SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ EDITRICE

Work published in open access form
and licensed under Creative Commons
Attribution – NonCommercial
ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

© Author(s)
E-ISSN 2724-2943
ISSN 2723-973X

Psychology Hub (2026)
XLIII, 2.1 (Special Issue), 85-94

Article info

Submitted: 10 April 2026
Accepted: 21 July 2026
DOI: 10.13133/2724-2943/19354

Restorative and Punitive Attitudes: A Qualitative Study Toward a Preliminary Conceptual Model

Lucrezia Perrella[1]*, Rita Zarbo[2], Ernesto Lodi[1], Paola Magnano[2] and Patrizia Patrizi[1]

[1] *Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sassari, Sassari, Italy*

[2] *Department of Human and Social Sciences, University of Enna Kore, Enna, Italy*

Abstract

Over the past two decades, research on punitive attitudes has grown, yet a precise definition of the construct remains elusive. Similarly, the concept of restorative attitude, introduced by Zehr in 2002, has received limited empirical attention. Existing studies have also rarely explored the potential relationship between restorative and punitive attitudes. To address this gap, this study aims to provide preliminary qualitative evidence to support the plausibility of a restorative-punitive framework and to explore its potential dimensions, to be tested in future quantitative studies.

A qualitative study design was employed, involving 81 participants: 26 experts in restorative justice (Italian and European) who took part in structured interviews, and 55 university students who completed an open-ended questionnaire.

The results revealed a polarisation in representations of the meaning of justice, highlighting, on the one hand, themes related to control and punishment and, on the other, themes related to support, rehabilitation, equity, and relationships. Expert interviews identified empathy, responsibility, respect and sense of justice as dimensions frequently associated with restorative attitude.

Overall, the convergence of theoretical contributions and the data from questionnaires and interviews provided preliminary support for the plausibility of a restorative-punitive framework. Because the study was exploratory and qualitative, the proposed continuum should be interpreted as a theoretical hypothesis requiring further empirical testing. The findings suggest that restorative and punitive attitudes may represent contrasting orientations for interpreting and responding to harm, while also highlighting the need for further research to examine their structure, dimensionality and measurement.

Keywords: restorative justice; attitudes; qualitative method; psychology

*Corresponding author.
Lucrezia Perrella, Department
of Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Sassari
Via Roma, 151, 07100
Sassari, Italy
E-mail: lperrella@uniss.it
(L. Perrella)

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, several studies have been carried out on punitive attitude or, more generally, on the punishment-related attitudes. Despite this, they still fail to provide a clear definition of the punitive attitude construct. In addition, although Howard Zehr first spoke of restorative attitude in 2002, the concept has not been sufficiently theorised and investigated as an existing, operationalizable and thus measurable construct. Moreover, the studies carried out so far do not consider the declination of the construct of punitive attitude, which could be placed in the extreme polarity of a continuum that, on the contrary, comes to be configured in its counterpart of restorative attitude (Zehr, 2002).

Therefore, the need to operationalise the punitive and restorative attitude construct stems from the gaps found in the literature. The literature, while including in sporadic instances the exploration (e.g. Adriaenssen & Aertsen, 2015; Kuhn, 1993) and measurement (e.g. Roberts & Indermaur, 2007) of punitive attitude in response to a norm-violating event (e.g. crime), remains limited and does not define it as a construct. Other studies have focused on attitudes about criminal justice issues (Mandracchia et al., 2013) and on the motivations and hidden elements that promote the tendency in individuals to condemn or punish (Plantz et al., 2023). Furthermore, although there are several scales in the literature relating to the revengeful attitude (Ruggi et al., 2012; Sommers et al., 2002), i.e., the tendency of people to act after an injury suffered through revenge and violence (Aquino et al., 2001), they do not differentiate it from the punitive attitude: revengeful attitude and punitive attitude cannot be considered to be overlapping.

Based on these premises, the aim of the research, part of a broader study, was to empirically substantiate the continuum of the restorative/punitive attitude construct by identifying its component dimensions. Differently from the punitive attitude, which has been defined in previous studies (i.e., Adriaenssen & Aertsen, 2015; Payne et al., 2004; Stalans, 2009), a clear definition of the restorative attitude is still lacking; so, we have started our research with a qualitative study aimed at identifying the core components of restorative attitude.

Despite the growing body of literature on punishment and restorative justice, theoretical gaps remain. Firstly, punitive attitudes have been extensively studied, but are generally examined through attitudes towards punishment, sentencing preferences or criminal justice policies, rather than being conceptualised as a clearly defined psychological construct. Secondly, although restorative justice provides a rich theoretical framework, the concept of a restorative attitude has not been systematically defined or operationalised within psychological research. Furthermore, existing studies on punitive attitudes often treat this concept as overlapping with others, such as revenge, despite them being distinct yet related constructs. Finally, the current literature tends to examine punitive and restorative orientations separately and lacks an integrative framework capable of explaining whether they represent distinct constructs or opposing manifestations of a broader disposition.

Taking all these aspects into account and drawing on restorative justice theory, we propose that restorative and punitive attitudes may represent the opposite poles of a multidimensional continuum. Before developing measurement tools, we considered it necessary to clarify the conceptual nature of this continuum and identify its constituent dimensions.

