# Predicting and Improving the Public's Attitudes and Beliefs About Victim-Offender Mediation in Response to a Serious Crime

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**Abstract**

Victim-offender mediation (VOM), an example of restorative justice, is a face-to-face meeting between victim and offender in a structured environment with a trained mediator. The goal of VOM is the initiation of a healing process for the victim while giving the offender the possibility to offer compensation. In the present study, the relations between the public's restorative and retributive justice orientations and their beliefs about VOM were examined in relation to VOM after a serious crime. It was also investigated if additional effectiveness and punitiveness information can improve the public's opinions. The public's opinion about victim-offender mediation is relevant for citizen's cooperation with the police, compliance with the law, their trust in the criminal justice system and policy makers decision-making. 131 participants completed an online study in which their restorative and retributive justice orientations were measured, before and after reading a crime story. Participant's perceptions of punitiveness, beliefs in effectiveness and general attitudes towards VOM were measured before and after reading the additional information. In line with the expectations, higher retributive justice orientations were a significant negative predictor of perceptions of punitiveness, beliefs in effectiveness and general attitudes towards VOM. Perceptions of punitiveness and beliefs in effectiveness mediated the negative relationship between retributive justice orientations and general attitudes towards VOM. In contrast, restorative justice orientations were a significant positive predictor of beliefs in effectiveness and general attitudes towards VOM. Additional punitiveness and effectiveness information did not influence the public's opinions about VOM. Overall, the present research lends additional validity to the constructs of retributive and restorative justice orientations and discovered part of the underlying belief structure of opinions about VOM. The possibility of harnessing the public's natural tendency for heuristic processing by using the media, to improve their opinions about VOM, is discussed. Even after serious crimes, more widespread use of VOM should not lower the trust of the public in the criminal justice system, at least when there is a possibility for retributive measures as well. However, future research is invited to find reliable methods of improving the public's opinions about VOM.

**Introduction**

"If he could feel the pain in my heart, if he could feel the hole that he left in my life, then that would be justice" (Umbreit, 2001, pp. 273–274). These were the thoughts of a woman whose son was murdered before she decided to meet the murderer for victim-offender mediation (VOM). In the beginning, she was clearly opposed to the idea of meeting the offender and only agreed to participate after seeing concrete examples of the healing process which is often initiated by VOM (Umbreit, 2001). Similar reactions might be observed in persons of the general public who have no direct involvement with any crimes. They may wonder what the purpose of VOM is and why the offender should deserve such an opportunity. It may also be that they have not even heard about the existence of VOM. The present study attempted to investigate the public's orientations towards justice and whether these orientations can predict their attitudes and beliefs about VOM after a serious crime. Furthermore, it was examined whether providing information about the effectiveness and punitiveness of VOM to the public can make their attitudes and beliefs more positive.

**Restorative Justice, Retributive Justice, and Victim-Offender Mediation**

According to Christie (1977), the aim of restorative justice is to enable victim and offender to represent themselves after a crime, to clarify the norms that were violated and find a solution to solve the crime. Christie also explains that an offense is a shared property between victim and offender, in which both are seen as equals who can talk about and discuss what they think is relevant to process the crime, without the involvement of a judge. Walgrave (2002) describes that restorative justice is based on negotiation, mutual respect, gaining understanding, reparation, reconciliation, and healing in a protective community setting. He explains that the criminal justice system currently focuses on the punishment of criminals which corresponds to a retributive approach towards justice. Retributive justice is based on punishing offenders according to the crime seriousness, while possibly mitigating factors like intent and environmental conditions are taken into account (Carlsmith & Darley, 2008). Victims are mostly left out of the justice process, while offenders are often only involved in a passive way (Christie, 1977). This means that they have no opportunity to get in contact with each other to process the crime (Christie, 1977). Some experts, such as Braithwaite (1999), are convinced that true justice, even for the most severe crimes, can only be reached by restorative justice procedures. Yet, it is important to note that restorative and retributive justice are not opposites but frequently complement each other (Roberts & Stalans, 2004). For example, the outcome of a restorative justice process can be communicated to a judge or public prosecutor who can take this into account when imposing a punishment.

VOM is the oldest example of restorative justice (Marshall, 1999). It can be an alternative or complementary to the regular court process. Depending on the success and the outcomes of VOM, the proceedings may be discontinued, the offender may receive no punishment, the punishment may be altered or the regular court process is continued without favorably taking the VOM into account (Servicebureau for Victim-Offender Mediation and Conflict Settlement, 2009). Umbreit, Coates, and Vos (2004) describe VOM as a face-to-face meeting between victim and offender in a structured environment with a trained mediator. VOM can promote offender accountability and increase victim assistance in order to address the needs of individuals affected by the criminal behavior (Kuo, Longmire, & Cuvelier, 2010; Marshall, 1999; Umbreit et al., 2004). During the dialogue, victims can ask questions and let the offender know how the crime affected them, to initiate a healing process (Umbreit et al., 2004; Umbreit & Vos, 2000). In contrast, the offender can take responsibility for his or her actions, might learn the impact he or she had on the victim's life and is actively involved in developing a restitution plan (Marshall, 1999; Umbreit et al., 2004). Among the many possible positive outcomes of VOM are high satisfaction rates, high perceptions of fairness for both victim and offender, increased rates of restitution completions, lower rates of recidivism, and a lower seriousness of crimes when an offender reoffends (Nugent & Paddock, 1995; Umbreit et al., 2004).

VOM is usually initiated for property crimes and minor assaults, but it also finds increased use for serious crimes (Umbreit, 2001). Some important differences exist between VOM after serious and less serious crimes. For example, after a serious crime, offenders are usually in prison and already found guilty when they participate in VOM; VOM requires even more excessive preparation than after less serious crimes on the part of the mediators, victims, and offenders; offenders usually do not have permission to initiate the mediation process themselves; offenders almost never are forgiven; and the process is highly monitored (Umbreit, 2001). Generally, victims and offenders appear to be quite willing to participate in VOM after serious crimes (Gustafson & Smidstra, 1989, as cited in Umbreit, 2001). Zebel, Schreurs, and Ufkes (2017) found in a recent study that the seriousness of crimes is not a reliable predictor for whether VOM is initiated, but victims were more willing to participate in VOM after serious crimes when a longer time has passed. However, the previously mentioned studies only focus on the appropriateness of VOM after serious crimes for persons that are directly involved in the crime and therefore do not reveal whether the public approves it.

**The Significance of the Public's Attitudes Toward Restorative Justice**

Before describing the views of the public about the criminal justice system and restorative justice, it is important to realize why these public opinions matter. On the one hand,

viewing the criminal justice system as legitimate can increase the public's compliance with the law (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Tyler and Fagan (2008) discovered that perceptions of legitimacy of the law and the police promoted the public's cooperation with the police, since it promoted reporting crimes by members of the public and fostered community cooperation to fight crimes. Only when the public is not opposed to current practices of the criminal justice system, there can be confidence in the system (Hough, 1996). The public mistakenly believes that crime rates are high and increasing and that the criminal justice system is too lenient (Roberts, 1992). If the public perceives VOM to be too lenient or is otherwise opposed, this might reduce acceptance of VOM, compliance with the law, cooperation with the police and confidence in the criminal justice system. In addition, the decisions of policy makers and judges can be influenced by the public's opinions (Roberts & Hough, 2005). If policy makers perceive the public to be opposed to VOM, they might be hesitant to promote and apply it.

