Five years on – sexual abuse survivors' reflections on their involvement with the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) and its legacy

Naomi Hilton

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School of Health and Social Sciences

University of Essex

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Abstract

This study explores survivor experiences of participating in the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), with a focus on the longer-term impact of testimony, institutional response and the legacy of inquiry processes. It also examines how survivors interpret the relationship between being heard and subsequent governmental action.

Adopting a pragmatic epistemological position, the study employed a mixed methods design comprising an online survey (n = 15) and semi-structured interviews (n = 10) with individuals who had contributed to IICSA. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

The findings demonstrate that while participation in the inquiry provided meaningful opportunities for voice, validation and identity repositioning, these experiences were often destabilised over time in the absence of perceived governmental action. Recognition was experienced as contingent and could become “hollowed” when not sustained through institutional response. Participants described a liminal identity positioned between empowerment and marginalisation, alongside a sense of deferred closure in which the inquiry remained experientially unfinished. The impact of inquiries is structured by competing temporalities, where misalignment between survivor urgency and institutional response produces deferred closure, fragile recognition, and unstable post-inquiry identities. In response, many engaged in cyclical patterns of activism, understood as adaptive strategies for maintaining agency while managing emotional demands.

The study contributes to theoretical understandings of recognition, identity and justice by conceptualising them as dynamic, relational and temporally unfolding processes. It also offers practical insights for the design of public inquiries, highlighting the importance of sustained institutional accountability, as well as clinical implications for supporting survivors beyond the point of testimony.

Overall, the findings suggest that the impact of public inquiries extends beyond their formal conclusion, with the relationship between testimony and institutional response playing a critical role in shaping survivor experiences over time.

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List of Abbreviations

CSA – Child Sexual Abuse

CPTSD – Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

IICSA –Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

ONS – Office for National Statistics

RTA – Reflexive Thematic Analysis

TIA – Trauma-Informed Approach

TP –Truth Project

TRC – Truth and Reconciliation Commission

VCSP – Victims and Survivors Consultative Panel

1. Introduction

This chapter sets out the background to this research, including child sexual abuse (CSA), and public inquiries, followed by a systematic literature review of victim and survivor experiences of giving evidence at truth and reconciliation commissions and public inquiries. It then considers the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) specifically before outlining the study aims and research questions.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse (CSA) involves forcing or enticing someone under 18 years to engage in sexual activities. It is a pervasive issue, with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2020) estimating 3.1 million adults endured CSA before the age of 16. More recent data indicates a prevalence of 9.1% among people aged 18 years and over (13.9% of women; 4.1% of men) (ONS, 2025). Further, the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2019 indicated 1-in-5 male and 1-in-10 female CSA survivors were abused in institutional settings (ONS, 2020). Although children comprise 20% of the population, they account for 40% of sexual offence victims (Home Office, 2025). These figures likely underestimate the true scale of CSA, given the reliance on self-report and recorded offences. This is compounded by substantial gaps between prevalence, reporting and prosecution: most survivors do not report their abuse to police, and most reported cases do not result in charges or convictions (Jay et al., 2022; Office for National Statistics, 2020). Together, this highlights the scale of CSA and persistent institutional failures to protect children and deliver justice.

Historically, CSA was often minimized or denied, with limited recognition within policy and public discourse (Whittier, 2009). While awareness and institutional responses have increased in recent decades, this legacy continues to shape patterns of underreporting, mistrust and institutional accountability.

Thus CSA remains underreported. Disclosure is often delayed until adulthood or never made, due to shame, fear of disbelief or reprisal, lack of understanding, and limited opportunities to disclose (Augusti & Myhre, 2024; Morrison et al., 2018). Institutional responses have historically compounded these barriers, with failures to recognise, respond to or act upon abuse contributing to prolonged harm. While there have been improvements in prosecutions and convictions for certain CSA offences (Kewley & Karsna, 2025), these remain modest relative to the scale of abuse. Poor institutional responses therefore reinforce concerns about institutional accountability.