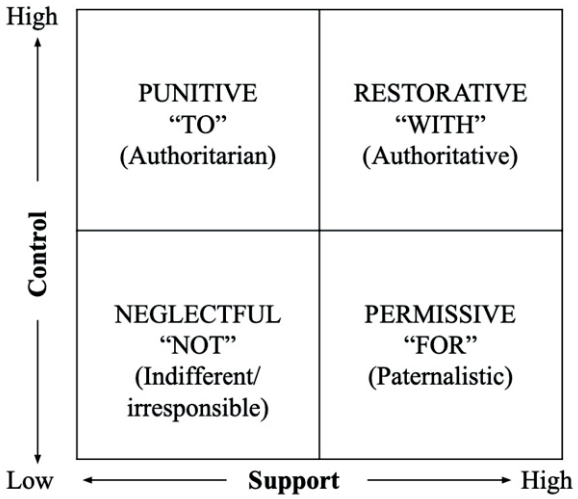
Restorative justice

Restorative justice refers to a conceptual framework; it is not a programme (McCold & Wachtel, 2001; Patrizi, 2024; Zehr, 1990), but rather a paradigm, a dialogical and narrative approach (Chapman, 2012) geared towards social justice (Procter-Legg et al., 2024). Indeed, restorative justice is 'an approach aimed at addressing harm or the risk of harm by involving all those affected in reaching a shared understanding and agreement on how the harm or wrongdoing can be repaired and justice achieved' (EFRJ, 2018, p. 3). It deals with any behaviour that leads to harm (injustice, crime or other transgression), and its approach calls for a shift in focus from the social or legal norm that has been violated to the consequences of that violation. The aim is to find solutions to redress the injustice through the involvement and agreement of all stakeholders, including communities: those close to the parties involved in the injustice, crime or other transgressions, and the wider social community that has an interest in healing the rifts that have occurred within it.

Restorative justice offers a completely different approach from traditional, retributive criminal justice. In the latter, the central focus is on the violation of the law, which requires that the offender be subjected to the prescribed and deserved punishment. In restorative justice, however, the offence represents a violation of people and relationships (Zehr, 1990). The focus is not on who committed the offence and what they deserve, but on the wrongful behaviour that has taken place and the consequences arising from it. Therefore, the means of restoring justice and relational balance is not punishment, but the opportunity for all parties involved (offender, victim, community) to participate together in processes of dialogue aimed at addressing the harm caused by the action, the needs, the loss and the pain caused by the offence (Wright, 2010; Zehr, 2002). Restorative justice, therefore, allows for the involvement of those who have suffered harm, those responsible for it, and members of the community to commit to 'making amends' for what was wrong and achieving justice (McCold, 2001; Zehr, 2002).

Restorative justice and restorative practices are not limited to criminal behaviour. Indeed, restorative justice can also be applied in response to conflicts that may arise in everyday life (for example, at work, within the family, or in the local community) to promote strategies for peaceful management and resolution. Furthermore, this paradigm represents a preventive approach aimed at nurturing social bonds. From this perspective, restorative justice and its practices aim to develop societies based on mutual support, responsibility and participation (Wachtel, 2021). In this regard, McCold and Wachtel (2001) introduced the 'Window of Social Discipline'. It outlines models of response to harmful behaviour and its consequences to maintain social discipline.

Fig. 1. Adaptation of Social Discipline Window (McCold and Wachtel, 2001)



Four 'quadrants' are generated: punitive (authoritarian), neglectful (irresponsible), permissive (paternalistic) and restorative (authoritative). This quadrant encompasses authoritarian, stigmatising and punitive models of response to behaviour that transgresses social expectations (Chapman, 2012; McCold & Wachtel, 2001). The restorative quadrant, on the other hand, is characterised by authority, the ability to take responsibility for one's own actions and to ask others to take responsibility for theirs with respect (Chapman, 2012).

The values of restorative justice

The philosophy behind restorative justice is recognising every human being as a person. For this reason, the person's dignity is the basis from which everyone feels safe and is recognised, respected and protected. Every person is different from one another and has different stories. They live in and through relationships, so their quality is fundamental to well-being and social cohesion. The objective is, therefore, to regenerate the bonded connections and ties and to support people in finding the right way to do so, to fulfil the relational obligations Zehr (1990) spoke of, and to assume personal and social responsibilities. The goal is to decrease suffering and the possibility of further harm. Restorative justice gives individuals, offenders or victims, a ground for interlocution and mutual listening where they can express their emotions in favour of conflict resolution (Suzuki & Yuan, 2021). Furthermore, people must perceive impartiality and fairness.

Finally, the assumption of personal and social responsibility required by the value of accountability is as much for action as for consequences and therefore, accountability is needed. Truth is a central value, especially for those who have suffered harm, as there is often a need to know the truth about what happened. It is a subjective and not procedural truth, telling stories that belong to the same story by each person involved. For restorative justice, there is no single truth or story, but stories from each person close the frame together. These are the values (EFRJ, 2018): respect for human dignity, solidarity and responsibility, justice and accountability, and truth.

Punitive attitudes

Kuhn (1993) affirms that punitive attitudes should be read both as a social characteristic and as a characteristic of public opinion. The first considers objective attitudes towards punishment (e.g., the severity of punishments imposed by judges). The second analyses the subjective attitudes of members of a specific community towards criminal sanctions, considering their desire to see them intensified or mitigated. Adriaenssen and Aertsen (2015), in line with research to date on the topic, identify four main aspects for measuring punitive attitude, defining it as "an attitude towards the goals of punishment, specific forms of criminal sanctions, the intensity of criminal sanctions, and specific sentencing policies" (Adriaenssen & Aertsen, 2015, p. 104). Although a multidimensional view of punitive attitude emerges, they do not define it as a psychological construct but rather examine it concerning different aspects of punishment (Payne et al., 2004).