**Retributive and Restorative Justice Orientations**

One way of explaining and predicting the public's responses to restorative justice may be by examining their justice orientations. According to Carlsmith, Darley, and Robinson (2002), lay people adopt a just deserts orientation when determining how an offender should be punished, especially when the crime is serious. This means that offenders should be punished proportionally to their moral deservingness. The deterrence of criminals to commit further crimes is a less relevant motivation for lay people's allocation of punishment (Carlsmith et al., 2002). Okimoto, Wenzel, and Feather (2012) empirically distinguished general restorative and retributive orientations towards justice. On the one hand, a restorative justice orientation implies a desire for renewed consensus between affected crime parties and maintenance of a shared identity. Persons with a restorative justice orientation value apologies, forgiveness, respect towards the offender and a mutual decision-making process to establish justice. On the other hand, persons with a retributive justice orientation value unilateral punishment of the offender to reduce his or her status and power. They prefer justice procedures which involve humiliation as well as lack of respect and forgiveness for the offender. Based on these justice orientations, Okimoto et al. (2012) could predict whether participants, who were instructed to imagine that they were a victim, preferred restorative or retributive procedures as a response to a theft crime. Retributive justice orientations could predict preferences for traditional judicial processes, while restorative orientations could predict preferences for alternative, restorative processes.

In contrast to the study of Okimoto et al. (2012), in the present study, participants will not be instructed to imagine that they are the victim of a crime. This simulates the natural conditions for members of the public who are confronted with everyday crimes, such as the one

presented in the current study. Crime victims who agree to participate in VOM may already be less retributive and more restorative. Otherwise, they might not have agreed to participate. Moreover, compared to crime victims, members of the public naturally have less contextual information about a crime to determine whether an offender deserves to be punished.

Another way to explain the public's reactions to crimes and restorative justice procedures, like VOM, is with the retributive impulse (Saulnier & Sivasubramaniam, 2018). Saulnier and Sivasubramaniam (2018) explain that laypersons usually engage in heuristic intuitive processing when evaluating a crime and how the offender should be punished. In the criminal justice context, heuristic processing is an intuitive and automatic decision-making process, based on the perception of an injustice which elicits negative emotions like anger, disgust, sadness and fear (Goldberg, Lerner, & Tetlock, 1999; Lerner, 2003; Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998). Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier (2011) explain that when heuristic processing is engaged, relevant information is ignored, to make a fast and often accurate judgment. However, according to Saulnier and Sivasubramaniam (2018), in the criminal justice environment, heuristic processing seems to promote the retributive impulses of laypersons and thus hinders the implementation of restorative approaches.

**The Impact of Serious Crimes on Evaluations of Restorative Justice**

Crime seriousness is shown to determine whether the public prefers restorative approaches or a combination of restorative and retributive approaches. Gromet and Darley (2006) conducted a study in which participants could allocate crime cases, with differing severities, to justice procedures that they thought would be appropriate. For crimes low in seriousness, participants preferred restorative approaches. In contrast, for more serious crimes the participants preferred retributive procedures, like prison sentences, in addition to the restorative procedures. Moreover, participants assigned less severe punishments when an offender successfully completed a restorative procedure.

Similarly, Roberts and Stalans (2004) found that the public generally is in favor of restorative concepts like compensation, restitution and community work. However, for violent or sexual crimes, the public's support for restorative justice mostly disappears and retributive proportional punishments are desired (Robert & Stalans, 2004). A reason for this may be the heightened emotionality associated with serious crimes which promotes heuristic processing (Saulnier & Sivasubramaniam, 2018). Another reason may be that studies often only give participants the option to choose between restorative and retributive procedures (Greene & Doble, 2000). This suggests that the public's lack of support for restorative approaches after violent crimes may be a result of methodological limitations of the studies conducted. If

participants would be allowed to choose restorative and retributive approaches, there may be much more support for the restorative ones (Gromet & Darley, 2006). Research conducted by Brown (1999) yielded yet another perspective concerning the treatment of sex offenders. She found that the public clearly supports rehabilitation of sex offenders, but only in a prison setting, not in a community setting.

In the present study, the public's view of justice after reading a violent crime story was examined. Based on foregoing research, it is expected that the retributive justice orientations of participants are heightened after reading the violent crime story. The public usually prefers retributive approaches after violent crimes which was successfully associated with retributive justice orientations in the literature (Gromet & Darley, 2006; Okimoto et al., 2012). Moreover, it is expected that restorative justice orientations do not change after reading the violent crime story. As mentioned before, when persons of the public consider more serious crimes, they are in favor of retributive and restorative approaches (Gromet & Darley, 2006). Only when they have to choose between the two approaches, their preference for restorative approaches decreases (Greene & Doble, 2000). Their restorative justice orientations appear to stay strong, but become less important for decision-making processes, compared to retributive orientations. Thus, the following hypotheses were devised:

*H1: After reading a serious crime story, people's retributive justice orientations become stronger.*

*H2: Reading a serious crime story does not influence people's restorative justice orientations.*

**Influencing the Public's Perception of Restorative Justice**

Despite the retributive views of the public which might promote heuristic processing, every member of the public also has the potential for conscious deliberate processing (Chaiken & Tropes, 1999). Conscious deliberate processing involves a more thoughtful consideration of the information and evidence available for the decision-making process (Saulnier & Sivasubramaniam, 2018). Saulnier and Sivasubramaniam (2018) are convinced that it is possible to counteract ineffective heuristic processing concerning restorative justice procedures by engaging conscious deliberate processing. However, according to the researchers, laypersons usually do not engage in deliberate processing which can reduce the public's desire for due processes, socially desirable outcomes and restorative justice when reacting to crimes.

There is evidence that persons of the public might become more favorable toward restorative justice if they have more contextual information (e.g. about the positive outcomes of restorative justice) and engage with it (Gromet, 2012; Saulnier & Sivasubramaniam, 2018). One way to provide someone with additional information while promoting deliberate processing may be to prohibit the person to rush to judgment (Saulnier & Sivasubramaniam, 2018). This leads people to spend additional time considering all the (contextual) information that is available, which can increase their support for restorative justice. For example, if people are educated about harsh punishments like the death penalty, they can become more liberal and are more likely to oppose the death penalty (Mandracchia, Shaw, & Morgan, 2013). This indicates that providing information can alter the public's opinions about the criminal justice system even when serious crimes are involved. Thus, providing knowledge about VOM may be one way to make the public's attitudes towards it more favorable, if the public actively engages with the information.

Interestingly, it may also be possible to make the public's attitude toward restorative justice more favorable without instructing them to actively engage with new information. Van Gelder, Aarten, Lamet, and Van der Laan (2015) conducted a study about the public's opinion about suspended sentences. The authors found that restorative and rehabilitative orientations were positively associated with beliefs in effectiveness and general attitudes toward suspended sentences. Moreover, the higher the punitiveness of the participants was, the less favorable was their general attitude toward suspended sentences. Furthermore, this relationship was mediated by the participant's beliefs in effectiveness and their perceived punitiveness of suspended sentences. Based on these results, Van Gelder and colleagues provided participants with information about the punitiveness and goals of suspended sentences. There was no effect for providing punitiveness information, but providing information about the goals of suspended sentences resulted in stronger beliefs in effectiveness and more positive general attitudes.

It is important to note that Van Gelder and colleagues did not provide participants with a crime story. It may well be that punitiveness information, which satisfies the retributive impulse, has an effect when participants think about a serious crime which promotes their retributive orientations towards justice. Therefore, the present study is partly based on the research of Van Gelder et al. (2015) but examines justice orientations, beliefs in effectiveness (BEVOM), perceptions of punitiveness (PPVOM) and general attitudes toward VOM (GAVOM), as well as experimentally providing information in relation to the public's opinion about VOM after a serious crime. Due to the focus on serious crimes, in the present study, VOM is conceptualized as a complement to the traditional retributive court process. Although VOM

is not punitive by nature, it is possible that the public mistakenly assumes that successful VOM after serious crimes allows offenders to unjustifiably escape punishment. In line with Van Gelder et al. (2015) and the explanations given above, the following hypotheses were devised.