Language used to describe those who have experienced CSA is sensitive and contested. Some prefer the term “victim,” which foregrounds the harm and aligns with legal definitions. Others favour “survivor,” which emphasises resilience and agency (Fohering, 2018). Many, however, identify with neither, or situate themselves between the two. Warner (2024) advocates for more descriptive phrasing such as “those who have experienced sexual violence.” Thus, terminology is shaped by individual preference, a person’s relationship to, and distance from, their experiences, and the context.

“Victim-survivor” acknowledges this range of positions and reflects the terminology adopted by IICSA (e.g. the Victim and Survivors Consultative Panel), however this study uses the term “survivor” for clarity and brevity. This choice aligns with the study’s focus on agency, identity and ongoing engagement, while

recognising the limitations of any single label. It is not intended to minimise harm, but to reflect the conceptual focus of the study.

CSA has wide-ranging and enduring impacts across life domains. Survivors report psychological, physical, social, educational and economic welfare difficulties, impacting relationships, identity and life trajectories (Blakemore et al., 2017; Hailes et al., 2019; Laird et al., 2020; Lemaigre et al., 2017; Taggart et al., 2021). Often survivors experience flashbacks, nightmares, dissociation, loneliness, distress, low self-esteem and anxiety (Lo Iacono et al., 2021; Stubley & Young, 2022). Clinical outcomes, including acute stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, complex posttraumatic stress disorder (CPTSD), adjustment disorders, depression, anxiety, somatisation disorder, substance dependency, dissociative disorder, personality disorder, and psychosis, have been found to result (Hasto et al., 2013). Survivors are also at risk of chronic physical health difficulties (Bellis et al., 2014; Huffhines et al., 2016).

Further to this is a disruption in trust and diminished sense of safety (Lev-Wiesel, 2015; Swain, 2015). Recent work conceptualises trust as relational and context-dependent, requiring survivor and trustee (individual, institutional or societal) to work together and is contingent on the trustee's trustworthiness (Alyce et al., 2025a). While this study offers important nuance, much of the literature focuses on interpersonal dynamics, with less attention to how institutional trust is constructed and repaired. Experiences of abuse are often ignored or silenced, limiting opportunities to process what has occurred, and making it difficult to identify or articulate emotional responses (Hunter, 2010).

CSA is also stigmatising and frequently experienced as an attack on the self, fostering feelings of defectiveness and damage (Herman, 1992/2015; McElvaney et al., 2022). The associated shame can further erode a sense of self and place in the world, often contributing enduring feelings of worthlessness (MacGinley et al., 2019).

These processes are closely tied to a disrupted sense of identity. Survivors may lose previously held identities and internalise stigmatised ones (Lashkay et al., 2023). Muldoon et al. (2024) highlight this internalisation of unwanted and damaging identity labels, and the loss of normative childhood identity development. This disruption can also be understood through social identity theory, which posits that identity is shaped through group membership and social belonging (Tajfel et al., 1979). The acquisition of stigmatised identities and loss of valued social roles may therefore have implications for relationships, disclosure, self-concept and recovery, and may intensify trauma-related symptoms. However, much of this literature assumes relatively linear trajectories of identity disruption and recovery, which may not capture the fluid and contested identities described by survivors.

CSA is also associated with difficulties in attachment and relationships, often resulting in ruptures with family, friends and wider communities (Herman, 1992/2015; Karatzias et al., 2017; Stubley & Young, 2022). These relational disruptions can extend to public services, where survivors may encounter barriers to accessing, engaging with or benefiting from support (Mason et al., 2020). Theimer et al. (2020) identify challenges at individual and systemic levels, including difficulties with disclosure, stigma and shame, impeding help-seeking and sustained engagement with services.

Survivors also describe disruptions to their sense of time. Abuse can leave individuals in a state of limbo, with a fractured sense of self and continuity (Jacobs-

Kayam & Lev-Wiesel, 2019). Lev-Wiesel (2015) describes survivors as “time-travellers” (p.2), simultaneously engaging with memories, present realities and future possibilities. These disruptions to temporality and identity resonate with findings in this study regarding liminality and ongoing identity negotiation.