In line with this, the study by Payne et al. (2004) emphasises that most research is divided into studies on punitive attitudes, which aim to investigate the beliefs underlying the reasons why people should be punished, and studies on sentencing attitudes, which aim to explore how people should be punished/condemned (e.g., severity and type of punishment). On the other hand, Indermaur and Hough (2002) emphasise the need to consider the role of emotions, such as anger or fear, in constructing and impacting punitive attitudes.

Attitudes result from interconnectedness with other attitudes and images, beliefs, emotions and experiences (Stalans, 2009). Actions deemed harmful evoke an emotional response in the community (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019), mainly generating negative attitudes and a tendency towards punitiveness (Taylor & Bailey, 2022). Some studies have examined punitiveness and concerns about crime in contemporary society (e.g. Farrall et al., 2009). These are reflected in public support for harsher punishments for offenders and the endorsement of policies that prioritise punitive measures over other objectives of the justice system, such as rehabilitation (Hough et al., 2013), while also contributing to self-perpetuating processes that exacerbate feelings of insecurity (Carvalho et al., 2020). Moreover, demographic factors, political or religious orientation and the media play a marginal role in predicting punitiveness, which is, instead, more closely related to a set of beliefs mostly based on individuals' knowledge of criminal justice and attitudes (Roberts & Indermaur, 2007). In the present study, punitive attitude is understood as an orientation toward wrongdoing that prioritises blame attribution, rule enforcement, sanctioning, and the perceived necessity of punishment as a response to harm or norm violation.

Restorative attitudes

Although the literature's focus on restorative justice has increased recently (Hermann, 2017), information on individuals' restorative attitudes, definitions, and measurements still needs to be researched. Some studies present opposing views on whether certain dimensions, which seem to reflect a restorative attitude, should be included in conceptualisations of restorative justice. For example, Kohen (2009) affirms

that forgiveness and reconciliation are fundamental elements in restorative justice, but that forgiveness is a necessary component while reconciliation is the goal towards which it should tend and that, therefore, without forgiveness, there can be no reconciliation. On the contrary, for Zehr (2002), forgiveness and reconciliation are not necessarily related to restorative justice. However, Strelan et al. (2011) pointed out that forgiveness and restorative justice share elements, with the first potentially contributing to the second.

Some studies have focused on factors influencing attitudes towards restorative justice by associating them, on the one hand, with individual variables such as the higher or lower subjective emotional response of fear to crime (Costelloe et al., 2009) and, on the other hand, with cultural variables such as social capital (Huang et al., 2012). Other studies that have focused on the relationship between the type of crime committed and the formation of attitudes towards restorative justice have shown that this relationship is not mediated by fear or by perceptions of the crime's seriousness, but rather by incremental beliefs that the offender can change (Weimann-Saks et al., 2022).

To better understand individuals' attitudes towards alternative sanctions, Taylor and Bailey (2022) adopted a five-factor model of restorative attitudes: empathic understanding, harm and needs, restorative processes, responsibility and community involvement. Okimoto et al. (2012) examined how individuals' orientation towards restorative approaches differed from traditional retributive justice orientations through a measure that polarised participants' responses in two opposite directions; on the one hand, a restorative orientation was associated with a shared sense of self and adherence to group-wide norms and values, while a retributive orientation was associated with personality traits such as narcissism and a focus on status and power. The model proposed in this study differs from these previous studies because it does not, as a starting point, aim only to measure attitudes towards restorative justice and its practices, but seeks to conceptualise a more general disposition towards harm, responsibility and the response to offences. Furthermore, the proposed focus is on the potential theoretical relationship between restorative and punitive attitudes, with a view to developing a future measurement scale that encompasses both poles, rather than just the inclination towards restorative justice.

Toward a restorative–punitive continuum

The hypothesis of a restorative-punitive continuum is based on the idea that both approaches represent alternative responses to the same social phenomenon: harm, wrongdoing, crime or the violation of social norms. Whilst punitive approaches focus primarily on rule-breaking, the attribution of blame and the associated punishment, restorative approaches focus on harm, relationships and accountability.

From this perspective, punitive and restorative attitudes do not simply represent different attitudes towards justice. Rather, they reflect different ways of interpreting the very meaning of justice. Indeed, people may orient their responses towards control and/or punishment, or towards dialogue, responsibility and the repair of harmed relationships.

This conceptualisation is consistent with the theory of restorative justice (Zehr, 2002) and with the Social Discipline Window (McCold & Wachtel, 2001), which describes punitive and restorative responses as contrasting approaches to addressing transgressions. Drawing on these theoretical frameworks, we propose that restorative and punitive attitudes may represent the opposite poles of a broader underlying dimension that reflects the ways in which people interpret and respond to harm, offences and, more generally, injustices.

Aims of the study

In line with the restorative justice paradigm and the possibility of declining the construct of punitive attitude on a continuum that, conversely, could be configured into its counterpart of restorative attitude (Zehr, 2002), this study aims to substantiate both constructs and identify their component dimensions empirically.

Although several studies have examined punitive attitudes and proposed different operationalisations, a shared psychological conceptualisation of punitive attitude as a construct is still lacking. In addition, restorative attitude has not been sufficiently theorised and investigated as an existing, operationalizable and thus measurable construct. Furthermore, although there are definitions and scales for the vengeful attitude in the literature, it is not differentiated from the punitive attitude even though they cannot be considered overlapping. Therefore, the need to operationalise the restorative/punitive attitude construct arises from gaps in the literature.