*H3: Higher post-scenario restorative justice orientations positively predict beliefs in effectiveness and general attitudes toward VOM.*

*H4: Higher post-scenario retributive justice orientations negatively predict beliefs in effectiveness, perceptions of punitiveness and general attitudes towards VOM.*

*H5: Higher post-scenario retributive justice orientations negatively predict general attitudes towards VOM because of lower perceptions of punitiveness and beliefs in effectiveness* (See Figure 1 for an overview of the corresponding theoretical model).

*H6: Receiving information about the effectiveness of VOM leads to stronger beliefs in effectiveness and more positive general attitudes towards VOM.*

*H7: Receiving information about the punitiveness of VOM leads to stronger perceptions of punitiveness and more positive general attitudes towards VOM.*
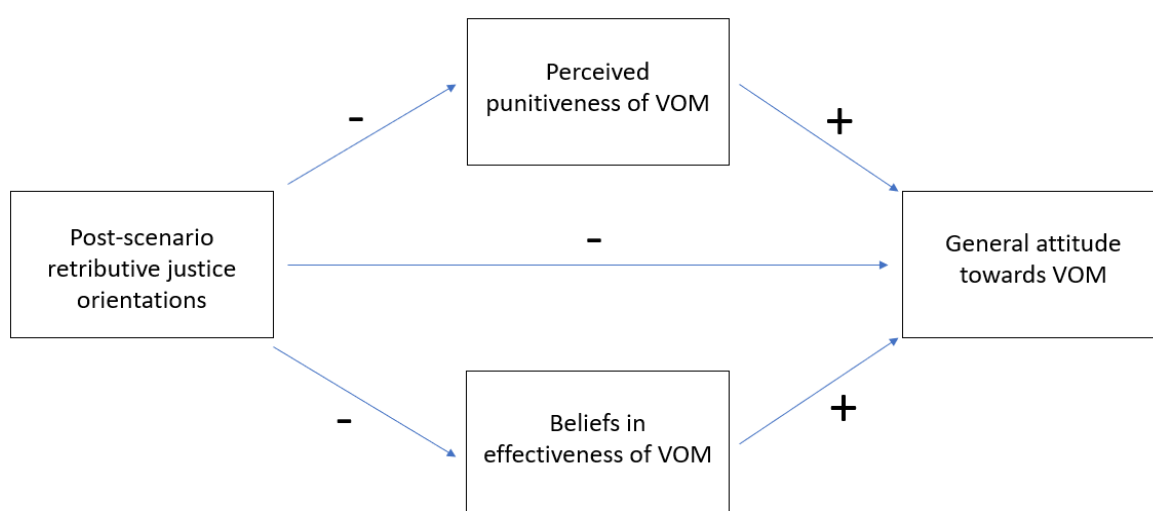


*Figure 1*. The hypothesized parallel multiple mediation model.

**Method**

**Design**

A 2 (*Punitiveness information*: Present vs. absent) x 2 (*Effectiveness information:* Present vs. absent) between-participants factorial design was employed. The dependent variables were *PPVOM*, *BEVOM,* and *GAVOM*.

**Participants**

A convenience sample of 155 participants was drawn. 24 participants were removed because they had too many missing values or did not take part seriously in the study. This left 131 valid participants ($M_{age}$ = 23.30, $SD_{age}$ = 6.40). 92 (70.2%) of the participants were female and 38 (29%) were male. The nationalities of the participants were mainly German ($N = 80$, 61.1%) and Dutch ($N = 26$, 19.8%). 76 (58%) of the participants have finished high school, 19 (14.5%) graduated from college, 30 (22.9%) graduated from university and 6 (4.6%) completed another type of education. 61 (46.6%) of the participants heard about the existence of VOM prior to the study and 5 (3.8%) of the participants knew someone who once had the option of participating in VOM. Therefore, while about half of the participants were familiar with VOM, almost no one had direct experience with it. Some participants were recruited via Sona Systems of the University of Twente, an online platform where students can register to participate in studies to get credits. Participants were also recruited via Surveyswap, an online platform where participants were obtained in response to the researcher of the present study filling out surveys of other researchers. The remainder of the participants were directly asked by the researcher and snowball sampling was used by giving participants the opportunity to recruit people for the study themselves out of their social networks.

**Materials**

Participants were presented with the following crime story which was slightly adapted from an online newspaper article (Pieters, 2018):

*JOGGER, 18, DELIBERATELY HIT BY CAR, STABBED IN DUTCH VILLAGE*

*An 18-year-old woman was injured while jogging in the village of Egmond aan den Hoef (The Netherlands) on Monday evening. She was deliberately hit by a car and stabbed in the chest, the police said in a statement on Tuesday. The young woman was jogging over Rinnegommerlaan around 7:40 p.m. when she was hit by a dark colored car "out of nowhere", the police said. The driver rolled down the window and stabbed the victim in the chest, before driving off in the direction of Zeeweg. The woman*

*collapsed a short time later. Bystanders called the emergency services and the woman was taken to hospital. She sustained lasting damages. The offender was caught by the police three days later and admitted his guilt.*

This scenario was chosen because it depicted the violent attacks of the offender as arbitrary, did not give any explanations of the offender's reason for attacking and described lasting damages of the victim. Furthermore, the crime described was not a property crime. All these factors should make the crime appear more serious, since readers likely assigned a disposition or traits of the offender as a cause instead of environmental circumstances (Hawkins, 1981). Furthermore, participants likely perceived the offender to be quite blameworthy (Shaver, 1983). It was checked if participants actually read the scenario by asking them how the offender attacked the victim.

**Variables**

**Retributive and restorative justice orientations.** Retributive and restorative orientations toward justice were each measured with six items, which were based on items used in a study from Okimoto et al. (2012). On the one hand, adaptations were made since Okimoto et al. (2012) made participants imagine that they were a victim. In the present study, however, participants reacted to the scenarios as outside observers. On the other hand, the posttest items were adapted to emphasize that the questions were about the specific crime scenario the participants just read. In the posttest, words like "an" were changed to "the". An example item to measure retributive justice orientations was: *"As a matter of fairness, the offender should be penalized.".* An example item for measuring restorative justice orientations was: *"Justice is restored when the offender has learnt to endorse the values violated by the incident."* (see Appendix for the complete set of items). The questions were presented in randomized order and were measured before and after reading the crime story. A 7-point Likert scale was used.

Okimoto et al. (2012) empirically distinguished the retributive and restorative justice orientations, as measured by the twelve items, using a confirmatory factor analysis across several studies. In the present study, a factor analysis with varimax rotation, specified to extract two factors, clearly and unambiguously replicated the expected factor structure. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 and 0.78, respectively, was found for the two scales administered before the crime story. Cronbach's alpha for the two scales after the crime story was 0.84 and 0.90, respectively.

**Knowledge about victim-offender mediation.** Previous knowledge about VOM was a possible confounder for the present study. In case participants already were knowledgeable about VOM, providing them with additional information might have not had the desired effect

and knowledgeable participants might already have a more positive attitude towards VOM. Therefore, participants were asked whether they have heard of the existence of VOM. In addition, they were asked to give a brief description of what they think VOM is. They were also asked if they know someone who faced the option of participating in VOM. Moreover, participants rated their knowledge about VOM with three items, again on a 7-point Likert scale. An example question was: *"I am familiar with the process of victim-offender mediation"* (see Appendix for the complete set of items).

