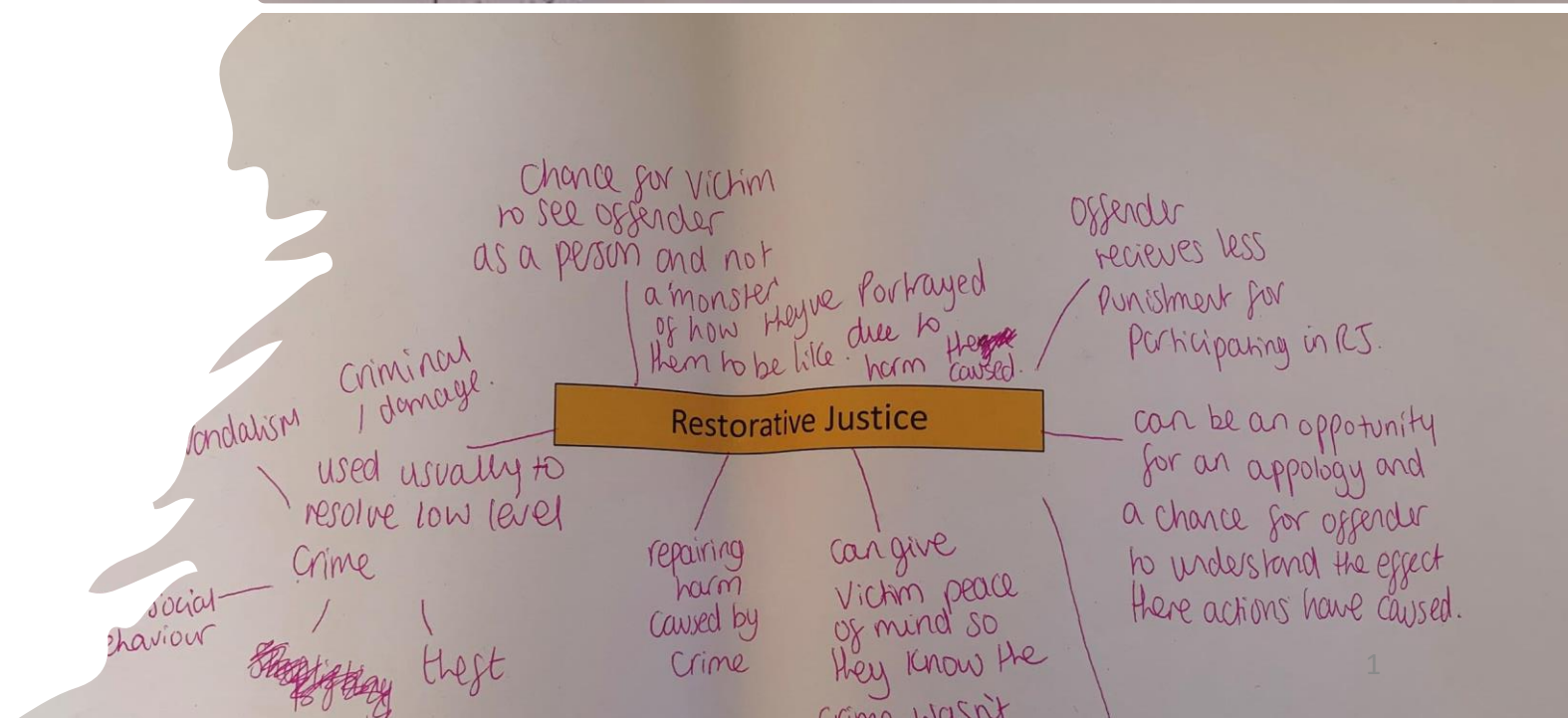
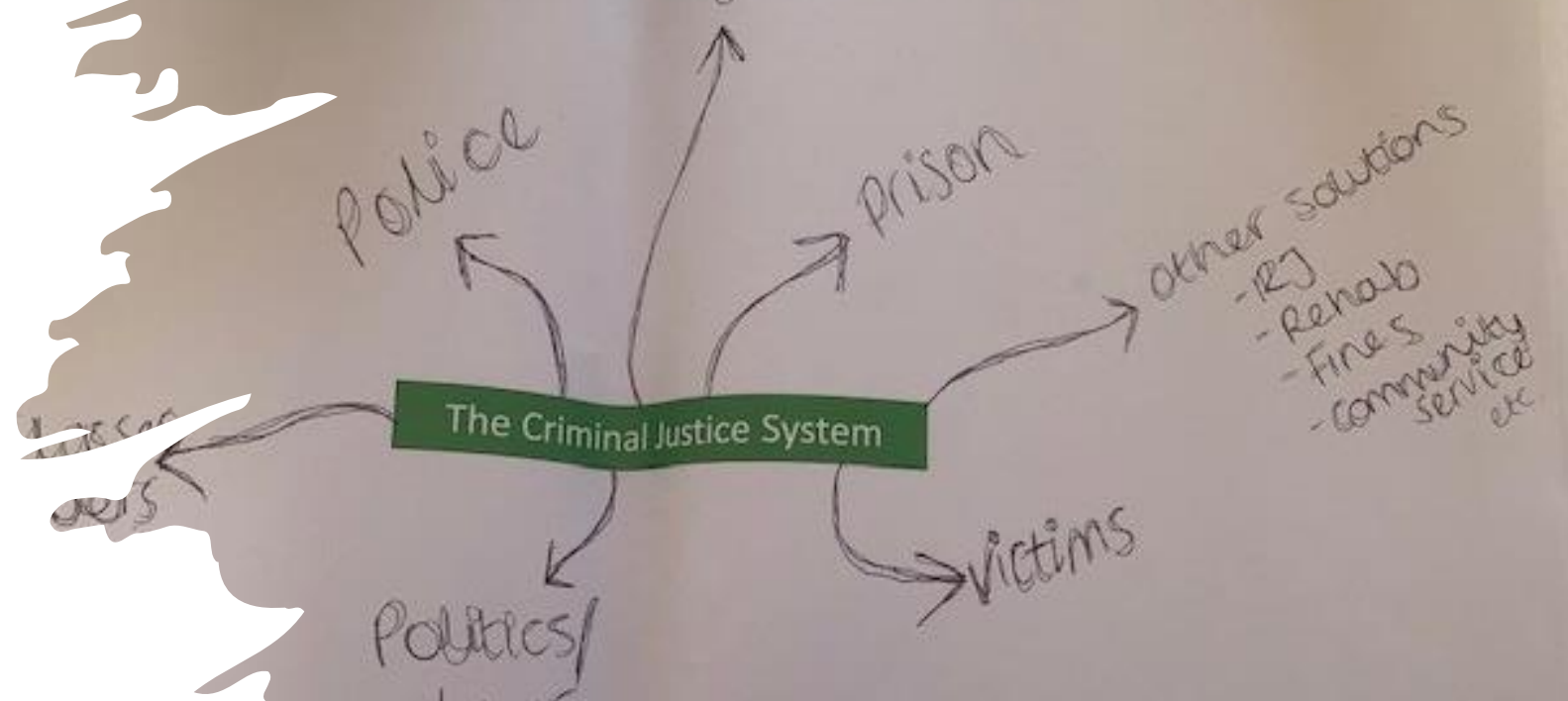
## the value of restorative justice as a topic and pedagogical tool