Consequently, the aims of this study were to:

1) provide preliminary evidence for a conceptual model linking restorative and punitive attitude;
2) explore the possible candidate dimensions;
3) examine whether a restorative–punitive continuum is theoretically plausible as a preliminary framework for future empirical testing.

Methods

A qualitative study was conducted to satisfy the research objectives. Since the punitive attitude has been examined in greater detail in the literature, although its conceptualisation remains fragmentary, we have analysed the restorative attitude with the aim of exploring its possible constituent dimensions and characteristics. The study explored the restorative pole directly through expert interviews, whereas punitive orientations emerged indirectly from participants' responses to justice-related prompts. A protocol for this study was published on OSF in June 2023 (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CP478).

Participants

A total of 81 people took part in the study, of whom 26 participated in interviews and 55 completed an open-ended questionnaire administered in small face-to-face groups.

The interviews were conducted with 26 national and international experts in restorative justice. Of these, 30.77% (8) were Italian experts and 69.23% (18) were non-Italian European experts, including 6 from Belgium, 4 from England, 4 from Ireland, 2 from the Netherlands and 2 from Spain. The age of the participants ranged from 32 to 73 years (M = 52.34; SD = 11.95). All the experts were restorative justice facilitators.

The questionnaire was completed by 55 university students (40 from the University of Sassari and 15 from the University of Enna) with prior knowledge of the topics under investigation (students from the fields of psychology, social sciences and law). Their ages ranged from 19 to 45 years (M = 23; SD = 6.37).

Instruments

The qualitative study was conducted with (a) a questionnaire consisting of 5 open-ended questions and (b) structured individual interviews consisting of 3 open-ended questions.

A research protocol, divided into key sections, was created to investigate participants' perceptions of restorative and punitive attitudes. The sections of the questionnaire were: a) biographical information, including the gender and age of the participants, and b) 5 open-ended questions: (1) "What is justice for you?", (2) "When people violate the rules, one should...?", (3) "People who suffer injustice/wrongdoing/crime need...?", (4) "People who are perpetrators of injustice/wrongdoing/crime need...?", (5) "Those who commit an injustice/wrongdoing/offence deserve...?". The information detected through the individual interview with experts was: a) biographical information, including the gender, age, and country of the participants; b) 3 open-ended questions: (1) "Does the restorative attitude exist?", (2) "What thoughts/feelings/behaviours characterise a restorative attitude?", (3) "What areas should a restorative attitude questionnaire cover?".

The questionnaire and interviews were designed to pursue complementary purposes. The questionnaire explored participants' views on justice, punishment, victims and offenders, whilst the interviews aimed to stimulate conceptual reflections from experts on the restorative approach and its constituent elements. Consequently, the data collected from both instruments are not considered directly comparable but represent complementary sources of information which together contribute to the development of a preliminary conceptual model.

Procedure

All participants agreed to take part in the research, and consent to the recording of the interviews was also sought and obtained from those who took part. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary; therefore, all participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling criterion. In particular, (a) for the questionnaire, information was disseminated to students regarding the possibility of participating in the research, with the support of other professors from the universities involved. No exclusion criteria were adopted for either the interviews or the questionnaire; (b) for the individual interviews, experts on the official list of qualified trainers of the European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ) were contacted.

The individual interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, following prior arrangements with the participants. The average interview duration was 45 minutes per participant, and interviews were recorded in audio-video format. The questionnaire was administered via a Google Form and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. To ensure respect for anonymity and avoid double-counting, each questionnaire participant was assigned a code using the initial letters of their first and last name and their date of birth.

Regarding the interviews, all answers to the questions were entered into an Excel file. Once the files were cleaned, the participants' answers were analysed in their original language, Italian and English (for foreign participants only). Two bilingual research experts (1 native Italian speaker with excellent knowledge of English and one native English speaker with excellent knowledge of Italian) translated the interviews into Italian. The experts translated the interviews independently and then discussed them jointly. To ensure that there were no wrong interpretations, a final check was carried out by a third expert with expertise in Italian and English, who confirmed the final version of the interview translations. On the other hand, the questionnaires were in Italian.

The research was approved by the University of Sassari ethics committee (protocol n. 2022-UNSSCLE-0061755). It was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, the general principles of research, and the ethical rules of the Italian Psychology Association (AIP).

Data analysis

Data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 25.0. (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA) and Microsoft Excel v16.56. Data were analysed using a conventional content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with inductive category development. Categories were not defined a priori but were obtained directly from the participants' responses. After the initial inductive development of categories, the final codebook was applied to the entire dataset to ensure consistency across all responses.

Regarding the questionnaires, all responses were first entered into an Excel coding matrix. An initial subset of the questionnaires (51%; n = 28) was independently reviewed by the research team to identify recurring themes and generate preliminary categories. These categories formed the initial coding framework, which was subsequently applied and verified on the remaining questionnaires (49%; n = 27) by two independent coders (Losito, 2002). The analyses were carried out separately by two researchers, and two other researchers intervened to resolve the few discrepancies that emerged in the coding of the data.

A similar procedure was followed for the interviews. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and imported into an Excel coding matrix. An initial subset of the interviews (50%; n = 13) was analysed to identify recurring themes and

generate categories. The resulting coding framework was then independently applied to the remaining interviews (50%; n = 13) by two independent coders. In three cases, disagreements arose over the interpretation of a single category. These cases were reviewed by two additional coders and subsequently discussed with the research supervisor until consensus was reached. For both questionnaires and interviews, each row of the coding matrix represented a participant response, and each column represented a category. In both the interviews and the questionnaires, participants were able to refer to more than one theme in a single response. Consequently, the frequencies refer to the number of coded themes rather than the number of participants, which is why the total frequencies may exceed the number of respondents. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa coefficient (Landis & Koch, 1977) based on the category assignments made independently by the two coders. The final coding matrices were imported into SPSS, and frequency analyses were conducted to identify the most recurrent categories and themes.

