



Lived experience consultants to a child sexual abuse inquiry: Survivor epistemology as a counterweight to legal and administrative proceduralism

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) in England and Wales was the first major child abuse inquiry internationally to appoint survivors to a formal role. The appointment of the Victims and Survivors Consultative Panel (VSCP) reflects growing recognition of the value of lived experience expertise and a broader shift in the policy domain towards public involvement and co-design.

Objective: This article draws on research that sought to understand both the experiences of a group of victims and survivors with related professional expertise consulting to a public inquiry, and the impact they had on the operation of the inquiry.

Participants and setting: Seven members of the VSCP joined the study as co-researchers, alongside academic researchers. Six IICSA staff also participated in the project.

Methods: A participatory research methodology was developed. First, a two-day workshop comprising four focus group sessions was held with VSCP members and researchers. Individual interviews were then conducted with the VSCP members and IICSA employees. Finally, there were two participatory data analysis workshops, which included both VSCP members and researchers, and where the themes were refined and consensus reached.

Results: The study found striking epistemological differences between survivor approaches, and the dominant civil services and legal paradigms that characterize public inquiries. This clash negatively impacted the VSCP, with each member reporting adverse effects on their work and personal lives. When a survivor epistemology was integrated into inquiry processes, there were clear benefits for external survivors, inquiry staff and the VSCP.

Conclusions: Engaging victims and survivors as consultants to non-recent child abuse inquiries has the potential to transform and improve inquiry processes and outcomes. However, consultation and co-design alone are not sufficient to guarantee success. Careful consideration is required in relation to how lived experience expertise can be meaningfully integrated into an inquiry's culture to safeguard survivors and enhance inquiry outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) was established as a statutory inquiry in England and Wales in 2015 and concluded its work in 2022. The UK government commissioned the Inquiry following high profile cases of child sexual abuse involving systemic failures in major institutions such as the police, residential ‘care’ homes, religious organizations and Parliament. IICSA’s terms of reference included a requirement to consider the experiences of victims and survivors, to provide opportunities for them to bear witness to the Inquiry, and to receive appropriate support in doing so (IICSA, 2022). The Inquiry had been advocated for by survivor activists for many years. As this paper explores, victims and survivors were instrumental in the establishment, development and outcomes of IICSA, and they continue to lobby government for the implementation of its recommendations. IICSA is one of the largest public inquiries conducted in the UK. It operated for a period of eight years and included three workstreams: Investigations and public hearings; The Truth Project; and Research. Over 6000 adults in England and Wales shared their experiences of child sexual abuse with the Truth Project, resulting in the largest public participation in an inquiry in UK history (IICSA, 2022).

This article draws on a participatory action research (PAR) project undertaken with members of the lived experience panel appointed to IICSA: the Victims and Survivors Consultative Panel (VSCP). The article begins by contextualizing IICSA within the broader international context of non-recent child abuse inquiries.¹ It then considers the engagement of victims and survivors with inquiries, comparing ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ forms of participation, before presenting the research findings. The study found that the VSCP contributed a distinct form of culture, knowledge, and communication, which we have termed a *survivor epistemology*. At times, this complemented what we identify as the dominant *civil service* and *legalistic epistemologies* inherent to public inquiries, leading to transformational changes in IICSA’s practice, processes and culture. Yet at other times, the survivor epistemology clashed with inquiry practices, impacting trust and relationships between the VSCP and IICSA staff. These tensions reduced over time as the VSCP’s role evolved, leading to creative collaboration and integration with inquiry staff. The article also considers the tensions that arose for the VSCP operating at the interface of IICSA and external survivor groups. Finally, we discuss implications for future inquiries—and inquiry adjacent justice processes—regarding how to effectively engage victims and survivors in lived experience panels.

2. Non-recent institutional abuse inquiries and survivor engagement

IICSA is one of a wave of inquiries globally that aim to address harm caused by non-recent institutional child abuse (Sköld, 2013; Wright et al., 2020). In the scholarly literature, non-recent child abuse inquiries have been variously described as transitional justice processes (Gallen, 2023; Sköld, 2013); a dignity conferring form of therapeutic politics (Moran & Salter, 2022; Wright, 2018); a type of apology politics (Sköld, 2015); remaking collective knowledge (Wright, 2017); “Aufarbeitung” or working through the past (Andresen, 2023); and an act of epistemic justice (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023). While there is large variation in how different countries have approached such inquiries (Sköld and Swain, 2015), and variation in scholarly analyses of this global phenomenon, inquiries since the late 1990s have been characterized by a ‘turn to testimony’ that centres the experiences of victims and survivors (Sköld, 2013; Swain, Wright & Sköld, 2018). Inquiries can offer a form of testimonial justice to atone for the denial and disbelief that has previously characterized societal responses to institutional child abuse (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023; Swain, 2014).

Foregrounding the testimony of victims and survivors reflects a wider embrace of lived experience expertise in policy making processes more generally (McIntosh & Wright, 2019; Heny et al., 2023). At least in rhetorical terms, this form of participation in inquiries can be seen as part of a broader shift to recognize childhood trauma as a legitimate form of serious harm, and one that confers on the survivor specific forms of knowledge and expertise based on their experiences (Wright, 2018). The involvement of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in inquiries thus serves multiple functions; it offers testimonial justice to individuals harmed (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023); creates new, culturally validated ways of talking about stigmatized and taboo social topics (Scott, 2022); generates new public understanding and re-writes the historical record (Wright, 2017); and enables learning about institutional failures through close-up, subjective knowledge forms (Taggart, 2022).

Yet, while the rhetoric of lived experience involvement has become ubiquitous in public service delivery, policy and research (Speed et al., 2020), there remains limited examination of the impacts, both on victims and survivors, and on inquiries, of different forms of engagement. There is a clear need to critically examine how experiential knowledge is drawn upon in inquiry processes, as the wider lived experience literature critiques the tokenism of superficial ‘engagement’ and the degradation of ‘experience’ as a way of knowing, vis-a-vis empirically validated forms of knowledge or professional expertise (Taggart, 2022).