A factor analysis confirmed the expected 1-factor structure of the three items. Therefore, the three items together were used as a knowledge about VOM scale. Reliability was high with a Cronbach's alpha of .88.

**Beliefs and attitudes toward victim-offender mediation.** BEVOM and PPVOM of the participants were each measured with five items on a 7-point Likert scale. Some of the items were adapted from the study of Van Gelder et al. (2015). BEVOM and PPVOM were measured before and after the additional effectiveness and punitiveness information were presented. The ten items were presented in randomized order. The items of the PPVOM scale were reverse scored so that high scores on the two scales indicated high BEVOM and high PPVOM, respectively. An example item to measure BEVOM was: *"Victim-offender mediation is an effective means of preventing future criminal behavior of the offender."*. An example item to measure PPVOM was: *"Participation in victim-offender mediation is a way for the offender to escape punishment."* (see Appendix for the complete set of items).

GAVOM was measured with four items on a 7-point Likert scale. The items were administered in randomized order before and after providing the additional punitiveness and effectiveness information. High scores indicated more positive attitudes towards VOM after the crime story which participants had to read. An example item was: *"All in all, I am in favor of victim-offender mediation after the crime described in the crime scenario."* (see Appendix for the complete set of items).

In their study about suspended sentences, Van Gelder et al. (2015) conducted a principal components analysis to empirically distinguish the constructs beliefs in effectiveness and perceptions of punitiveness. They found two factors with eigenvalues > 1 which gave support for the hypothesized two-dimensional structure concerning opinions about suspended sentences. In the present study, there was evidence for the validity of the BEVOM, PPVOM and GAVOM scales by means of a factor analysis with varimax rotation, specified to extract three factors. Three rather clear factors with eigenvalues > 1 emerged. However, there appeared to be a slight overlap between the constructs BEVOM and GAVOM, as shown by the

corresponding factor loadings. A few of the items loaded strongly on both corresponding factors. The item *"The restitution agreement is in some sense an additional penalty for the offender."* was removed from all analyses because it did not load on the expected factor and significantly worsened the Cronbach's alpha of the PPVOM scale when included. Cronbach's alpha for the BEVOM scale was found to be 0.85 at pretest and 0.90 at posttest. After removing the item mentioned above, Cronbach's alpha for the PPVOM scale was 0.74 at pretest and 0.74 at posttest. Cronbach's alpha of the GAVOM scale was 0.88 at pretest and 0.92 at posttest which indicated excellent reliability.

**Procedure**

The present research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Twente. It was conducted through the online platform Qualtrics which participants could reach via a link. Before participation, participants were informed that the aim of the study was to explore their attitudes and beliefs about justice. They were told that they would have to read a crime story and answer a few questions afterward. Moreover, they were informed that the study would take them about 15 minutes to complete. Participants were then briefed about their rights as a participant and the confidential treatment of their data. They gave their active informed consent by indicating that they understood the given information and by affirming that they were aware of their rights to withdraw during the study without giving a reason.

The questionnaire started with measuring some demographics of the participants (gender, age, nationality, and highest completed education). Subsequently, their retributive and restorative justice orientations were measured. It was explained that the questions were about what "justice" meant to them in general, not related to a specific incident. Next, the crime story was presented. Participants were instructed to read it carefully and they were informed that the crime described is based on a crime which really happened. After reading the scenario and answering the control question, their justice orientations were measured again.

Thereafter, participants were informed that the following questions were about the topic of VOM. They were told that they do not have to look up any information about that topic beforehand. Then their ideas, experiences, and knowledge regarding VOM were measured. Subsequently, general baseline information about VOM, adapted from Gromet and Darley (2006), was presented:

> *After an offender has been arrested for a crime and admitted his guilt, a judge can decide whether or not the case is appropriate for victim-offender mediation. If the victim and the offender agree to participate, they have the option of attending a victim-offender*

*mediation instead of a traditional sentencing before a judge. Victim-offender mediation is a face-to-face meeting between an offender and the victim, with a mediator (a neutral third party who has prepared both sides for the meeting beforehand) present. Sometimes, there may be multiple victims, or even members of the community or friends/relatives present.*

*During this meeting, the victim is allowed to ask the offender questions. The victim and offender try to work out a restitution agreement outlining what the offender must do to atone for his wrongs and make things as right as possible with the victim. The terms of the agreement may include an apology, monetary compensation, some services that the offender does for the victim, community service, and the like. When victim and offender come to an agreement, this is communicated back to the criminal prosecutor or judge, who will decide if an additional punishment is needed. In some cases, this leads to a dismissal of the case or a lower sentence.*

After reading the general information, participants were told that, within the case they just read, the possibility of VOM was offered to victim and offender. Their BEVOM, PPVOM, and GAVOM were measured in response to this. Next, participants were randomly allocated into one of four experimental conditions. They received additional information about the effectiveness of VOM, punitiveness of VOM, both, or no additional information at all. In any case, participants were instructed to actively think about and remember everything they learned about victim-offender mediation for about one minute. Participants in the control condition, therefore, only received the general information about VOM and had to think about and remember it, before their attitudes and beliefs were measured again.

The following effectiveness information was provided and emphasized the many positive outcomes that are possible after successful VOM. The information was mainly taken from the research findings of Dhami (2012), Nugent and Paddock (1995), Umbreit, Coates, and Roberts (2000) and Umbreit et al. (2004):

*There are numerous scientific studies which give evidence for the effectiveness of victim-offender mediation. Usually, victims and offenders are both satisfied with the mediation process and perceive it to be fair. Victims report that meeting the offender and being able to ask questions helped them to come to terms with the outcomes of the crime and initiate a healing process. Furthermore, after participating in victim-offender*

*mediation, victims often experience less fear of being victimized again by the same offender. Offenders often accept responsibility for their crimes and offer their apologies. In most cases, they stick to the restitution agreement which they made with the victim. In addition to that, lower rates of reoffending are observed for offenders who participated in victim-offender mediation, compared to offenders who took part in the traditional court process. If they reoffend, the severity of their crimes usually is lower than before.*

The following information, mainly found in Umbreit (2001), was given about the punitiveness of VOM to underline that VOM after serious crimes does not enable an offender to escape punishment:

*After serious crimes, which involve severe violence, the context surrounding victim-offender mediation is different than for less severe crimes. The offenders are in almost all cases already in prison and found to be guilty. They are not allowed to initiate the mediation process themselves and the preparations to participate in a meeting take more time than usual, before being allowed to meet the victim. Moreover, they are highly monitored during their sessions with the victim. Furthermore, while they still develop a restitution agreement, successful mediation does not lower the duration of their prison sentence or the severity of other punishments inflicted upon them. Meaning that offenders get no material benefit out of their participation in victim-offender mediation after a serious crime. In addition to that, victims forgive them only in rare cases. Some victims even fight against the parole of an offender despite a successful victim-offender mediation.*

After reading the additional information and thinking about it for one minute, participants' BEVOM, PPVOM, and GAVOM were measured again. This concluded the measurement part of the survey. Participants were debriefed about the concrete aims of the study. Then they were asked to give their informed consent again to make sure that participants still agreed to participate after being debriefed about the concrete purposes of the study.

## Results

### Exploration of the Data

Table 1 and 2 display the baseline characteristics of the total sample and whether there were differences on the baseline variables between the two punitiveness information and

effectiveness information conditions, respectively. With few exceptions, participants were adequately randomized over the different conditions. Only in the effectiveness information conditions, the variables nationality and education were non-randomly distributed.