Results

The agreement between coders was excellent for both the interviews (*Cohen's* κ = .81, p < .001) and the questionnaires (*Cohen's* κ = .84, p < .001), indicating a high level of consistency in category assignment. As multiple themes may be identified within a single response to the questions, the frequencies refer to the number of times the coded themes appear rather than to individual participants.

Questionnaires

The frequency analysis showed that the most frequently answered category to question 1(q), "What is justice for you?", referred to the concept of Equity (32), emphasising aspects such as equality, protection/respect/recognition of rights, and freedom. For example, one participant defined justice as *"Treating all people equally and ensuring that everyone's rights are respected"*. Responses classified under the "Punishment" category (12) reflected a focus on sanctions and consequences, for example, *" Anyone who breaks the rules or commits a crime should be punished"*. In the "Respect for State rules and laws" category (11), participants gave answers such as *"When people respect the rules and regulations of a Country"*.

In response to question 2(q) "When people break the rules, should one…?", answers such as "*Impose the appropriate punishment*" or *"Punish them without reducing the sentence"* were grouped under the category of "Punish" (43). In contrast, responses such as *"Ensure that the person who committed the offence is rehabilitated so that they can be reintegrated into society"* or *"Take action to make the offender aware of their actions and work to ensure they do not break the rules again"* were grouped under the category of "Re-educate" (22).

In response to question 3(q) "Do people who suffer injustices/wrongdoings/crimes need…?", answers such as *"Support aimed at improving their situation as victims"* or *"Support (e.g. psychological or financial)"* were classified as "Support" (32). Participants' responses such as *"Victims need to be protected and safeguarded by the state"* were classified as "Protection and guarantee from the State" (20). Finally, responses such as *"The victims must have justice"* or *"Let justice be done"* were classified as "Justice (formal)" (12).

In response to question 4(q) "People who are perpetrators of injustice/wrongdoing/crime need...?" participants' answers were classified as "Re-education/rehabilitation/treatment" (47) and "Punishment" (16). For example, in the first case, participants replied, *"A re-education programme to help them reintegrate into the community"* or *"A treatment and rehabilitation programme that makes them aware of the offence, so that they are able to understand for themselves what they should not do"*. In the second case, however, the participants all gave answers such as *"Being punished"*.

Finally, the answers to the question 5(q) "Those who commit an injustice/wrongdoing/offence deserve...?" were classified as: "Punishment commensurate with the seriousness of the offence" (26) and the answers in this category correspond to the name given to it; "Punishment" (22). Here, the participants' answers were *"A punishment" or "Pay with a punishment"*; "Re-education/rehabilitation/treatment" (20). In this case, participants responded, for example, *"A rehabilitation programme, so that the offender can be reintegrated into society"*. Table 1 summarises the results of the questionnaire frequency analysis.

Tab. 1. Questionnaire frequency analysis

Question	Answer	Frequency
Question 1(q) "What is justice for you?"	Equity	32
	Punishment	12
	Respect for the rules and laws of the State	11
	Victim Protection/Security	5
	Other	5
	Offender rehabilitation/ treatment	3
	Compensation	2
Question 2(q) "When people violate the rules one should...?"	Punish	43
	Re-educate	22
Question 3(q) "People who suffer injustice/ wrongdoing/crime need...?	Support	32
	Protection and guarantee from the State	20
	Formal justice	12
Question 4(q) "People who are perpetrators of injustice/wrongdoing/crime need...?"	Re-education/ rehabilitation/treatment	47
	Punishment	16
Question 5(q) "Those who commit an injustice/ wrongdoing/offence deserve...?"	Punishment commensurate with the seriousness of the offence	26
	Punishment	22
	Re-education/ rehabilitation/treatment	20

Note: *(q) questionnaire question*

Interviews

To the question 1(i) "Does the restorative attitude exist?", 21 people answered "Yes" and 5 "No". To the question 2(i)

"What thoughts/feelings/behaviours characterise a restorative attitude?" the most frequent answer was "Empathy" (33), which included answers referring to aspects such as: "Emotional closeness" (11), "Caring for the other person" (10) and "Understanding the other people" (12). For example, one participant said that *"A restorative approach means being able to understand the feelings of both those who suffer harm and those who cause it"*. Next, the most frequently answered category was "Responsibility" (19). In this case, for example, one participant stated that *"A restorative attitude is characterised by taking responsibility for one's own actions and asking the other person to do the same"*. The third category of responses concerns "Respect" (16), understood as the recognition of the dignity and worth of every person, regardless of their role in the harm. As one expert observed, *"A restorative attitude implies respect for people as human beings and the respect shown in listening without judging"*. Finally, the most frequent answers to the question 3(i) "What areas should a restorative attitude questionnaire cover? (please reply using keywords)" were "Responsibility" (17), "Respect" (14), and "Sense of justice" (14). Table 2 summarises the results of the interview frequency analysis.