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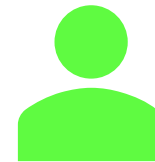
# Research design and methods



33 of 2,324 criminology modules with restorative justice



10 modules focused on restorative justice



Interviews with academic (10)

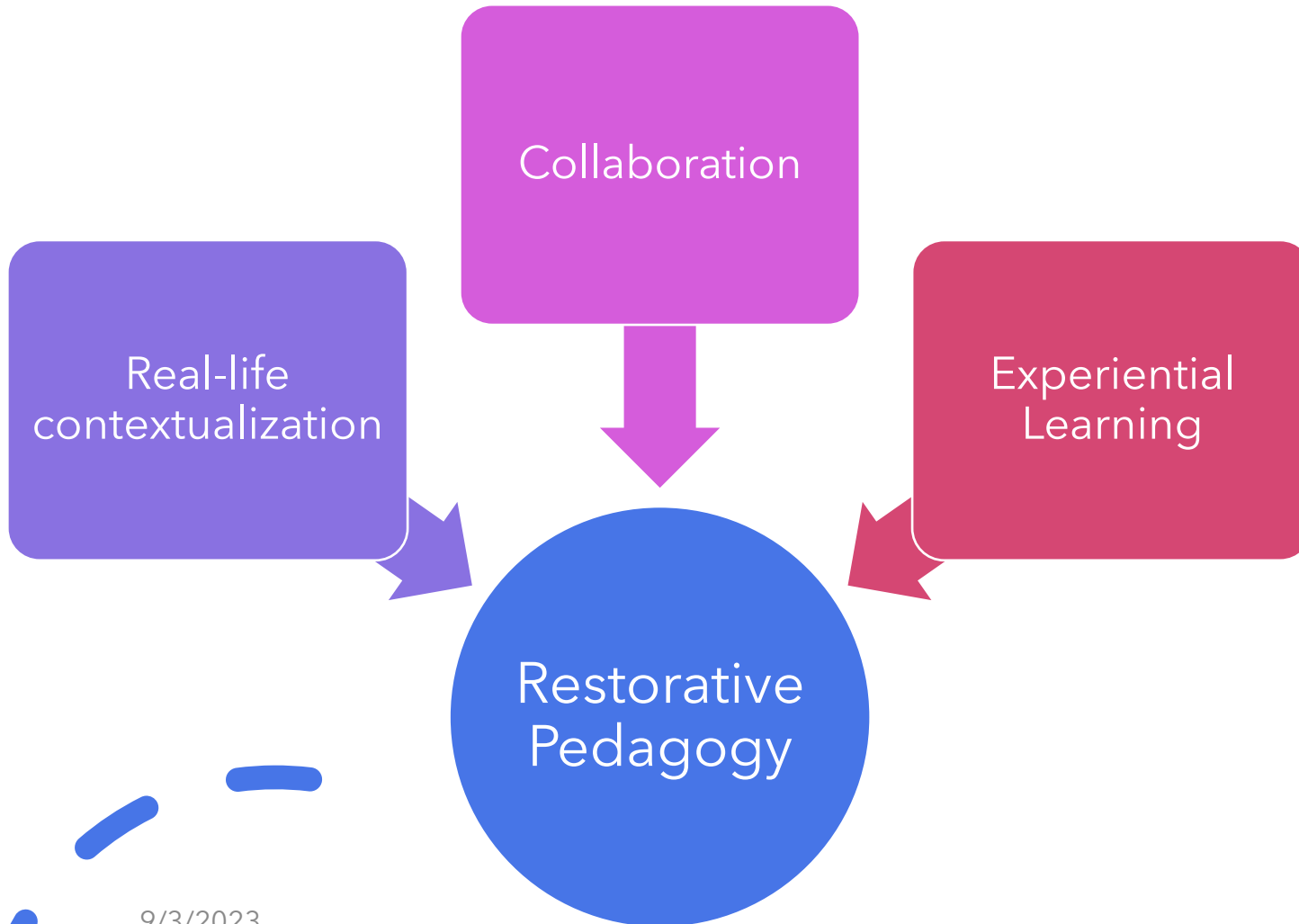


Focus groups with students (3)

# Criminological imagination

- The **sociological imagination** can enable the relationship between "*the personal troubles of milieu and the public issues of social structure*" to be recognised and understood (Mills 1959: 8).
- The **criminological imagination** centres on the need to encourage students to be critical and think beyond mainstream individualised narratives of crime and justice (Barton et al. 2010).
- Clear links to **critical pedagogy** as it supports learners to become empowered to work against the oppression of themselves and others, enabling the transformative power of education (Freire 1970; Barton et al. 2010; Pointer et al. 2020)

# Restorative practice as a pedagogical tool



Restorative practice is a way of being, a style which informs “daily interactions with family, friends, colleagues, and indeed the general public” (Hopkins 2015: 11).

# Real-life contexulisation

- Videos
- Case studies
- Guest speakers
- Conference attendance

"It's easy to dehumanise people a lot, you're generalising people into boxes, and you don't look at that person as a person anymore, it's just a theory, it's just number. Whereas seeing things in videos it does help putting it into context."  
(Year 2 Student)

"Real world examples help bridge the gap between the conceptual and the actual"  
[Interview 8].