Table 1

*Baselines Characteristics of the Total Sample and Tests of Differences of the Baseline Variables Between the two Punitiveness Information Conditions*

| Characteristic | Total | Punitiveness information: Absent | Punitiveness Information: Present | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Subjects (%) | 129 (100%) | 61 (47.3%) | 68 (52.7%) | |
| Gender | | | | .60a |
|   Male (%) | 38 (29.5%) | 19 (50.0%) | 19 (50.0%) | |
|   Female (%) | 90 (69.8%) | 42 (46.7%) | 48 (53.3%) | |
|   Other (%) | 1 (0.8%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (100.0%) | |
| Age (M, *SD*) | 23.30 (6.38) | 24.08 (7.84) | 22.62 (4.76) | .209b |
| Nationality | | | | .479a |
|   Dutch (%) | 26 (20.2%) | 12 (46.2%) | 14 (53.8%) | |
|   German (%) | 79 (61.2%) | 35 (44.3%) | 44 (55.7%) | |
|   Other (%) | 24 (18.6%) | 14 (58.3%) | 10 (41.7%) | |
| Education | | | | .428a |
|   High school (%) | 75 (58.1%) | 36 (48.0%) | 39 (52.0%) | |
|   College (%) | 18 (14%) | 10 (55.6%) | 8 (44.4%) | |
|   University (%) | 30 (23.3%) | 14 (46.7%) | 16 (53.3%) | |
|   Other (%) | 6 (4.7%) | 1 (16.7%) | 5 (83.3%) | |
| Awareness of existence of VOM | | | | .447a |
|   Yes (%) | 61 (47.3%) | 31 (50.8%) | 30 (49.2%) | |
|   No (%) | 68 (52.7%) | 30 (44.1%) | 38 (55.9%) | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Knowledge about VOM (*M, SD*) | 3.78 (1.63) | 3.90 (1.58) | 3.70 (1.69) | .491b |

*Note.* a = Chi-square test. b = Independent samples t-test.

Table 2

*Baselines Characteristics of the Total Sample and Tests of Differences of the Baseline Variables Between the two Effectiveness Information Conditions*

| Characteristic | Total | Effectiveness information: Absent | Effectiveness Information: Present | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Subjects (%) | 129 (100%) | 64 (49.6%) | 65 (50.4%) | |
| Gender | | | | .60a |
| Male (%) | 38 (29.5%) | 19 (50.0%) | 19 (50.0%) | |
| Female (%) | 90 (69.8%) | 44 (48.9%) | 46 (51.1%) | |
| Other (%) | 1 (0.8%) | 1 (100.0%) | 0 (0.0%) | |
| Age (*M, SD*) | 23.30 (6.38) | 22.63 (4.33) | 24.00 (7.94) | .231b |
| Nationality | | | | .027a |
| Dutch (%) | 26 (20.2%) | 19 (73.1%) | 7 (26.9%) | |
| German (%) | 79 (61.2%) | 34 (43.0%) | 45 (57.0%) | |
| Other (%) | 24 (18.6%) | 11 (45.8%) | 13 (54.2%) | |
| Education | | | | .037a |
| High school (%) | 75 (58.1%) | 39 (52.0%) | 36 (48.0%) | |
| College (%) | 18 (14%) | 5 (27.8%) | 13 (72.2%) | |
| University (%) | 30 (23.3%) | 19 (63.3%) | 11 (36.7%) | |
| Other (%) | 6 (4.7%) | 1 (16.7%) | 5 (83.3%) | |
| Awareness of existence of VOM | | | | .926a |
| Yes (%) | 61 (47.3%) | 30 (49.2%) | 31 (50.8%) | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No (%) | 68 (52.7%) | 34 (50.0%) | 34 (50.0%) | |
| Knowledge about VOM (*M*, *SD*) | 3.78 (1.63) | 3.82 (1.79) | 3.76 (1.55) | .853b |

*Note*. a = Chi-square test. b = Independent samples t-test.

Table 3 gives an overview of the means, standard deviations, and correlations of age, knowledge about VOM, justice orientations and beliefs about VOM. Notably, knowledge about VOM was positively correlated with BEVOM at pretest ($r$(127) = .22, $p$ = .013) BEVOM at posttest ($r$(127) = .23, $p$ = .01) and GAVOM at posttest ($r$(127) = .18, $p$ = .042). Participants who scored higher on knowledge about VOM tended to score higher on the BEVOM and GAVOM scales. Furthermore, age was positively correlated with pre-scenario retributive justice orientations ($r$(127) = .21, $p$ = .014) and negatively correlated with BEVOM at pretest ($r$(127) = -.26, $p$ = .004) and posttest ($r$(127) = -.18, $p$ = .043). People who were older tended to score higher on the retributive justice orientations scale and lower on the BEVOM scale. Moreover, pre-scenario retributive justice orientations were negatively correlated with pretest GAVOM ($r$(127) = -.28, $p$ = .002) which already gives some preliminary evidence for the hypothesized relationships.

**Justice Orientations and Their Influence on Opinions About VOM**

It was predicted that after reading the crime story, people's retributive justice orientations would become stronger. This hypothesis was tested with a paired-samples t-test with pre- and post-scenario retributive justice orientations as dependent variable. The difference in mean scores was found to be statistically significant ($t$(130) = -10.46, $p$ < .001, $d$ = 0.64). In line with the expectations, after reading the crime story, people's retributive justice orientations were stronger ($M$ = 4.79, $SD$ = 1.16) than before reading it ($M$ = 4.08, $SD$ = 1.14).

It was also predicted that reading the crime story did not influence people's restorative justice orientations. This hypothesis was tested with a Wilcoxon signed-rank test because the assumption of normality was violated. Pre- and post-scenario restorative justice orientations were the dependent variables. The test showed that people's restorative justice orientations were weaker after reading the crime story (mean rank = 51.53) than before reading it (mean rank = 67.13) which was contrary to the expectations ($Z$ = 2.64, $p$ = .008).

Higher post-scenario restorative justice orientations were hypothesized to positively predict pretest BEVOM and GAVOM. Table 4 shows the outcome of the linear regressions

Table 3

*Correlations Between Age, Knowledge About VOM, Pre- and Post-Scenario Retributive and Restorative Justice Orientations and Pre- and Posttest PPVOM, BEVOM, and GAVOM*

| Variables | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|-----------|------|------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| (1) Age | 23.30 | 6.38 | — | | | | | | | | | | |
| (2) Knowledge | 3.78 | 1.63 | -.16 | — | | | | | | | | | |
| (3) PreRetr | 4.08 | 1.14 | .21* | -.04 | — | | | | | | | | |
| (4) PreRest | 4.63 | 0.93 | .07 | .00 | -.10 | — | | | | | | | |
| (5) PostRetr | 4.79 | 1.16 | .11 | .02 | .77** | -.07 | — | | | | | | |
| (6) PostRest | 4.46 | 1.21 | .04 | .13 | -.08 | .84** | -.06 | — | | | | | |
| (7) PrePPVOM | 4.14 | 1.11 | -.05 | .14 | -.47** | .14 | -.40** | .18* | — | | | | |
| (8) PreBEVOM | 5.01 | 0.98 | -.26** | .22* | -.31** | .42** | -.25** | .42** | .53** | — | | | |
| (9) PreGAVOM | 4.83 | 1.27 | -.12 | .16 | -.28** | .33** | -.22* | .38** | .61** | .75** | — | | |
| (10) PostPPVOM | 4.34 | 1.10 | -.08 | .13 | -.34** | .03 | -.28** | .04 | .75** | .36** | .43** | — | |
| (11) PostBEVOM | 5.13 | 1.03 | -.18* | .23** | -.36** | .35** | -.28** | .39** | .52** | .78** | .60** | .44** | — |
| (12) PostGAVOM | 5.00 | 1.28 | -.10 | .18* | -.27** | .34** | -.27** | .38** | .55** | .71** | .80** | .46** | .72** |

*Note.* *p < .05. **p < .01. Retr = Retributive justice orientations, Rest = Restorative justice orientations.