Therapeutic theories around understanding trauma vary in emphasis, however they often locate trauma primarily within the individual, potentially obscuring social and institutional conditions that shape harm and recovery. So while clinical models often locate trauma within cognitive, emotional or neurobiological systems (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Sherin & Nemeroff, 2011), broader frameworks emphasise the social and relational context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ford et al., 2015; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

The literature also contests trauma’s location and how to address it. The concept of CPTSD, recognised in the ICD-11, reflects the cumulative and relational nature of trauma associated with prolonged abuse (World Health Organization, 2022). It includes difficulties in affect regulation, negative self-concept and relational disruption, making it relevant to experiences of CSA (Cloitre et al., 2013). This highlights the importance of considering trauma as an individual, relational and social process. Keilson (1992) highlights how traumatisation continues beyond the initial event, shaped by social responses to the survivor. Similarly, ecological and relational perspectives argue that recovery is influenced by interactions between individuals, communities and institutions (Harvey, 1996). Herman (1992/2015) further conceptualises trauma as a social and political phenomenon, shaped by power, recognition and response.

Within this framework, the responses of others, including families, communities and institutions, are crucial in compounding or alleviating harm.

Experiences of disbelief, silence or institutional failure can reinforce shame and marginalisation, while recognition and validation can support recovery and meaning-making (Hunter, 2010; Lev-Wiesel, 2015; Newsom & Myers-Bowman, 2017). As such, healing is not solely an individual internal process, but also a relational and social one.

When caregivers and institutions ignore, minimise or negatively respond to abuse, traumatic shame may develop (Moran & Salter, 2022). Survivors may hold negative expectations of speaking out resulting in prolonged silence around their experiences (McElvaney et al., 2022). This can be reinforced by fragmented memory and enduring shame (MacGinley et al., 2019; Sinason & Conway, 2021), contributing to feelings of isolation, self-blame and a diminished sense of self (Newsom & Myers Bowman, 2017).

These experiences can also be understood through the lens of epistemic injustice, whereby individuals are wronged in their capacity as knowers (Fricker, 2007). Testimonial injustice occurs when survivors' accounts are dismissed or discredited, while hermeneutical injustice reflects the lack of shared frameworks through which experiences can be understood and articulated. Together, these processes can reinforce silence and marginalisation.

These dynamics can make help-seeking difficult, especially around institutions and authority figures, where breaches of trust are often central to experiences of CSA (Herman, 1992/2015; Taggart, Forthcoming). Previous attempts at disclosure may have been met with challenge, rejection or disbelief, reinforcing expectations of negative responses (Alaggia et al., 2019; Alyce et al., 2023; McElvaney et al., 2022).

These dynamics can also be understood through the concept of institutional betrayal, which describes the additional harm that occurs when institutions fail to prevent or respond appropriately to abuse (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Experiences of dismissal, inaction or inadequate support can exacerbate trauma, undermine trust in authority and contribute to ongoing difficulties in help-seeking.

Such experiences can contribute to a broader loss of trust in the wider world, and may disrupt an individual's sense of temporal continuity (Ratcliffe et al., 2014a). However, while rebuilding trust is complex, it is not unattainable. Alyce et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of survivors and those in authority working together to build trust through trustworthy attributes and actions. When established, such trust can support recovery and healing.

The distinction between individual and social understandings of trauma also reflects different pathways to healing. At an individual level, recovery is often considered a process of personal meaning-making and integration, in which traumatic experiences are incorporated into a coherent sense of self (Herman, 1992/2015; Stubley & Young, 2022). However, trauma is also inherently relational, and healing may occur through social and public processes that enable connection, recognition and validation.

Speaking out, or identifying oneself as a 'victim' or 'survivor' of CSA, can represent an important step in reconstructing identity and challenging traumatic shame (Herman, 1992/2015; McElvaney et al., 2022; Muldoon et al., 2024; Whittier, 2009). Movement from being silenced and invisible to being heard and acknowledged may foster a sense of agency and restore self-worth (Herman, 1992/2015, 2023).