The participation of victims and survivors has become one way of evaluating the effectiveness of inquiries as a justice response to past harms. The limited evidence available so far is mixed. One study found that the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (2013–2017) in Northern Ireland disempowered survivors, delimited voice, and fell short in meeting survivors’ justice needs (Lundy, 2022). It outlines an alternative model of participation which focuses on activist research and external campaigning to address power imbalances in inquiry processes and improve redress packages. In this context, a survivor-driven Expert Panel on Redress brought together survivor groups, academics, legal experts and human rights organizations to create a ‘collective voice’ to demand reparations for non-recent institutional child abuse in Northern Ireland. The study suggests that using a participatory research methodology that prioritises empowering survivors, facilitating voice to challenge power, and influencing political discourse and policy, was key in both enabling healing and exercising influence. This ‘outsider’ campaigning through public engagement and ‘insider’ lobbying of policymakers

¹ We adopt the term ‘non-recent abuse’ in favour of ‘historical institutional abuse’ to acknowledge that the harms of abuse are not confined to the past, and for many victims and survivors the trauma is ongoing.

(Wright & Henry, 2019), is contrasted favourably with the passive, individual and limited forms of participation enforced on victims and survivors giving testimony to inquiries (Lundy, 2022).

By contrast, research drawing on interviews with victims and survivors who testified to the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013–2017), concluded that participation offered dignity conferring opportunities that could enable healing from the shame that is often central to traumatic responses to child sexual abuse and complex trauma (Moran & Salter, 2022). The study suggests that participation in an inquiry that is conducted with care and is sensitive to the needs of victims and survivors can be a form of ‘therapeutic politics’ (Whittier, 2009) whereby emotionality is central to its success in raising public awareness (Stein, 2011). Moran and Salter (2022) conclude that it was the public nature of the Royal Commission, the social status of Commissioners who heard victim and survivor testimony, and the public validation and transfer of social capital to victims and survivors that made the process transformational compared with traditional therapeutic approaches (Moran & Salter, 2022). While justice was not the key focus (in contrast to the Northern Ireland study), this research nevertheless underscores the importance of *recognition* as a form of justice and the “reparative experience of being seen as an abuse survivor by others and being understood and valued as such” (Moran & Salter, 2022, p. 980).

An evaluation of participation in the Truth Project at IICSA found that for the majority of participants surveyed, engagement was positive and that even when some retraumatization occurred, this was short lived for most and found to be an important component of relieving the experience as part of a healing process (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023). There was evidence that for a minority of participants, ongoing retraumatization was linked to engagement with IICSA’s Truth Project and that future inquiries should consider offering longer term support. A key finding of this study was that victim and survivor input into the design of the Truth Project had a positive impact on participation as it led to the development of a trauma informed model based directly on lived experience expertise. Here, the VSCP were instrumental in creating the emotional and relational architecture that scaffolded survivor participation (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023). A related study examining outcomes for Inquiry staff (Barker, Taggart, et al., 2023) also found that VSCP involvement in training IICSA civil servants in how to implement a trauma informed approach helped inculcate a testimonial sensibility (Fricker, 2007), which enabled staff to understand and respond to trauma without undertaking clinical training.

The distinction between the VSCP (as lived experience expert consultants to IICSA) and Royal Commission and Truth Project participants (who shared their testimony) opens up a way of understanding survivor engagement as operating in different domains of participation and influence. In the Northern Ireland example, victims and survivors shared their testimony in a proscribed manner largely controlled by the inquiry (Lundy, 2022). Similarly, both the Royal Commission and IICSA’s Truth Project offered victims and survivors primarily a form of testimonial justice, which although meaningful for participants (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023; Moran & Salter, 2022), was arguably limited in shaping inquiry practices and recommendations. By contrast, the VSCP, who were officially appointed to advise the IICSA, were actively involved in the shaping of the Inquiry’s operational strategy and thus influenced IICSA’s workstreams from an ‘insider position’ (Wright & Henry, 2019). The VSCP’s influence stands in contrast to the external pressure applied by the Northern Ireland Panel of Experts on Redress. While both enacted versions of ‘consultation and advocacy engagement’, they differ in their positioning to the inquiries. The study reported on here thus generates novel insights into how the VSCP used their ‘insider’ position to influence IICSA’s work and outcomes.

3. Survivor activism and non-recent institutional child abuse inquiries

Before turning to the work of the VSCP and this study, we first briefly consider other key areas of victim and survivor activism related to non-recent institutional child abuse inquiries. Under the radar, decades long activism has been the slow burn that catches alight on the spark of high profile cases of child abuse, exposure of institutional failures, and journalistic interest (Wright & Swain, 2018). Commissioning inquiries has become a common government response to this campaigning, once public awareness and outrage reach a tipping point (Wright, 2017). Yet, while survivor activism is often central to the establishment of inquiries, once commissioned, survivors often have little power (Gallen, 2023; Lundy, 2022). We have noted above how survivors can move beyond testimonial participation to exert direct influence on inquiries via insider and outsider positions. Yet to date, activism and advocacy *prior* to the commissioning of inquiries has had the most substantive influence on their development.

‘Coming out’ as a victim of child abuse has been an important political tool for activist campaigns for recognition of institutional and societal failings (Whittier, 2009). This style of therapeutic politics often requires public expressions of private pain to connect subjective experience to problems with social structure (Jackson, 2013). Storytelling thus becomes a key strategy for bringing to life historic harms, often through engagement with the media, and has the potential to create new discourses of victimhood and trauma that can be utilised to make further social and economic justice claims (Wright, 2018). In the United States the MeToo movement is a key example of this type of activism (Rouf & Taggart, 2022). Yet, public expressions of victimhood, particularly around taboo topics such as child sexual abuse, carry risks for victims and survivors, potentially leading to feelings of shame which is often the affective core of interpersonal traumatic injury (Dolezal, 2015). Variations in how people are responded to when they ‘come out’ are often linked to classed, gendered, and racialised discourses, leaving adult victims and survivors of abuse in residential ‘care’ settings, for example, more subject to prejudice, disbelief and victim blaming (Wilson & Golding, 2015).

Alongside the risks to psychological integrity, survivors also face a confusing political and civic bureaucratic infrastructure, which can make navigating spheres of influence to mount a case for an inquiry and/or redress difficult. Establishing an advocacy/activist group, such as the Expert Panel on Redress in Northern Ireland (Lundy, 2020) or Care Leavers Australasia Network (CLAN) in Australia (Wilson & Golding, 2015), can harness collective survivor voice. An important driving force for such activism, as Herman (1998) notes, involves recognition that the trauma of childhood abuse is widespread, meaning it is not just a personal matter but rather is a social problem and a political issue. For some people, activism becomes a way of transforming the meaning of their personal tragedy by

making it the basis for social action, a process that Herman (2023 p. 3) terms a “survivor mission”. This often includes strategies aimed at raising awareness, creating change and pursuing justice. Social action by victims and survivors can generate a new source of power derived from being part of a “strong oppositional collective identity” (Whittier, 2009, p. 169) and a new sense of shared purpose and connection with others. Harnessing individual experience as the basis for social action can act as a bridge between private pain and collective politics, echoing the work of Arendt (1958) who emphasised the value of storytelling as a way of connecting with others and finding common ground to reclaim a public world (Jackson, 2013).