Table 4

*Summary of Linear Regressions With Post-Scenario Restorative and Retributive Justice Orientations as Predictors for Pretest PPVOM, BEVOM, and GAVOM*

| Variable | Pretest PPVOM | | | | Pretest BEVOM | | | | Pretest GAVOM | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | *SE* | *F* | $R^2$ | *B* | *SE* | *F* | $R^2$ | *B* | *SE* | *F* | $R^2$ |
| Post-scenario restorative justice orientations | .16* | .08 | 4.01* | .03 | .34** | .07 | 27.38** | .18 | .40** | .09 | 21.52** | .15 |
| Post-scenario retributive justice orientations | -.38** | .08 | 23.57** | .16 | -.21** | .07 | 8.70** | .06 | -.24* | .09 | 6.23* | .05 |

*Note.* *p < .05. **p < .01. Controlling for age, nationality, education and gender did not change the overall results.
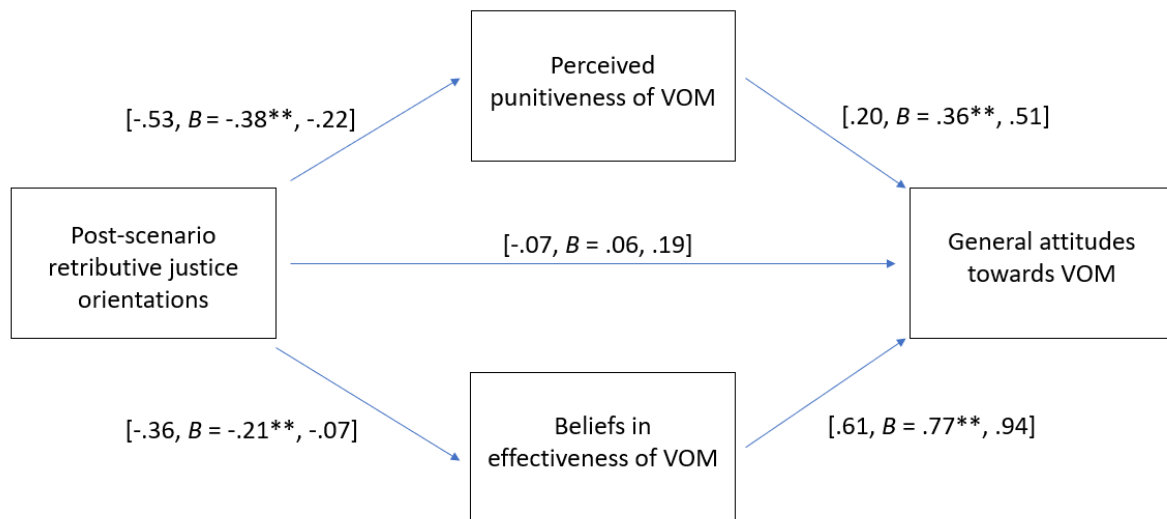
with post-scenario restorative justice orientations as independent variable and pretest BEVOM and GAVOM as dependent variables. As can be seen, in line with the expectations, higher post-scenario restorative justice orientations positively predicted pretest BEVOM and GAVOM and explained a significant proportion of variance in pretest BEVOM and GAVOM scores. People with a stronger restorative justice orientation tended to believe more in the effectiveness of VOM and had generally more favorable attitudes towards VOM.

In contrast, higher post-scenario retributive justice orientations were hypothesized to negatively predict pretest PPVOM, BEVOM, and GAVOM. Three linear regressions with post-scenario retributive justice orientations as independent variable and pretest PPVOM, BEVOM and GAVOM as dependent variables were conducted to test this hypothesis. As can be seen in Table 4, in line with the expectations, higher post-scenario retributive justice orientations significantly and negatively predicted pretest PPVOM, BEVOM, and GAVOM. People with a stronger retributive justice orientation tended to believe less in the punitiveness and effectiveness of VOM and had less favorable attitudes overall. Notably, the proportions of explained variance in the dependent variables were particularly high for post-scenario restorative justice orientations predicting beliefs in effectiveness and general attitudes and for post-scenario retributive justice orientations predicting the perceived punitiveness of VOM.

To test the hypothesis that higher post-scenario retributive justice orientations negatively predict general attitudes toward VOM because of lower perceptions of punitiveness and beliefs in effectiveness, a parallel multiple mediation model was tested using the PROCESS extension for SPSS based on the procedures described in Hayes (2018). The independent variable was post-scenario retributive justice orientations, the mediators were pretest PPVOM and BEVOM and the dependent variable was pretest GAVOM. Table 4 shows that retributive justice orientations, without including the mediators into the regression equation, are a significant predictor of pretest GAVOM. Figure 2 shows the regression coefficients of the mediation analysis and whether each variable was a significant predictor of the following variables in the model. As can be seen in the figure, when controlling for the effect of the two mediators, post-scenario retributive justice orientations did not significantly predict pretest GAVOM.

The significance of the specific indirect effects of post-scenario retributive justice orientations on pretest GAVOM through the two mediators was determined by calculating 95% bootstrap confidence intervals (CI). A specific indirect effect was deemed significant if the value of 0 did not lie within the confidence interval. As expected, the indirect effect of post-scenario retributive justice orientations on pretest GAVOM through pretest PPVOM was

significant and negative ($B$ = -.14, 95% CI [-.28, -.06]). The indirect effect of post-scenario retributive justice orientations on pretest GAVOM through pretest BEVOM was significant and negative as well ($B$ = -.16, 95% CI [-.30, -.04]). In line with the expectations, higher post-scenario retributive justice orientations negatively predicted general attitudes towards VOM because of lower perceptions of punitiveness and beliefs in effectiveness.



*Figure 2*. The regression coefficients and p-values corresponding to the hypothesized relations between post-scenario retributive justice orientations, pretest PPVOM, pretest BEVOM and pretest GAVOM in the parallel multiple mediation model. **p < .01.

**The Influence of Additional Information on Opinions About VOM**

It was hypothesized that receiving information about the effectiveness of VOM leads to stronger beliefs in effectiveness and more positive general attitudes toward VOM. To test this hypothesis, two Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) with effectiveness information (present vs. absent) as independent variable and posttest BEVOM and GAVOM as dependent variables were conducted. Although the assumption of normality was violated, it was decided to conduct ANOVAs, to control for the influence of nationality and education, since participants were non-randomly allocated between the two groups on these two variables. With a sufficiently large sample size, ANOVAs are quite robust against violations of normality (Schmider, Ziegler, Danay, Beyer, & Bühner, 2010). Controlling for nationality did not change the overall results. However, unexpectedly, there was no significant difference between groups on posttest BEVOM scores, when controlling for education ($F(1, 121) = 0.01$, $p = .937$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$) People who received effectiveness information did not have stronger beliefs in effectiveness

($M$ = 5.32, $SD$ = 0.83) than people who did not receive effectiveness information ($M$ = 4.93, $SD$ = 1.17), when controlling for education. Moreover, there was no significant difference between groups on posttest GAVOM scores ($F(1, 127)$ = 0.17, $p$ = .681, partial $\eta^2$ = .00). Controlling for nationality or education did not change this result. Contrary to the expectations, people who received effectiveness information did not have more favorable general attitudes towards VOM ($M$ = 4.95, $SD$ = 1.31) than people who did not receive the information ($M$ = 5.05, $SD$ = 1.25).