"I liked the flow of it [the restorative justice module] and how the teaching was, it was very different. I think the videos were really important. Because instead of looking at a piece of paper and going, well this is how it's meant to be, when you're seeing restorative justice in real life it makes you understand. (Year 2 Student)

# Collaboration

- Debate
- Group working
- Discussion
- Removal of power imbalances
- Less formal class structure

"And so you know, that kind of element is really really important, and the kind of group work and the facilitating discussions and their ability to feel safe with me, but also to challenge what I'm saying... You know... and trying to facilitate that environment whereby people feel...safe."  
(Interview 2)

"Yeah, we try to discuss, we try to participate, the sessions tend to be very informal, in the spirit of restorative justice, encouraging participation, debate, often people disagree, but it tends to be a very nice debate."  
(Interview 5)

"I think having the different elements of it - rather than just having a three-hour lecture - it was group work and talking to people about it and I did really enjoy that style of teaching."  
(Year 3 student)



# Experiential learning

- Restorative practice
- Role play of restorative justice encounters
- Sharing circles
- Restorative problem-solving tasks

"My favourite thing was we did check-ins every week, every morning, and to start with I was petrified, I wasn't really listening to what other people were saying, I was so nervous about what I was going to say. But by the third week, we'd go round pass the ball round and say how we're feeling, I really like to see how that was applied in our lectures, so what we were learning we could see it, we could feel it a bit more."  
(Year 3 Student)

"What's the relevance to restorative justice, why are we doing this, what have you learned from this exercise? So, they make some very good observations, how this is a participatory model, everybody gets a chance, they are all equal, nobody forces a decision, as a teacher I'm participating in the circle, I also get the chance to make my own rearrangements, but I don't tell them when to stop. You often get one or two people who continue rearranging the structure when everybody else has already finished, and usually they don't, these people don't like the other person they are with and we have a discussion, is this about Lego or is this something much bigger? So, techniques like that, I think they help understand some concepts, and experience some key principles of restorative justice". (Interview 5)



## Restorative justice as a topic

“The value of restorative justice I think to any area of criminological concern is that it provides a useful counter to what happens in criminology, but also then I think conceptually and theoretically gets us to start thinking about the way that we approach our own work and lives”  
(Interview 2)

# Critical Criminological Thinking

## Questioning restorative justice

- "I assumed before it was only for like minor crimes... so for it to be put on physical, serious crimes you think - how could that work?"  
(Year 2 Student)
- "Is it not minimising things that are seen as minor crimes? Because that might not be minor to somebody else? Just because you don't go from one extreme to another, trauma is trauma, isn't it? It's how you take it, even if it's a minor crime in the eyes of the law, that could have an impact on that person hugely."  
(Year 3 Student)

## Restorative justice as a problematising lens

"I mean at undergraduate level I think it is important in what will be opening up people's minds to alternative ways of thinking. So that's the real value, yeah, it's not so much the content... yeah, the content is clearly important, but not as centrally important I think as a lot of people regard it. I think at undergraduate level it's really about trying to get people to think, and thinking is hard like! Restorative justice is good for that."  
(Interview 6)

# Imagining otherwise

## Humanising Criminology

"I think when you think of justice you always think of justice for the victim, you never think, right okay, this offender has committed a crime but why have they done that? Because they could be suffering just as much as the victim is, and there's so many reasons why people commit crime, not just because they're a bad person, they should have that chance to speak to the victim...So, it's a good way of seeing it from both perspectives then. But yeah, I think it's really good."

(Year 2 student)

## Students as social actors

"If I see someone acting up, instead of thinking, oh they're bad, I think of the restorative justice module and think, yeah there is other stuff going on with them. I've got a different mindset now almost; I try to think about two sides."

(Year 3 Student)

# Conclusion

Critical  
Thinking

Imagining  
Otherwise

Humanisation

Social Action



Thank you

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# Conclusion



Restorative pedagogy offers an **innovative and valuable approach to teaching and learning in criminology**, and beyond.



Through real-life examples, collaboration, and experiential learning **complex, abstract, concepts (like restorative justice) are relatable and understandable for students.**



Restorative justice as a **topic and tool humanises topics and concepts encouraging critical thinking, imagining otherwise and social action** among students.