In spite of the challenges, there is evidence that activism of different forms constitutes an important strategy in mobilizing support for inquiries, and can influence the operation and outcomes of inquiries once commissioned (Wright & Henry, 2019). However, there has been limited empirical research on different models of insider and outsider activism and advocacy, and the strategies and tactics deployed by survivors to achieve their objectives. Furthermore, given that traumatic injury is often a feature of child sexual abuse, more understanding is needed of the impacts of survivor advocacy, and what resources and supports they need to do this work safely. Given the VSCP’s unique role at IICSA, this study provides an opportunity to address these questions, using a participatory action methodology that mirrors the ethos of collaboration and centring of survivor voice that is central to work in the field.

4. The Victims and Survivors Consultative Panel (VSCP)

The VSCP comprised up to eight public appointees to “provide advice to the Inquiry’s Chair and Panel, and offer guidance across all areas of the IICSA’s work” (IICSA, 2022). While they self-identified as survivors of child sexual abuse, they also came from a range of professional backgrounds, such as advocacy and campaigning, sexual violence service provision, and education. Over the course of the Inquiry (2015–2022), there were a total of 12 VSCP members, with a maximum of eight at any one time. Appointments were made by the Chair and Panel, after advertisements and interviews. This was the first time globally that a large scale child abuse inquiry had employed a lived experience panel in this way, not as staff but as consultants who were both ‘inside’ IICSA while also retaining some independence.

The core aim of this study was to examine the work the VSCP conducted at IICSA from multiple vantage points, and to understand how this work impacted VSCP members, key Inquiry staff who worked alongside them, and the operation of the Inquiry as a quasi-civil service organization. This study is important as the VSCP had a pioneering role at IICSA, and their work represents a distinctive form of victim and survivor engagement, linked to but also distinct from other forms of activism and advocacy.

5. Methodology: participatory action research

At the conclusion of IICSA in 2022, members of the VSCP and two Inquiry staff who had worked alongside them (Authors 1 & 11) began discussing a legacy project to document the VSCP’s work at IICSA. They had previously contacted an inquiry scholar (Author 2), who joined the team along with a doctoral clinical psychology student (Author 3). The group formed a participatory action research group and were awarded funding from [funding source]. The team aimed to publish a scholarly output (this study) and a report with recommendations for use by future inquiries and other bodies seeking to establish lived experience panels (Wright, Taggart et al., 2023). Ethical approval was granted by the University of Essex.

A two-day participatory research workshop, comprising four focus group discussions, was audio recorded and transcribed. The discussion was structured around IICSA’s developmental trajectory from 2015 to 2022. The first day focused on activism leading to IICSA, the early years, and how the VSCP navigated challenges. The second day focused on the later stages of the Inquiry, publication of the final report, and legacy campaigning undertaken since IICSA ended. All authors were present for both days of the workshop. Follow up interviews with all VSCP members were conducted by two of the authors (Authors 2 & 3), in which individuals could speak confidentially, and in greater depth, about their own experiences of consulting to the Inquiry. The team also identified key staff at IICSA with potentially useful insights into working with the VSCP. Six members of IICSA staff were interviewed, including senior staff, members of the clinical and engagement teams, and an ex-member of the VSCP who left to take up another position in the organization.

The PAR methodology meant that VSCP members were co-researchers on the project and as such were involved in the design and analytic process. While the entire team had access to focus group transcripts, individual interview data was handled, transcribed, and coded by three academic members of the team (Authors 3, 1 and 2). Two subsequent data analysis workshops were conducted whereby initial coding of the focus groups, using reflexive thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2015), was presented for discussion, debate and refinement. One of the VSCP members was engaged as a research assistant (Author 4). From these meetings, further themes emerged, and existing ones were refined and combined, with consensus reached through dialogue and, in some cases, compromise.

Even so, some differing views remained; these were addressed through adapting themes to take account of varying interpretations. While nuanced perspectives were articulated, and are evident in the quotes below, a dialogical process enabled agreement on core themes. Critically, developing consensus was integral to the VSCP’s role at IICSA and the seven participant-researchers had worked together for at least five years, and some, for much longer. This was a key factor in reaching agreement on our findings and in the overall success of this research project.

At the data analysis workshops, creative and visual methods were used to map emerging themes. A VSCP researchers drew the findings out using metaphor and imagery, such as scales of justice to represent what became alternate epistemologies, a Sisyphean mountain climb for the evolution over time, and walking a tightrope as the metaphor for the interface between the Inquiry and outside survivors. This reflected the non-academic backgrounds of most of the research team and was an organic element of the participatory methodology that facilitated involvement.

6. Findings

Insights drawn from inductive and latent coding of focus groups and interviews with VSCP members and IICSA staff resulted in one overarching theme and six subthemes: A ‘Triptych of Epistemologies’ was identified as the supra theme and the subthemes are: Individual and collective survivor identity; At the interface; Trust: reciprocity and rupture; Collective trauma and parallel processes; Evolution over time, and Life after IICSA. These themes capture the experiential process of consulting as a professional survivor panel, and below we discuss how each element facilitated integration and/or created barriers for the VSCP’s work.

6.1. Triptych of epistemologies

Epistemology refers to theories of knowledge, and how knowledge is understood and trusted. Variations between epistemologies can lead to differing perspectives on ‘how we know what we know’, what constitutes knowledge and how reliable subjectivity is (Audi, 2010). We found three distinct epistemologies operating at the Inquiry: legalistic, civil service and survivor. *Legalistic epistemology* reflects an emphasis on formal evidence gathering, evidential scrutiny and decisions based on probability (Gardiner, 2023). *Civil service epistemology* refers to the four pillars of the UK Civil Service: impartiality, objectivity, honesty and integrity (UK Government, 2015). *Survivor epistemology*, by contrast, captures the lived experience and professional expertise of victims and survivors, focusing on justice claims, issues-based advocacy, and experiential knowledge (Taggart, 2022). At times these epistemologies complemented each other in positive and enriching ways, as in an artistic triptych with three separate components making up one cohesive artwork. However, at other times these epistemologies clashed, with one or more becoming hegemonic. This was a critical dynamic of the Inquiry, especially as the dominant epistemologies were civil service and legalistic, which had major consequences for both IICSA and the VSCP.