It was also hypothesized that receiving information about the punitiveness of VOM leads to stronger perceptions of punitiveness and more positive general attitudes towards VOM. The two parts of the hypothesis were each tested with a Kruskal-Wallis H test because the assumption of normality was violated. The independent variable was punitiveness information (present vs. absent) and the dependent variables were posttest PPVOM and GAVOM. The Kruskal-Wallis H tests indicated that there was no difference between the two groups in posttest PPVOM scores ($X^2(1)$ = 0.16, $p$ = .693) and posttest GAVOM scores ($X^2(1)$ = 2.53, $p$ = .112). Contrary to the hypothesized relations, receiving information about the punitiveness of VOM did not lead to higher perceptions of punitiveness or generally more favorable attitudes towards VOM. Overall, therefore, neither effectiveness nor punitiveness information influenced opinions and attitudes about VOM.

## Discussion

### Theoretical Reflection and Future Research

The present study investigated the public's orientations toward justice and whether these orientations can predict their attitudes and beliefs about VOM after a serious crime. This made it possible to discover the underlying factors of the public's opinions towards VOM which can concretely be targeted to improve the public's opinions. Furthermore, this gave an indication about how restoratively and retributively oriented the public is after a serious crime. This is relevant for explaining why the public has differing opinions about restorative justice, depending on the seriousness of the corresponding crime. As expected, retributive and restorative justice orientations were shown to predict perceptions of punitiveness of VOM (PPVOM), beliefs in effectiveness of VOM (BEVOM) and general attitudes towards VOM (GAVOM). Restorative justice orientations were, unexpectedly, weaker after reading the crime story. Moreover, people with stronger restorative justice orientations had higher BEVOM and overall more positive GAVOM. The opposite was true for retributive justice orientations which, as expected, were stronger after reading the crime story. People with stronger retributive justice orientations had lower PPVOM, BEVOM, and overall less positive GAVOM.

Based on people's restorative and retributive justice orientations is appears to be possible to predict their opinions about VOM. The fact that both restorative and retributive justice orientations after reading the crime story were moderately high, while retributive justice orientations became even stronger, complements the research of Gromet and Darley (2006). They found that the public views restorative procedures after serious crimes as acceptable, only if there is a possibility for retributive measures as well.

Justice orientations appear to be one of the underlying mechanisms in explaining the public's preferences for restorative and retributive justice procedures. They could predict the public's opinions about VOM corresponding with Van Gelder et al. (2015). However, it became clear that restorative justice orientations are particularly suitable for predicting BEVOM and GAVOM, while retributive justice orientations can better predict PPVOM. This suggests that future studies should increase their focus on restorative justice orientations which, so far, are neglected in the literature, compared to the retributive orientations of the public. The present results are also is in line with the research of Okimoto et al. (2012). However, in contrast to their study, in the present study, participants did not imagine to be the victim of a low-seriousness crime but looked at it from an outside perspective. This lends additional validity to the constructs of restorative and retributive justice orientations which seem to be relevant underlying factors of opinions towards criminal justice procedures for victims of a crime and the public. It might be worthwhile to determine whether the same holds true for offenders. It would be logical to assume that higher restorative justice orientations of offenders increase their willingness to participate in VOM.

It appears that the public's skepticism of restorative procedures after a serious crime is not a result of the methodological limitation that participants can often only indicate a preference for either a restorative or a retributive procedure. The restorative justice orientations were indeed weaker than the retributive justice orientations. However, even after reading the crime story, people's restorative justice orientations were not particularly weak. This emphasizes that the public does not completely reject the restorative values associated with VOM after a serious crime. Nevertheless, there is a potential for experimentally strengthening restorative justice orientations or weakening retributive justice orientations, for example, by highlighting a shared identity between victim and offender (Wenzel, Okimoto, Feather, & Platow, 2008). Future studies about the public's opinions towards VOM may, thus, highlight a shared identity between victim and offender if a serious crime story is presented, to counteract the weakening of the public's restorative justice orientations.

The relationship between retributive justice orientations and GAVOM was mediated by people's PPVOM and BEVOM. Specifically, the negative relationship between retributive justice orientations and GAVOM is partially explained by people's PPVOM and BEVOM. In accordance with the study of Van Gelder et al. (2015) about suspended sentences, beliefs in effectiveness and perceptions of punitiveness seem to underlie the public's general attitudes towards VOM. This suggests that future studies about the public's opinions about VOM are well advised to include these two variables to gain a comprehensive understanding of the underlying belief structure of VOM. It may also be possible to identify other variables which can act as a causal mechanism in determining the public's opinions and to examine their relationship with the variables investigated in the present study. Moreover, there is now preliminary evidence that beliefs in effectiveness and perceived punitiveness may also underlie the public's opinions about other sanctions and restorative procedures that are part of the criminal justice system. Increasing the public's beliefs in effectiveness and perceptions of punitiveness has the potential to increase acceptance of restorative justice procedures.

Corresponding with these results, it was experimentally examined whether providing information about the effectiveness and punitiveness of VOM to the public can make their attitudes and beliefs more positive. Providing information about the punitiveness of VOM did not influence people's PPVOM and GAVOM. Similarly, additional effectiveness information did not influence people's BEVOM and GAVOM. This suggests that in case of a serious crime, simply providing information about VOM as plain text is not an effective means to change the public's opinions about VOM. Instead, a different format or different kinds of information may be required to change the public's opinions. Nevertheless, especially people's BEVOM and GAVOM were already quite high, suggesting that the public overall is in favor of VOM after serious crimes and believes in the effectiveness of it.

Since additional information did not improve BEVOM and PPVOM it is logical that the public's GAVOM did not become more positive as well. There are several possible explanations for this outcome. The additional punitiveness information specified that victims forgive offenders only rarely after a serious crime. This might have influenced the public's perception of the offender's potential or worthiness for rehabilitation. Gromet and Darley (2006) linked a lower perceived potential for rehabilitation to a desire for more retributive measures. Furthermore, they discovered that only after offenders complete a restorative procedure, the public perceives an increased potential for rehabilitation. In contrast, offenders who go through a traditional court process were assigned lower potentials for rehabilitation. In the crime case offered to the participants in the present study, it was not mentioned whether

offenders successfully completed the VOM. However, some participants received the message that offenders after serious crimes are almost always in prison which could have reduced the public's belief in the offender's potential for rehabilitation. Another reason why the punitiveness information might not have been effective may simply be that participants did not think that VOM allows offenders to escape punishments.

On the other hand, it may be that the effectiveness manipulation did not work due to the high seriousness of the crime which increased the perceived moral wrongfulness and blameworthiness of the offender and the public's just deserts orientations (Carlsmith et al., 2002). High just deserts orientations make people focus on the rectification of a wrong and make a reduction of the frequency of future criminal behavior, the main focus of the effectiveness manipulation, less relevant (Carlsmith et al., 2002).

There also is the possibility that participants were in a low-motivation setting while participating in the present study. After all, most participants participated in the study because of their desire for extrinsic rewards like credits, not because they are particularly interested in their beliefs about VOM. Being in a low-motivation setting is related to lower task importance and a reduced desire to attain judgmental confidence which impedes systematic processing (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). In contrast, if the motivation of participants and their perceived task importance could be raised, it may be possible to increase their engagement with the information and promote systematic processing. Future research could, therefore, implement ways to motivate participants, for example by giving them the chance to win money or another incentive if they can demonstrate at the end of the research that they remember the provided information.