However, while individual therapeutic approaches are essential, they may not fully address the broader sense of injustice associated with CSA (Stubley & Taggart, 2023). This highlights the importance of social and public forms of response, which can extend beyond the individual to engage with issues of recognition, accountability and repair (Herman, 2023; McPhillips et al., 2020).

van der Westhuizen et al. (2023) further highlight the importance of meaning making in recovery from CSA, identifying emotional, cognitive and relational processes through which survivors make sense of their experiences. Their review suggests that healing involves internal work, such as self-repair and integration of trauma narratives, and engagement with external and social resources. This reinforces the view that recovery is not solely an individual process, but one shaped by broader relational and social contexts, highlighting the potential importance of public mechanisms that enable recognition and narrative integration.

Such dynamics can also be understood through recognition theory, which highlights how identity and self-worth are shaped through processes of social acknowledgment (Honneth, 1995). Experiences of abuse, and subsequent disbelief or institutional failure, can therefore be understood as forms of misrecognition, with implications for personal identity and social standing. This positions responses to CSA as therapeutic, legal, relational and moral processes. This highlights the importance of social and institutional responses that not merely acknowledge harm but actively contribute to restoring recognition.

Taken together, this literature highlights that responses to CSA are not solely matters of individual recovery, but are shaped by broader social, relational and institutional processes. Mechanisms that provide opportunities for recognition, validation and accountability may therefore play a crucial role in shaping survivor

experiences and recovery. Public inquiries represent one such institutional response, designed to engage with survivor testimony and address historical harm. The following section therefore examines public inquiries as a mechanism for responding to CSA.

1.1.2 Public Inquiries

Historical responses to CSA in England and Wales have been characterised by patterns of denial, deflection and disbelief, often deployed by institutions to protect themselves and maintain legitimacy (Lovett et al., 2018). Societal concern has usually been generated by media attention and survivor activism (Wright & Henry, 2019). Within this context of contested narratives and institutional failure, public inquiries have emerged as mechanisms through which states seek to investigate wrongdoing, acknowledge harm and restore public trust.

Public inquiries into nonrecent institutional child abuse have been carried out in various countries, including Australia, Canada, Ireland, Norway, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Swain et al., 2018; Wright, 2017; Wright & Henry, 2019). While some emerged in the 1980s, the majority arose following the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s, which provided an influential model for testimonial-based inquiries (Wright, 2017). More recently, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse adopted a trauma-informed approach and has influenced subsequent inquiry practices (Wright et al., 2017). Inquiries have examined a range of institutional contexts, including ‘care’ settings and religious organisations. However, this trend is uneven. For example, few Eastern or Southeastern European governments have established comparable inquiries, issued formal apologies or implemented redress schemes. This

unevenness highlights how responses to historical abuse are shaped by cultural, political, and institutional contexts (Wright, 2017), suggesting public inquiries are contingent forms of response, shaped by differing national capacities and approaches to recognition and accountability.

While often emerging from British legal traditions and influencing other common law systems, such inquiries have been described as a largely “global, yet western-orientated, phenomenon” (Wright, 2017, p. 11). This raises important questions about how such processes operate across different cultural and institutional contexts, and whose needs they can meet in relation to recognition, cultural sensitivity, and power dynamics.

These developments are closely connected to broader work in transitional justice, including truth and reconciliation processes. Such mechanisms similarly rely on survivor testimony, aiming to provide acknowledgment, establish accountability and support societal repair (Hayner, 2011a; McAlinden & Naylor, 2016; McPhillips et al., 2020; Teitel, 2000). They also foreground the temporal and ongoing nature of justice, highlighting how recognition may unfold unevenly over time. Both inquiries and truth commissions collect testimony, synthesise accounts of past events, and produce findings and recommendations (Gallen, 2023). Beyond these formal functions, they carry broader symbolic and political significance, often presented as markers of transparency and mechanisms for restoring public confidence (Winter, 2014; Wright, 2017). In this sense, they can be understood as forms of transitional justice, oriented toward truth-telling, accountability, reparation and reform (Crocker, 2000; Méndez & Cone, 2013). As such, they carry an implicit promise of investigation, recognition, justice and the prevention of future harm, although the extent to which this is realised in practice remains contested.