Legal practice can be said to be “up to its neck in epistemology” with considerations of “proof, evidence, doubt, testimony, arguments, witnesses, experts” (Gardiner, 2019, p. 2). The Inquiry was a legal process under the Inquiries Act 2005 with judicial procedures that at times undermined and overruled victim and survivor participation. The relationship between the VSCP and the Inquiry Panel is illustrative. As a senior leader at IICSA said: “There is a real issue with too much direct contact between the Chair and Panel and the VSCP ... let me put this in context of a criminal trial ... if the judge kept having meetings with either defence or prosecution ... they’re going to bring a judicial review. The Act says it is a judicial process. So it’s very important that impartiality is baked in ... So the idea that once they (the Panel) was sitting, that there could be regular engagement ... was never going to be the case.”

In practice, what this meant for some VSCP members was that rather than seeing this separation as a reflection of judicial process, it was experienced as a reenactment of being shut out by institutional power and silenced. As one VSCP member put it:

The experiences that we were having felt like mirroring the abuse itself. So because IICSA was evidently an institution, then because we were being marginalized, minimized, not believed, no transparency, or being there when we needed, it felt like abuse itself. And it was the mirroring of our experiences, and personal experiences [that] played out throughout.

Another VSCP member viewed the anxiety about judicial review and the focus on legalistic process as indicative of the existential challenges IICSA faced early in its work (for an overview, see a news article written by a VSCP member at the time, Tuck, 2016):

It became very evident that the reams of negative public exposure had been both deeper and more pervasive than I had initially assumed. What we encountered was an organizational response that was so mired in self-protection that it didn’t leave a lot of room for creative consideration.

One of the consequences of the dominant legalistic epistemology, coupled with external threats, was a lack of creativity and mutuality, and the development of a defensive organizational state. In focus group discussions, VSCP members reported that this meant they were treated as a potential threat to the equilibrium of the Inquiry, with power concentrated in the senior leadership and withheld from their group. This left some VSCP members feeling like they “were never equal partners, we were always sub-partners in their eyes.” This was an ongoing and repeatedly reoccurring threat to the VSCP as a group and left them managing, as one VSCP member put it, “with the sense of paranoia that ... the Inquiry was in some conscious or unconscious way, waiting for us to implode, and therefore for them to be relieved of the burden of having to manage us.” For others, who joined IICSA later in its lifespan, this was less of a concern. While they recognized the threats, they were able to exercise greater agency: “I took it upon myself to think, where can I add value?”

There were also tensions between civil service and survivor epistemologies. A civil service epistemology characterized the operations of IICSA’s work streams, running in parallel and largely complementary ways with the dominant legalistic epistemology. Most staff were civil servants, coming to the Inquiry from other areas of the public sector. For victims and survivors, such as members of the VSCP, questions of objectivity are counterintuitive, as their expertise and knowledge is grounded in subjective experience. From the VSCP’s perspective, staff at IICSA saw them as ‘outsiders’ and many of the VSCP felt ill-equipped to “compete with the civil service world”, which has a culture very different to their usual workplaces. One example of this tension was how the Inquiry managed the strong emotions that arose in relation to child sexual abuse and institutional failings. As one staff member noted, “there wasn’t a lot of room for emotion”. This reflects the civil service culture of impartiality. However, it stands in stark contrast to his description of the VSCP: “things would be emotional ... particularly because of their own life experiences.”

The differences in emotional habitus (Gallen, 2023) between these epistemologies led to many VSCP members feeling, “quite angry ... so that made us difficult to deal with. They didn’t understand our anger. From their perspective they had a job to do and it didn’t involve emotion.” One senior leader advised VSCP members: “We need to take the emotion out of it, we’ve got a job to do, and they won’t listen if you show too much emotion.” VSCP members described taking different approaches to manage the emotional habitus of

IICSA, with some being more angrily vocal, while others took a more subdued, diplomatic approach. Yet, what was striking was the degree of consensus that emerged in the workshops about the stifling of emotionality at IICSA, irrespective of people's individual strategies while working there.

To be clear, the VSCP members were not overly critical about their civil service colleagues. On the contrary, they recognized differences existing at an unconscious cultural level. As one VSCP member stated: "I don't think that was deliberate. I think [it was] because of the culture of IICSA, and it was so insular and so institutional." However, according to a senior leader, one of the key reasons the VSCP was appointed was to "keep the Inquiry honest". While an emotionally charged habitus sat uneasily within the civil service culture of IICSA, for the VSCP, anger, shame and betrayal forms part of their survivor epistemology. This resulted in a situation whereby emotional expression by VSCP members was viewed as problematic, at times pathological, within a culture that prioritized epistemic neutrality.

This spoke to a central paradox the VSCP faced at IICSA. According to senior leaders, they were recruited based on their lived experience of child sexual abuse and trauma, and their third sector advocacy work. Yet the dominant epistemology of the Inquiry strongly reflected a civil service culture, which privileges conformity, neutrality and objectivity. As the VSCP were appointed based on their individuality, emotionality, advocacy and outspokenness, it was perhaps not surprising that there were misunderstandings and experiences of marginalization. As one VSCP member noted in relation to their commitment and approach: "Yeah we're not just a voice on the side that you can just listen to when you want."

One area where the survivor epistemology flourished, influenced the Inquiry culture, and represented external victims and survivors' needs was in the evolution of the Truth Project. The Truth Project involved people sharing their experiences of child sexual abuse and for the Inquiry to bear witness. Initially, IICSA only planned to hear from people who had experienced abuse within an institutional setting. However, this would have excluded the majority of victims and survivors, whose abuse took place in homes and local communities. The VSCP members argued that "all institutions have let down the child, whether the abuser is the father or in the family, the institutions have not protected the child ... so when we pointed that out, they were like, 'ok fine'." This reflects another area where consensus, and the VSCP's collective approach, was instrumental in influencing organizational change.

The major shift in operational direction to expand the Truth Project was accompanied by the VSCP lobbying IICSA leaders to also extend the support offered to victims and survivors, with major budgetary implications. According to one senior leader, "We didn't move a muscle on the Truth Project without talking [with the VSCP] ... we paid for things like companions to travel, we paid for first-class travel if needed, overnight accommodation if needed. It all sounds like small things but when you add it together it almost quadrupled the budget." Without this expansion of eligibility, the Truth Project would have supported less than half of all participants to share their testimony (IICSA, 2022). Based on VSCP advice, this support meant most people reported positive experiences (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023). This may be one reason for the relative difference in experiences of providing testimony when compared with the Northern Ireland inquiry (Lundy, 2020). This achievement by the VSCP relied upon a survivor epistemology that understood the need for an emotional and relational architecture, and the steps needed to reduce re-traumatization. This knowledge was fundamentally linked to the identity and experiences of VSCP members as CSA survivors themselves.