Tab. 2. Interview frequency analysis

Question	Answer	Frequency
Question 1(i) *"Does the restorative attitude exist?"*	Yes	21
	No	5
Question 2(i) *"What thoughts/feelings/behaviours characterise a restorative attitude?"*	Empathy	33
	Responsibility	19
	Respect	16
	Change	9
	Trust	6
	Reconciliation	5
	Other	4
	Sincerity	3
	Kindness	3
	Forgiveness	2
	Security	2
	Formal Justice	2
	Hope	6
	Support	1
Question 3(i) *"What areas should a restorative attitude questionnaire cover?"*	Responsibility	17
	Respect	14
	Sense of justice	14
	Empathy	9
	Sense of community	8
	Practical examples	6
	Past experiences of RJ	5
	Other	1

Note: (i) interview question

Convergence of findings

The results of the questionnaire highlighted the simultaneous presence of themes relating to punishment, law enforcement and sanctions, as well as themes concerning support, rehabilitation, fairness and the protection of rights. Similarly, the interview results highlighted empathy, responsibility, respect, and a sense of justice as key aspects of a restorative attitude. Taken together, these findings suggest that participants' representations of justice and experts' conceptualisations of restorative attitude converge around two different ways of responding to wrongdoing: one centred on punishment and control, and the other centred on relationships, responsibility, and restoration. The relationship between these findings is summarised in Table 3.

Tab. 3. Convergence of questionnaire and interview findings informing the proposed restorative–punitive framework

Emerging theme	Punitive orientation	Restorative orientation
Response to wrongdoing	Punishment, sanctions	Rehabilitation, support
Focus of justice	Rule enforcement	Fairness, relationships
View of offenders	Deserving punishment	Capable of change and accountability
Core dimensions	–	Empathy, responsibility, respect, sense of justice

Discussion

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the results should be interpreted as an initial attempt to develop a model. Whilst the restorative approach was analysed directly through interviews with experts in restorative justice, the punitive dimension emerged indirectly from the participants' descriptions of the concepts of justice, punishment, victims and offenders. The findings do not demonstrate the existence of a single bipolar continuum; rather, they identify thematic contrasts that make such a continuum theoretically plausible and worthy of future empirical investigation. Consequently, the proposed restorative-punitive continuum should be regarded as a theoretically grounded conceptual framework that requires further empirical testing.

In line with the paradigm of restorative justice and the possibility of situating the concept of a punitive attitude on a continuum which, conversely, could be conceived as the counterpart to a restorative attitude, this study aims to provide preliminary evidence for a conceptual model linking restorative and punitive attitudes and to explore their possible constituent dimensions. Since previous studies have already partially defined the punitive attitude, it became necessary to investigate the restorative attitude through a qualitative study. To meet the research objectives, it was deemed appropriate to first examine the participants' "concept of justice" and the responses they would adopt in the face of unjust or illegal actions, such as a crime. We believe that both polarities revolve around the very concept of justice. The proposed theoretical framework is the result of the convergence of three complementary sources of data: theoretical contributions from the restorative justice literature, participants' views on justice and responses to unlawful acts, and experts' conceptual reflections on the restorative approach. The consistency observed across these

different sources provides initial support for the plausibility of a restorative-punitive continuum and for the identification of potential candidate dimensions. Therefore, these findings should not be interpreted as definitive confirmation of a continuum between restorative and punitive approaches, but rather as a preliminary conceptual framework.

All the answers to the five questions in the questionnaire revealed a polarisation between two predominantly opposite aspects of the same concept. The first concerns the focus on people as such, as human beings and, therefore, as bearers of rights, including the right to be rehabilitated after an unjust act (e.g. a crime). These aspects were expressed in terms of 'fairness', particularly emphasising aspects such as equality, protection, respect and recognition of rights, and freedom. The second concerns control, expressed in compliance with rules/laws and sanctions (such as punishment in its most extreme form). This polarisation appears to be consistent with suggestions previously discussed in the literature, emphasising the dichotomous aspect underlying the concept of justice and, consequently, underlying the modes of approach, attitudes, and behavioural responses relating to it. The data collected from the questionnaires thus made it possible to highlight a polarisation in participants' representations regarding justice and responses to unlawful actions. As for the individual interviews with the experts, the data provided a conceptual interpretation of this polarisation. The experts identified a) empathy, b) responsibility, c) respect and d) a sense of justice as the fundamental dimensions characterising a restorative attitude. Taken together, the two datasets suggest two contrasting ways of interpreting and responding to harm: one centred on punishment and control, and the other centred on people, relationships and responsibility. The convergence between participants' representations and the experts' conceptual reflections provides preliminary support for the plausibility of a restorative-punitive continuum (as summarised in Table 4) and for the development of the proposed conceptual model.

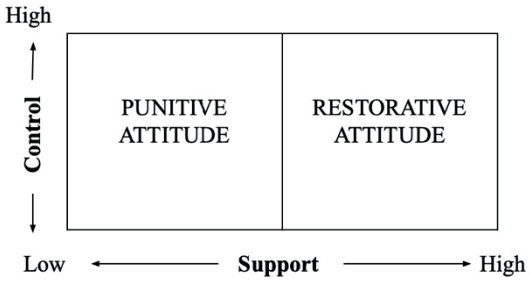
Tab. 4. Restorative/punitive attitude factors

Restorative attitude	Factors	Punitive attitude
	Empathy	
	Respect	
	Responsibility	
	Sense of justice	

Alternative interpretations of the findings should also be considered. The dimensions identified in the interviews may partly reflect the professional background and theoretical orientation of the restorative justice experts, who are naturally familiar with restorative values and principles. Consequently, the importance attributed to empathy, responsibility, respect and a sense of justice may be influenced by the conceptual framework within which these experts operate. Similarly, the coexistence of punitive and restorative themes in participants' questionnaire responses does not necessarily imply a single underlying continuum. An alternative interpretation is that restorative and punitive attitudes may represent related but distinct constructs that can coexist within individuals. Future research should therefore compare alternative conceptual models and examine whether these orientations are best understood as opposite poles of a continuum or as independent dimensions.