Contrary to the procedure discussed above, it might be more worthwhile to use the public's natural tendency for heuristic processing to improve their attitudes towards VOM. Saulnier and Sivasubramaniam (2018) explained that heuristic processing usually leads to retributive impulses which explain the lack of support for restorative approaches. However, they also suggest that it is possible to harness heuristic processing to increase support for restorative approaches by replacing the retribution-oriented script of the public with a restoration-oriented script. One way of doing this might be to inform the public about restorative justice and VOM by using the media, making use of the cultivation effect. Shrum (2001) defines the cultivation effect as "a positive relation between the amount of television a person watches and the degree to which the person's judgments about social reality reflect a television-world point-of-view" (p. 96). It might, therefore, be possible to change retribution-oriented scripts into restoration-oriented scripts by using media like the television. The public

might value restorative justice more if the news media, advertisements, or a popular TV series report of successful examples of VOM which provide the public with a restoration-oriented script. Depiction of successful VOM in the media could also make individuals and policymakers believe that most of the public is in favor of VOM (Roberts, Stalans, Indermaur, & Hough, 2003). Due to the current popularity of crime series, it would be easy to familiarize large parts of the public with restorative justice and VOM if they could be introduced into popular TV shows.

**Strengths and Limitations**

This is the first study which comprehensively examined the public's opinions about VOM after a serious crime while making use of reliable and validated research methods. Maruna and King (2004) pointed out that research often only establishes what the public wants without offering explanations why that is the case. The present research addressed this weakness due to the large number of variables measured, their established interrelations and by revealing the concrete underlying belief structure of the public's beliefs about VOM. It became clear that beliefs in effectiveness and perceptions of punitiveness can concretely be targeted to improve overall attitudes towards VOM.

It was not checked whether and how closely the participants read the additional information since there was no way to check how long participants spent thinking about the presented information. This limitation is aggravated by the fact that there was no reliable and accurate way to measure the cognitive processing styles (deliberate and heuristic) participants used while reading the additional information. Using such a measure could have yielded evidence about the causal mechanism underlying attitude change regarding VOM. There was also no measurement of the motivation of the participants during the study which could have given another clue about the participant's engagement with the information. Furthermore, it was not measured how serious participants perceived the crime described in the crime story. There only is indirect evidence for the high seriousness of the crime because retributive justice orientations became stronger while restorative justice orientations became weaker. Therefore, the present research did not yield a comprehensive picture of the underlying processes of attitude formation and change.

Another limitation concerns the restricted generalizability of the research results. Most of the sampled participants were university students in their twenties. Being younger is associated with lower retributive justice orientations and higher BEVOM. Thus, a more representative sample of the public, including older members of the public, might have shown overall less favorable GAVOM. Moreover, some participants had an already quite high level of

knowledge about VOM, perhaps due to participating in another study about VOM or their course work at university. A more representative sample might have shown that the public's knowledge about VOM is not as high as it was observed in the present study, resulting in lower BEVOM and GAVOM.

Participants were provided with a moderate amount of general baseline information about VOM before they received additional information. This could have influenced the public's opinions about VOM in an unintended way. It might be that participants made certain assumptions about VOM after reading the baseline information and already constructed a clear-cut conception of it for themselves. This conception might be an explanation for the resistance to change of the public's opinions. On the one hand, providing a moderate amount of baseline information secures that participants had a correct understanding of VOM. On the other hand, providing less baseline information would have imitated more natural conditions in which the public is confronted with VOM. In their everyday life, it is likely that members of the public do not receive detailed information about VOM. Therefore, future research could provide participants with only fairly limited baseline information about VOM to simulate natural circumstances and prevent the construction of hardly changeable conceptions about VOM.

**Implications**

The results of the present study suggest that there may not be much resistance of the public if the use of VOM after serious crimes becomes more widespread. The public had generally favorable attitudes towards VOM, believed in the effectiveness of it and did not perceive it to be particularly lenient. Apparently, the public does not think that VOM allows offenders to escape their punishments. This indicates that widespread use of VOM after serious crimes would probably not reduce compliance with the law and trust in the criminal justice system (Hough, 1996; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Furthermore, policy makers and judges may use the results of this study to inform their policies and counteract the widespread belief that the public's sense of justice can only be satisfied by implementing harsh punishments (Roberts & Hough, 2005). However, this does not mean that restorative justice alone could satisfy the public's demands for justice. In line with Gromet and Darley (2006), the strength of the public's justice orientations suggests that VOM should ideally be paired with retributive measures if high public acceptance is desired. While there certainly is potential to improve the public's opinions about VOM or influence their justice orientations, it is advisable to first come up with effective and convincing ways of doing this. The public's opinions about VOM after a serious crime appear to be quite resistant to change.

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**Appendix**

**Pre-Scenario Retributive Justice Orientations**

1.  As a matter of fairness, an offender should be penalized.
2.  The only way to restore justice is to punish an offender.
3.  Justice is served when an offender is punished.
4.  Only a punishment restores the justice disrupted by an incident.
5.  For the sake of justice, some degree of suffering has to be inflicted on an offender.
6.  An offender deserves to be punished.

**Pre-Scenario Restorative Justice Orientations**

1.  For justice to be reinstated, the affected parties need to achieve agreement about the values violated by an incident.
2.  To restore justice, an offender and the victim need to restore consensus on their values and rules.
3.  Without an offender's sincere acknowledgement of having acted inappropriately, the injustice is not completely restored.
4.  A sense of justice requires that an offender and the victim develop a shared understanding of the harm done by an incident.
5.  Justice is restored when an offender has learnt to endorse the values violated by an incident.
6.  For a sense of justice, an offender and the victim need to reaffirm their belief in shared values.

**Post-Scenario Retributive Justice Orientations**

1.  As a matter of fairness, the offender should be penalized.
2.  The only way to restore justice is to punish the offender.
3.  Justice is served when the offender is punished.
4.  Only a punishment restores the justice disrupted by the incident.
5.  For the sake of justice, some degree of suffering has to be inflicted on the offender.
6.  The offender deserves to be punished.

**Post-Scenario Restorative Justice Orientations**

1. For justice to be reinstated, the affected parties need to achieve agreement about the values violated by the incident.

2. To restore justice, the offender and the victim need to restore consensus on their values and rules.

3. Without the offender's sincere acknowledgement of having acted inappropriately, the injustice is not completely restored.

4. A sense of justice requires that the offender and the victim develop a shared understanding of the harm done by the incident.

5. Justice is restored when the offender has learnt to endorse the values violated by the incident.

6. For a sense of justice, the offender and the victim, need to reaffirm their belief in shared values.

## Knowledge About VOM

1. I am familiar with the concept of victim-offender mediation

2. I am familiar with the process of victim-offender mediation

3. I have knowledge about the aim of victim-offender mediation

## Perceived Punitiveness of VOM

1. The offender is not punished enough after his participation in victim-offender mediation. (reverse scored)

2. Participation in victim-offender mediation is a way for the offender to escape punishment. (reverse scored)

3. The restitution agreement is in some sense an additional penalty for the offender. (removed from the analyses)

4. Victim-offender mediation is an example of the too lenient criminal justice system. (reverse scored)

5. Victim-offender mediation is hurtful for the public confidence in the judiciary. (reverse scored)

## Beliefs in Effectiveness of VOM

1. Victim-offender mediation is an effective means of preventing future criminal behavior of the offender.

2. Victim-offender mediation provides the offender a chance to improve his life.

3. Victim-offender mediation offers more possibilities for staying on the right track than a prison sentence alone.

4. Victim-offender mediation is an effective means for changing the criminal behavior of the offender.

5. Victim-offender mediation makes it likely that the offender acknowledges his mistakes.

**General Attitudes Towards VOM**

1. Overall, I am in favor of victim-offender mediation after the crime described in the crime story.

2. I like the idea of victim and offender engaging in victim-offender mediation after the crime.

3. Victim-offender mediation after the crime helps to establish justice.

4. In my opinion, victim-offender mediation deserves its place in the criminal justice system.