6.1.1. Individual and collective survivor identity

The formation of the VSCP as a consultative panel of experts raised the issue of how they positioned themselves as individual survivors, and as a group. This also arose during the participatory research described here, both in the focus groups and data analysis workshops. The development of a survivor epistemology as part of their work with at IICSA was not unitary or homogenous and involved some VSCP members backgrounding other aspects of their identity. This was a nuanced and individual navigation, not just in relation to how people viewed themselves, their identity and their roles at the Inquiry, but also how Inquiry staff positioned them, both individually and as a group. VSCP members described their identities as survivors as sometimes incongruent with the Inquiry's expectations. Many of them were also acutely aware of the stigma associated with CSA as a particular kind of victimhood:

I had [previously] very actively decided not to, to make any public proclamation about my own survivor status just one way or the other. Because my experience of seeing the way that survivors got treated in public, particularly in kind of governmental circles, led me to believe that it would work against me in terms of eroding what people's assumptions about my competence was. Not my credibility, but my ability to interact with them as purely a professional person.

There were also strategic reasons why some of the VSCP felt that focusing on their individual victim status was counterproductive to wider justice ambitions. As one VSCP member articulated, "It needs to be bigger than one person's experience. There's commonalities, but you need to broaden it out so that the, the whole picture is seen, rather than just one experience.... I definitely wanted to keep my experiences and the rest of the work separate." This resonates with the Panel of Experts on Redress' focus on collective voice (Lundy, 2020) and shifts from individual narratives to broader, justice focused discourses (Jackson, 2013). Yet, other VSCP members were more willing to use their survivor identity to educate others at IICSA and beyond, and media engagement became a key area of work for some.

VSCP members brought to their role with IICSA extensive individual experience holding active 'outsider' positions as survivors and collectively lobbying for social reform. They described how employing survivor activist strategies led to change early in the Inquiry: "We brought together the survivors and survivor groups to form ... a loose alliance of people and organizations, to lobby and to make sure the Inquiry was statutory." The VSCP saw their appointment as a strategic move made by IICSA, "I think they [Inquiry staff] saw the power of activists and thought, 'we better keep them close'."

In bringing the VSCP members 'inside' the Inquiry, IICSA was attempting to build a representative group of people with a diversity of lived experiences in relation to abusive institutions, connections to wider survivor communities, and intersectional identities.

However, when this representation could not be fully realized, Inquiry staff appeared to not grasp the implications for the VSCP. Responses from external survivor communities who felt unrepresented or excluded was palpable, with social media posts stating the VSCP were “not representative of all survivors.”. While expectations of broader survivor communities could have been better managed, the VSCP “had to deal with the fallout” and felt a lack of understanding from IICSA. As one VSCP member stated:

lots of people saying, you know, that I had no right, that I was representing them. But, of course, I didn't ... We can't represent anyone. We can just say our views, but it's hard ... we've all experienced a crime ... it doesn't mean that we all think the same act the same have the same skills and, and organizations still don't get that. ... You can't speak to us as a collective and get an answer as a collective.

VSCP members inhabited a liminal space, being part of IICSA but separate from it, connected to external survivors yet also perceived as being different from them, led to feelings of alienation that impacted both their work at the Inquiry and their wellbeing.

6.1.2. *At the interface*

One of the reasons VSCP members joined the Inquiry was in the hope of creating a transitional space between other survivors and IICSA. As one VSCP member said: “We tried really hard to be the conduit between victims and survivors, who came to our organizations, or on social media ... to try and address some of the things that were going wrong”. A distinctive feature of the survivor epistemology was its role in shaping culture. The VSCP's conduit role reaped dividends for the Truth Project design and delivery. However, at times it also caused difficulties with external survivors as the VSCP were perceived as ‘insiders’, albeit without them always having the benefit of insider knowledge or agency:

It felt like we were fighting among ourselves, fighting the Inquiry just to stay within our group and do our work ... and fighting with some victims-survivors on the outside ... Trying to have your voice, trying to do the best you could for the group, for victims-survivors collectively. But you were always on quicksand, you never knew quite where you stood.

The concept of conflict zone interfaces, which have been described as “spaces that lie between ... highly segregated neighborhoods” (Cunningham & Gregory, 2014, p. 64) is a useful metaphor here. The VSCP operated at the interface between IICSA and external survivors, subjecting them to challenges from both inside and outside. As one member put it:

We were always conscious of how we were going to be perceived ... what the fallout [with external survivor groups] was going to be, but they [the Inquiry] never seem to be worried about that. They knew, for example, that myself and others were very prolific on social media. They knew that there would be a fallout, but they just expected us to get on with it, and that was really not fair.

Operating at the interface exposed VSCP members to hostility and attacks from victims and survivors who felt shut out by the Inquiry. At times, this took the form of misogynistic and humiliating abuse on social media – defacing photographs of VSCP members, comparing them to “obedient poodles” and making defamatory statements about them. IICSA's response was to adopt a civil service communications strategy, which was not to engage, leaving VSCP members unable to use social media. For some, this curtailed their advocacy work. A senior IICSA leader later acknowledged that there should have been stronger protection and defence. As he said in an interview with one VSCP member: “in the early days, we could have gone out and defended you much more publicly.” Being publicly unsupported left VSCP members feeling that their credibility was undermined. Part of this arose from a clash of cultures:

They [staff] were following the culture of the statutory departments that many had come from. The VSCP weren't from that culture ... we could recognize it [but] we were from a different place, the community and voluntary sector, a culture that many staff weren't familiar with at all. The VSCP wanted to engage and use our experience, some of those within IICSA wanted to control innovation and new ways of working, because that's what they had always done as representatives of powerful statutory departments who always knew best. So there was a clash.

Some VSCP members also described the impacts on their health: “Every time we turned up for work someone got triggered. We got traumatized, as a group, and as individuals. It was a really weird feeling ... it was a constant fight.” This was a particularly difficult component of their work, at times feeling unsupported or betrayed by IICSA, which undermined trust.

6.1.3. *Trust: reciprocity and rupture*

Betrayal of trust is at the heart of child sexual abuse (Alyce et al., 2023) and fostering trust with survivors is a key aim of trauma informed care (Sweeney & Taggart, 2018). Building trust was a core component of the Inquiry's trauma informed engagement strategy (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023). Challenges with trust, both between the VSCP and IICSA, and between VSCP members, were evident from the outset and compounded by a lack of clarity regarding the VSCP's role. In the early years of the Inquiry, there was very little direction provided to the VSCP in relation to their work. As one member described the consequences of this:

We started a series of conversations which unearthed a fair amount of ... unease ... everyone ... had a very specific take on what it was they ... thought that they were going to be doing, and surprised that not everyone shared exactly that same view ... it was a very loose and an open process.