The proposed continuum hypothesis appears to fit within the Social Discipline Window (see Figure 1; McCold and Wachtel, 2001; Chapman, 2012), if one looks at the two upper quadrants of the figure. On the one hand, both polarities demand a high demand for control/responsibility (we could say security for the punitive polarity and more safety for the restorative polarity). As you can see from Figure 2, to determine the oscillation could be the orientation towards relationships and support that, if low, determines oscillation towards the punitive attitude, if high, towards the restorative attitude.

Fig. 2. Restorative/punitive attitude continuum in the perspective of the Social Discipline Window



In this regard, we believe that the findings are consistent with the hypothesis that restorative and punitive attitudes may represent contrasting orientations within a broader framework whose values can determine whether individuals approach people and events in a punitive or restorative manner.

Overall, the findings may provide initial evidence for conceptualising restorative and punitive attitudes as potentially opposing orientations within a single, broader framework for understanding and responding to harm.

Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study offers a preliminary conceptual framework for understanding restorative and punitive attitudes as contrasting orientations toward harm, responsibility and justice. The findings identify empathy, responsibility, respect and sense of justice as candidate dimensions of a restorative orientation, while also suggesting that punitive responses are associated with control, sanctioning and rule enforcement. Future studies should test whether these orientations form a bipolar continuum or constitute distinct but related dimensions.

Limitations and future research suggestions

The study has several limitations. The study did not examine restorative and punitive attitudes in a balanced manner; therefore, the proposed continuum should be interpreted

as a preliminary conceptual model rather than as a fully validated representation of the relationship between the two attitudes. Future studies should investigate both poles more systematically. The sample size is limited, and the characteristics of the participants probably do not represent those of the general population; however, the strength of the sample selection lies in the involvement of participants from different cultural contexts. It can be considered a preliminary study to address future research toward validating the construct by constructing a quantitative scale to measure it. Moreover, some prompts may have activated normative or retributive frames, particularly through terms such as 'deserve' and 'violate the rules'; future studies should compare alternative phrasings to reduce framing effects.

Future research could focus on developing instruments for measuring the construct and evaluating its strength (e.g., as a function of its stability or intensity). These instruments could open new knowledge regarding the likelihood of punitive or restorative behaviour and prove valuable for developing and implementing restorative justice practices and interventions that focus on or are inspired by restorative justice and to understanding and deconstructing stereotypes and stigmatization that tend to relegate specific social groups to certain labels (e.g., Zarbo et al., 2023).

Ethical Approval
The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of University of Sassari (protocol n. 2022-UNSSCLE-0061755). Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement
Protocol of this study was published in OSF (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CP478).

Funding
This research received no external funding

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflicts of interest

Author Contributions
E. Lodi, P. Magnano, P. Patrizi, L. Perrella and R. Zarbo: conceptualization; L. Perrella and R. Zarbo: data detection; L. Perrella and R. Zarbo: data analysis; L. Perrella and R. Zarbo: writing - original draft; E. Lodi, P. Magnano, P. Patrizi: supervision. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Supplementary material
A protocol for this study was published on OSF in June 2023 (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CP478)

Declaration about the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process
No AI was employed in any stage of the study, including the writing process

References

Adriaenssen, A., & Aertsen, I. (2015). Punitive attitudes: Towards an operationalization to measure individual punitivity in a multidimensional way. *European Journal of Criminology*, *12*(1), 92–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370814535376.

Aquino, K., Tripp, T. M., & Bies, R. J. (2001). How employees respond to personal offense: The effects of blame attribution, victim status, and offender status on revenge and reconciliation in the workplace. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*(1), 52–59. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.1.52.

Carvalho, H., Chamberlen, A., & Lewis, R. (2020). Punitiveness beyond criminal justice: Punishable and punitive subjects in an era of prevention, anti-migration and austerity. *The British Journal of Criminology, 60*(2), 265-284. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azz061

Chapman, T. (2012). That's how the light gets in: Facilitating Restorative Conferences. In E. Zinsstag, & I. Vanfraechem (Eds.), *Conferencing and Restorative Justice: Challenges, Developments and Debates* (pp. 65-82). Oxford University Press.

Costelloe, M. T., Chiricos, T., & Gertz, M. (2009). Punitive attitudes toward criminals. *Punishment & Society*, *11*(1), 25–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474508098131.

EFRJ. (2018). *Connecting People to Restore Just Relations. Practice Guide on Values and Standards for Restorative Justice Practices*. European Forum for Restorative Justice. https://www.euforumrj.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/efrj-values-and-standards-manual-to-print-24pp.pdf.

Farrall, S. D., Jackson, J., & Gray, E. (2009). *Social Order and the Crime concern in Contemporary Times*. Oxford University Press.

Hermann, D. H. J. (2017). Restorative justice and retributive justice: An opportunity for cooperation or an occasion for conflict in the search for justice. *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*, *16*(1), 71–103. https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol16/iss1/11.

Hough, M., Bradford, B., Jackson, J., & Roberts, J. V. (2013). *Attitudes to Sentencing and Trust in Justice: Exploring Trends from the Crime Survey for England and Wales*, 85. Ministry of Justice.

Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative health research*, *15*(9), 1277–1288. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687.

Huang, H., Braithwaite, V., Tsutomi, H., Hosoi, Y., & Braithwaite, J. (2012). Social capital, Rehabilitation, tradition: support for restorative justice in Japan and Australia. *Asian Journal of Criminology*, *7*(4), 295–308. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-011-9111-1.