VSCP members felt that IICSA did not always know what it needed from them:

I think they wanted a survivors group to validate what they were doing ... to demonstrate almost that they were listening to survivors and paying attention to what they were saying, but without knowing what that meant, or [what they] should actually be doing.

A survivor epistemology was clearly needed, for IICSA's credibility if nothing else, but there was a lack of understanding about the role of the VSCP within the Inquiry.

The initial struggle to build trust between the Inquiry and the VSCP was compounded when on two occasions, former VSCP members (not involved with this research), breached their confidentiality agreement and leaked IICSA materials. A senior staff member observed: "The *Times* had a recording of [a pre-VSCP survivor meeting], which they published, and that put me in an incredibly difficult position with the Home Secretary because I've been saying ... we need to start engaging [with] groups. We need to start trusting them and then suddenly, it's well, how can you trust them if they're recording." Later, the leak of a report by another early VSCP member "really destroyed a lot of the trust that the Panel had."

These events also adversely impacted VSCP members, who felt they were collectively punished for the actions of others. As one Inquiry staff member revealed, they were largely viewed as a homogenous group and "it was also felt by some that the VSCP was becoming a liability." Moreover, the impact of two male survivors betraying the trust of IICSA, and the majority of the VSCP being female, also made things difficult for the new men appointed to replace them. As one of them said: "I realized that when [two new men] joined ... that we would both have a mammoth job ... to do because the trust had been ... destroyed."

IICSA also struggled to engender trust with both the VSCP and wider victim and survivor communities due to a perceived lack of transparency. As a statutory public inquiry with data protection and confidentiality responsibilities, it was unable to be fully transparent, which is a core component of trauma informed approaches (Sweeney & Taggart, 2018). As a senior staff member said: "You don't expose what goes on in the board. You expose the outcomes, not the process." Balancing calls for transparency was difficult, as IICSA had secretive practices built into its culture. This had a corrosive impact on trust. In developing this project, both academic and VSCP researchers wanted to understand the impacts of the opaque workings of IICSA. Therefore, processes of data generation, analysis, thematic coding and integrating individual interviews and focus groups was all conducted transparently.

It was important to some VSCP members that the breaches of trust described above were understood in the context of the traumatic work they were doing and could be interpreted as the consequence of unsuccessful attempts to raise concerns with IICSA. At the same time, the VSCP recognized that it was difficult for Inquiry staff to understand what was needed to successfully engage with victims and survivors. Yet over time, some VSCP members developed a new perspective on the challenges IICSA faced. As one said:

I was very angry at them for not thinking it through and not doing better [at the start]. But I don't feel that anymore because they were told to set up an inquiry about something they didn't know [about] because if they knew there wouldn't be the inquiry, and they had no idea what they were doing.

The emotional toll of the VSCP's work should not be underestimated. Their role as consultants was linked to a specific and very demanding form of epistemological labour that they were uniquely positioned to carry out, but which also entailed an affective burden.

6.1.4. Collective trauma and parallel processes

Alongside trust, a key component of trauma informed care is recognition that the harms of the past can be reenacted afresh in the present, and that contact points between survivors and institutions are often a source of retraumatization (Hennessey et al., 2022). The term parallel process refers to an organizational and interpersonal dynamic whereby services established to work with traumatic injury come under stress and consequently mirror the features of a traumatized individual (Bloom, 2010). There is some evidence of IICSA being a trauma organized system in response to staff stress arising from working with child sexual abuse materials, as well as encouraging findings about the benefits of staff training and support at IICSA, some of which was designed and provided by the VSCP (Barker, Taggart, et al., 2023).

The early days of the Inquiry's work was characterized by high levels of negative media, high-profile staff departures, and a risk of IICSA being shut down. The existential threat that pervaded VSCP members' sense of security was also felt by Inquiry staff. As a senior staff member recalled: "I was staving off the Home Office ... staving off the press, trying to find a new Chair. And then rebuilding ... the relationship with the Home Office ... if I hadn't done those things, we would have been shut down." Several VSCP members viewed these early challenges as leading to a traumatized organizational culture, which undermined an otherwise successful trauma informed engagement strategy. One staff member reflected:

I can imagine, for many people in the Inquiry, that the VSCP, you know, represents the intolerable, if that makes sense? Because [they] are all survivors and I think you could very quickly feel that sense of trauma in the system that wasn't being processed or worked through and was just buzzing around. And I think it was quite easy, then, to see that it wasn't the VSCP doing anything. It was what was happening across the system, you know, day in day out hearing people's experiences of child sexual abuse.

For some VSCP members, this dynamic led to the re-emergence of interpersonal strategies they had developed in childhood to manage their abuse. As one VSCP member said:

I found that I ended up falling back into the old practice of being compliant. And so they used my compliance, and that really rested badly with me... because in the years of being abused, I was also utterly compliant.

Other VSCP members reacted to these dynamics with anger, showing variance in emotional responses to organizational culture:

It was really important that IICSA at all levels understood the concept of “mirroring”, and that IICSA itself was engaging in this. The VSCP stood our ground ... not in an attacking way, but in a survivor response way, we wanted to be in a position where we were ‘heard’ – that our varied life, work and activist knowledge was recognized.

These reflections underscore the need to identify and manage interpersonal trauma-related dynamics. It also connects to competing epistemologies: the procedural civil service on the one hand, and on the other, a survivor epistemology that privileges relational working and an understanding of the atemporality of trauma. As one member quipped humorously during one of the focus groups: “Are you seriously expecting trauma survivors to have an accurate chronological memory?” The absence of a shared understanding of how unconscious trauma dynamics influence organizational culture made it difficult for the VSCP to recognize when ruptures occurred and to fully appreciate the importance of repair and working through:

We, as a group, treated the Inquiry as a perpetrator. You know, they would be constantly doing things to us that we didn’t want them to do, and we didn’t know how to get away from them. And I think that the Inquiry saw us in some ways as perpetrators ... those dynamics of power were very live. Very, very live.

6.1.5. *Evolution over time*

Despite the challenges described above, there is an important story of development over time that helps balance the narrative of the VSCP’s work and their contribution to IICSA. Critically, none of the people we interviewed, VSCP members and Inquiry staff alike, thought that having a lived experience panel was a mistake. Staff at IICSA appreciated working alongside the VSCP and the dimensions of care they brought to the Inquiry. As one person noted: “the experience for me was very positive.” Similarly, a senior leader said: “If I had to advise the Secretary on how to set up an inquiry, making sure you’ve got a VSCP, this is how I would do it.” They also underscored the important contributions the VSCP made to the ethical integrity of IICSA, describing them as “a group of survivors who kept us all honest.” The VSCP helped design the emotional and relational architecture of the Inquiry’s interactions with victims and survivors (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023) and they inculcated a testimonial sensibility that encouraged honesty in working practices (Barker, Taggart, et al., 2023). The shared voice of the VSCP on key issues, despite group differences, enabled them to increase their impact. As a staff member observed of the VSCP: “it was quite a flat structure ... [and] ... it was a good way of working because they, were very good at ... standing collectively on issues.”

The Inquiry recognized that changes were needed to address how the VSCP and staff interacted. The person who undertook this relationship rebuilding work remarked: “The main thing was about perception ... changing perception of the VSCP ... also getting the VSCP into a rhythm where they could engage with teams ... in a more civil service-type approach.”

This helped integrate competing epistemologies, which was viewed positively by many VSCP members: “I felt that changed over the years where we were more involved with things from the concept.” Some VSCP members took it upon themselves to facilitate integration:

They had me working on a project in the set group that was about invisible barriers ... I’m so glad I did that. I found it so interesting, because the VSCP were out on a limb ... [but] through the work I did with the Culture and Engagement Group, I realized... It’s not just an issue for the VSCP, it’s an issue within IICSA as a whole, and it put me a little bit to rest, and it integrated me, I think, a lot more with staff.

Overall, there was a sense that things improved towards the end of the Inquiry as some of the barriers were reduced. As one VSCP reflected on their work: “certainly in the last couple of years of the Inquiry it was much more structured, and it felt much more directed.”

6.1.6. *Life after IICSA*

Although the Inquiry reported to the UK government in 2022, the VSCP’s work has continued (informally), particularly following the limited political response so far to IICSA’s recommendations. This work has taken the form of lobbying and activism, including a joint statement written with the Inquiry Chair expressing grave disappointment at the government’s failure to commit to implementing recommendations (Survivors Trust, 2023). This suggests that some of the earlier distancing between the Chair and VSCP was, at least partly, driven by legal constraints. Importantly, there was recognition among VSCP members that relationships with IICSA senior staff had changed in a “positive way” following the Inquiry. While competing epistemologies were perhaps inevitable during the Inquiry, the repair that later occurred was made possible through a shared purpose of agitating for government action.

However, the joint statement, and the disappointment it articulated, also demonstrates that the primary moral responsibility and emotional burden for social change has again been left to survivors, rather than the institutions found to have systemically failed. This has meant ongoing, unpaid work to ensure IICSA leads to change. The commitment beyond personal gain is clear and speaks to a moral responsibility felt by VSCP members to honour survivors. This work reflects therapeutic politics (Whittier, 2009), survivor missions (Herman, 2023), and the testimonial sensibility the VSCP aimed to inculcate at IICSA (Barker, Taggart, et al., 2023).

Yet this ongoing advocacy is multilayered and varied for different VSCP members. Some of the post-Inquiry legacy work on implementing recommendations is led by organizations who were less directly involved with IICSA. This left some VSCP members feeling territorial, at times shut out of the process, and feeling that their work was undervalued. As one said: “It feels a little bit like ... you guys deal with all that pain and all that trauma, and then once you’ve got through that we’ll come in and take it from now.” There was a feeling that the post-IICSA environment resembled a “feeding frenzy” with pots of funding available and organizational interests prevailing.

For some, it felt like the VSCP were “being written out” of IICSA’s legacy, which speaks to the marginal role survivors experience when engaging with institutions, inquiries and otherwise. Others see the VSCP’s legacy differently, as reflecting the strength victims and survivors have as a collective. All VSCP members received affirming and positive feedback from third sector colleagues who recognized their pioneering work, leadership, achievements and ongoing commitment: “[they] really see the value of the VSCP ... how passionate we are and how much knowledge [and] expertise we have.” These sometimes contradictory feelings experienced by VSCP members point to an ongoing struggle for legitimacy for victims and survivors, even when they are recognized as experts and leaders.

For all VSCP members, reaching the end of IICSA after many years, and in some cases decades, of work leading up to and during the Inquiry, represented a significant life stage transition. There was anxiety for some about loss of a role and purpose, while for others there was a sense of relief that they could slow down and take a step back. What was shared in several of the individual interviews was a strong appreciation and gratitude for other VSCP members, something that has not always been easy for them to express openly: “One of the biggest things I take away is, is just how much respect I have for the other VSCP members ... that closeness in working is something that I really value”. This person mentioned that their VSCP work helped them see how childhood experiences of abuse could be transformed into a productive social contribution.

Despite some tensions that existed during their work as a panel, what consistently emerged in this research was recognition of the value of their relationships with one another, because of their diversity as a group and despite it. The strength of the VSCP’s collective voice in their ongoing advocacy work was also highly valued. Members of the VSCP collectively described two key aspirations for their IICSA legacy. The first was to change the culture around child sexual abuse:

I want [there] to be a cultural shift and change in the language use when it comes to talking about child sexual abuse. I want people to talk about it quite openly. I have seen that change. Not dramatically, but I have seen that in the last five years people are more willing to talk about child sexual abuse.

Secondly, in spite of the challenges faced by the VSCP, there was a strong desire to affirm the potential of survivor activism and advocacy in inquiries:

[If] part of [the VSCP’s] legacy can be how other inquiries can work in a more effective way, then that would be amazing ... [not] to get rid of all of the challenges ... but yeah, to tackle some of the unnecessary internal difficulties that there were.

Finally, there was recognition that like the Northern Ireland Panel of Experts (Lundy, 2020), collective voice was a more powerful tool than individual advocacy. As one VSCP member stated: “collectively ... with the VSCP logo, we still have influence. Whereas I think ... individually we would have less influence [it is] the sum of all our parts that actually make people occasionally sit up and listen.” The same desire to utilize their collective voice, while retaining individual perspectives, was one of the goals of this project.

7. Discussion

Examining the work of a lived experience panel at a large public inquiry into child sexual abuse offers a valuable opportunity to learn from a pioneering approach to survivor engagement that can inform future inquiries and inquiry adjacent processes. Adopting a participatory research methodology was important, given both the expertise of the group and their experiences at IICSA. Academic researchers worked alongside members of the VSCP to co-design and conduct the focus groups and themes were developed in collaborative data analysis sessions. What emerged was a collective interpretation of the three different epistemologies that operated at IICSA: survivor, civil service and legalistic. The survivor epistemology was widely viewed as invaluable to IICSA’s work – evident in the appointment of a lived experience panel to the Inquiry – but it also constituted a threatening subaltern force, challenging the powerful and deeply entrenched worldviews that characterize both legalistic and civil service culture, practices and values.