Indermaur, D., & Hough, M. (2002). Strategies for changing public attitudes to punishment. In J. Roberts, and M. Hough (Eds.), *Changing Attitudes to Punishment* (pp. 198-214). Willan Publishing.

Kohen, A. (2009). The personal and the political: forgiveness and reconciliation in restorative justice. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, *12*(3), 399–423. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230903127911.

Kuhn, A. (1993). Attitudes towards punishment. In A. Alvazzi del Frate, U. Zvekic, & J. J. M. van Dijk (Eds.), *Understanding*

Crime. Experiences of Crime and Crime Control (pp. 271-288). UNICRI. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/687442.

Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics*, *33*(1), 159–174. https://doi.org/10.2307/2529310.

Lodi, E., Perrella, L., Lepri, G. L., Scarpa, M. L., & Patrizi, P. (2022). Use of Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices at School: A Systematic Literature Review. *International journal of environmental research and public health, 19*(1), 96. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010096.

Losito, G. (2002). *Analisi del Contenuto Nella Ricerca Sociale*. Franco Angeli.

Mandracchia, J. T., Shaw, L. B., & Morgan, R. D. (2013). What's with the attitude?: Changing attitudes about criminal justice issues. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 40*(1), 95–113. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854812459474.

McCold, P., & Wachtel, T. (2001). Restorative justice in everyday life. In J. Braithwaite, & H. Strang (Eds.), *Restorative justice and civil society* (pp. 117-125). Cambridge University Press.

McCold, P. (2001). Primary restorative justice practices. In A. Morris, & G. Maxwell (Eds.), *Restorative justice for juveniles: Conferencing, mediation, and circles* (pp. 41–58). Hart.

Okimoto, T. G., Wenzel, M., & Feather, N. T. (2012). Retribution and restoration as general orientations towards justice. *European Journal of Personality, 26*(3), 255–275. https://doi.org/10.1002/per.831.

Patrizi, P. (2024). Giustizia riparativa. psicologia e diritto per il benessere di persone e comunità (2nd ed.). Franco Angeli.

Payne, B. K., Gainey, R. R., Triplett, R. A., & Danner, M. J. E. (2004). What drives punitive beliefs?: Demographic characteristics and justifications for sentencing. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 32*(3), 195–206. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2004.02.007

Perrella, L., Lodi, E., Lepri, G. L., & Patrizi, P. (2024). Use of restorative justice and restorative practices in prison: a systematic literature review. *Rassegna Italiana di Criminologia, XVIII*(1), 69-82. https://doi.org/10.7347/RIC-012024-p69.

Plantz, J. W., Neal, T. M. S., Clements, C. B., Perelman, A. M., & Miller, S. L. (2023). Assessing Motivations for Punishment: The Sentencing Goals Inventory. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *50*(1), 139-162. https://doi.org/10.1177/00938548221131954

Procter-Legg, T., Hobson, J., & Quimby, E. (2024). Restorative justice and social justice: an international perspective. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2024.2414953.

Roberts, L. D., & Indermaur, D. (2007). Predicting Punitive Attitudes in Australia. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, *14*(1), 56–65. https://doi.org/10.1375/pplt.14.1.56.

Ruggi, S., Gilli, G., Stuckless, N., & Oasi, O. (2012). Assessing vindictiveness: Psychological aspects by a reliability and validity study of the Vengeance Scale in the Italian context. *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues, 31*(4), 365–380. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-012-9153-2.

Sawyer, W., & Wagner, P. (2019). *Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2019*. https:// www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2019.html.

Sommers, J. A., Schell, T. L., & Vodanovich, S. J. (2002). Developing a Measure of Individual Differences in Organizational Revenge. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, *17*(2), 207–222. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25092816.

Stalans, L. J. (2009). Measuring attitudes to sentencing and sentencing goals. In M. E. Oswald, S. Bieneck, & J. Hupfeld-Heinemann (Eds.), *Social psychology of punishment of crime* (pp. 231–254). John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Strelan, P., Feather, N. T., & McKee, I. (2011). Retributive and inclusive justice goals and forgiveness: The influence of motivational values. *Social Justice Research, 24*(2), 126–142. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-011-0132-9.

Suzuki, M., & Yuan, X. (2021). How Does Restorative Justice Work? A Qualitative Metasynthesis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *48*(10), 1347-1365. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854821994622.

Taylor, T. O., & Bailey, T.-K. M. (2022). The Restorative Justice Attitudes Scale: Development and initial psychometric evaluation. *The Counseling Psychologist, 50*(1), 6–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/00110000211044485.

Wachtel, T. (2021). *Dreaming of a New Reality. How restorative practices reduce crime and violence, improve relationships and strengthen civil society*. International Institute for Restorative Practices.

Weimann-Saks, D., Peleg-Koriat, I., & Halperin, E. (2022). Incremental beliefs and public attitudes toward restorative justice: the cases of sexual, violent and property offenses. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, *61*(4), 169–187. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2022.2062518.

Wright, M. (2010). *Towards a Restorative Society: A Problem-Solving Response to Harm*. Cambridge University Press.

Zarbo, R., Zammitti, A., Lodi, E., & Magnano, P. (2023). An Analysis of Systems of Influences through the Lens of Balanced Time Perspective: A Qualitative Study on a Group of Inmates. Behavioral Sciences, 13(10), 806. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13100806.

Zehr, H. (2002). *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*. Good Books.

Zehr, H. (1990). A Restorative Lens. In H. Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (pp. 177-214). Herald Press.