This study highlights how ideological differences and points of tension will (perhaps inevitably) arise in the structure and function of an inquiry incorporating lived experience expertise. As a public inquiry, the legalistic epistemology of IICSA dominated and was viewed as the ultimate ‘truth’, determining how the Inquiry was governed and how knowledge was shared. In practice, this meant that ‘sensitive’ information was not shared, including with the VSCP. Epistemological differences were palpable at times, particularly when civil service norms, practices and values were applied to the VSCP’s work, and through attempts to shape or manage how they functioned as a consultative panel. This included ways of being, such as perceived ‘professional’ conduct regarding the types of speech acts deemed appropriate, and clearly demarcated and hierarchical communication and reporting structures, which jarred with some VSCP members. This was especially true for those who had come from the third sector, which is characterized by flatter organizational structures and more egalitarian cultural norms and practices. These epistemological tensions curtailed the flourishing of a survivor culture within the Inquiry, shaping knowledge sharing practices and particular ways of being.

What we have defined as survivor epistemology speaks to something broader than the experiential knowledge or co-production typically referred to in the scholarly literature. It incorporates how knowledge is constructed and valued, how it is communicated, the roles of emotion and justice in understanding child abuse, and a sensibility about advocacy and activism that is at the heart of how knowledge is operationalised. While there was evidence that survivor epistemology was overrun at times by socially valued and institutionally powerful legalistic and civil service epistemologies, there were other areas where it led to transformational culture change. The framework presented here can help illuminate important differences between professional groups and survivors, which can inform future lived experience panels and the institutions appointing them. It points to the importance of aiming for a complementary triptych in social relations, while emphasising that clashes of epistemology are more likely to be due to reciprocal misrecognition, rather than the inherent inferiority of experiential knowledge. The attempted formal integration of a survivor epistemology into the work of a public inquiry was pioneering and the VSCP transformed elements of IICSA’s work. This contrasts with

outsider forms of grassroots activism, such as the MeToo movement and the Northern Ireland Panel of Expert on Redress. However, it is important to note that the binary between outsider and insider activism is somewhat specious as the VSCP members rejoined external activist work post IICSA.

While we have presented a survivor epistemology as a counterpoint to, and often in conflict with, legalistic and civil service epistemologies, the evolution of the VSCP over time and particularly post-IICSA, reflects a level of integration and reveals that creativity and mutual understanding did develop. From the VSCP standpoint, they functioned best when they were not viewed as outsiders but rather worked alongside other inquiry teams. While this has operational implications for future inquiries and inquiry adjacent processes, it does invite comparison with another form of advocacy and consultative survivor participation. The Northern Ireland Panel of Experts (Lundy, 2020) remained completely independent of the inquiry they were lobbying. As such, they did not risk being either co-opted into the inquiry worldview or having their activism sanitized by insider status (Wright & Henry, 2019). On the one hand, the Northern Ireland Panel achieved considerable success regarding redress for survivors. On the other hand, the VSCP's success in transforming the Truth Project scope and budget, as well as shaping how IICSA interacted with victim and survivor stakeholders, meant considerable benefits were conferred by acting at the interface.

The risks of groups facing cooption by offering lived experience expertise to larger institutions are an issue for social movements more broadly (Holdo, 2019). Clearly, different views will be held by victim and survivor groups on the relative benefits of insider versus outsider status, and the both/and approach shown by the VSCP pre, during and post IICSA. This study, in combination with Lundy's (2020) work, illuminates distinctive models and benefits of survivor participation, both of which offer a consultative and advocacy form of participation that is new to non-recent child abuse inquiries internationally. Given the frequency with which medium and high-income countries are utilizing inquiries (Wright et al., 2020), these lessons are urgently needed.

One problem that arose for the VSCP, due to the limited number of members and the selection process, was a lack of representativeness to outsider survivor groups, which caused problems for both the VSCP members and victims and survivors more broadly. This study did not include the perspectives of those outside of IICSA, and as such is a limitation. Given the conflict described between VSCP members and some external groups, issues of representation and voice need further examination. Critically, core features of traumatic injury are social alienation and an impact on interpersonal relationships. It is therefore unsurprising that conflict may emerge when some survivors are selected over others. This is likely exacerbated by the interpersonal context of child sexual abuse, whereby being singled out and chosen as 'special' provokes both envious and fearful responses (Messler Davies & Frawley, 1994). What is encouraging is that despite abuse, such as social media attacks, VSCP members understood some of the hostility they received from external survivors and groups. Further research is needed to advise inquiries how to effectively deal with these forms of conflict.

One element that can obscure the issue of conflict in these spaces is the fact that survivors of child sexual abuse are victims of harm. As such, it can be difficult for them to be seen as adults who can also inflict harm on others. It is important to explore how all actors in inquiry processes can be granted the dignity of complex interior lives, including feelings like envy and destructiveness (Rose, 2023), and not be reduced to passive victims who need to be mollified at the cost of their agency. As victim and survivor participation in inquiries further develops, and with this research providing some new insights, we hope that tensions between different advocacy and campaigning approaches can lead to creative solutions whereby multiple forms of participation can be enabled to maximize victim and survivor influence.

8. Conclusion

This study drew on the experiences and reflections of the VSCP, a lived experience panel who pioneered a model of insider survivor participation at a large non-recent child sexual abuse inquiry in the UK. The group contributed a survivor epistemology that shaped the ways in which the Inquiry engaged with victims and survivors. Yet, despite their transformational contributions, VSCP members faced considerable difficulties navigating a culture dominated by legalistic and civil service worldviews. This had a significant impact on VSCP members' wellbeing and curtailed opportunities for integration into inquiry workstreams. Nonetheless, the model of the VSCP as a lived experience panel at the interface of an inquiry and its key stakeholders, brought a survivor epistemology that created a relational and emotional architecture which improved outcomes for other victims and survivors. The analysis of their experiences and the impact of their work is thus an important contribution to the study of non-recent child abuse inquiries internationally.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Danny Taggart: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Katie Wright:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Hannah Griffin:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Lucy Duckworth:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **May Baxter-Thornton:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Sheila Coates:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Emma Lewis:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Fay Maxted:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Kit Shellam:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Chris Tuck:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Stephanie Ford:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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