The use of survivor testimony as a central component of inquiry processes has its roots in earlier truth commissions, particularly in Latin America and South Africa, where testimony was positioned as a means of acknowledgment, accountability and societal healing (Humphrey, 2003; Wright, 2017; Wyles et al., 2022). This framing aligns with broader understandings of trauma as socially embedded, shaped by individual experience and institutional and societal responses (Herman, 1992/2015). Public inquiries and truth commissions are often positioned as mechanisms that can contribute to healing through recognition, acknowledgment and the validation of survivor experiences. In this sense, they are investigative processes, and relational and social interventions. However, this framing sits in tension with the formal, legalistic and bureaucratic structures through which inquiries are typically constructed, which may constrain their capacity to fully realise these relational aims.

Public inquiries are formal processes established to investigate matters of significant public concern. In the UK, the Inquiries Act 2005 provides the statutory framework for their operation. Despite their quasi-judicial appearance, they are fundamentally political rather than legal processes, lacking the power to determine liability or enforce their recommendations (Ireton, 2023; JUSTICE, 2020). Consequently, governments are under no obligation to enact their recommendations. Inquiries are often prompted by public pressure, moral outrage or sustained survivor activism (Daly, 2014; Johnston, 2024).

Inquiries are frequently positioned as mechanisms of accountability, learning and recognition. They are expected to establish the truth, provide acknowledgment of harm, generate recommendations to prevent recurrence and, in some cases, contribute to restoring trust in institutions. The Statutory Inquiries Committee (2024)

indicated that public inquiries should provide survivors with catharsis, ensure accountability and make recommendations to avoid repetition of harm. Wright (2016) further highlights their social and cultural functions, suggesting that inquiries operate retrospectively, in examining past harms, and prospectively, in shaping future policy and practice. They also symbolize an open and transparent society, where those who were unheard have a voice.

However, this framing has been subject to critique. Ireton (2023) argues that the absence of a clearly defined purpose for public inquiries has contributed to participant frustration and disappointment. While participants are frequently described as being at the ‘heart’ of inquiries, there is little consensus on what this means in practice. Ireton suggests that governments, inquiry teams and other stakeholders must more clearly articulate the role and limits of inquiries, and more actively manage participant expectations.

Public inquiries are often presented as mechanisms for public participation in policy-making, enabling deliberation and input from a range of stakeholders (Gephart, 2007). Within this, there have been increasing calls for participant needs, particularly those of survivors, to be placed at the centre of inquiry processes (JUSTICE, 2020). However, there is limited consensus on how this should be operationalised in practice.

The quasi-judicial form of inquiries can create expectations among participants, the media and the wider public that they will establish culpability or deliver a form of justice (Ireton, 2023). However, this perception is often at odds with their actual remit. The absence of a clearly defined purpose within the Inquiries Act 2005 further contributes to this ambiguity, allowing different stakeholders, including policymakers, survivor groups and the public, to attach divergent and sometimes

competing expectations to the inquiry process. Drawing on Ireton's (2023) distinction between different models of inquiry, these expectations may reflect the varied functions inquiries are perceived to serve. For example, quasi-judicial inquiries may generate expectations of accountability and justice, while testimonial or truth-recovery models emphasise voice, recognition and acknowledgement, and policy-oriented inquiries prioritise learning and reform. These tensions are compounded by the diversity of survivor experiences and perspectives, meaning that participant groups cannot be understood as homogeneous. As Ireton (2023) argues, public inquiries are not designed to serve any single group, but must instead navigate a multiplicity of interests, often making it difficult to fully meet the expectations placed upon them. This ambiguity is significant when considering how participants experience inquiries over time, especially where expectations of justice or change are not realised.

These tensions are significant when considering how participants experience public inquiries in practice. Where expectations of voice, validation and justice are not met, the gap between the perceived purpose of an inquiry and its actual function may shape participants' sense of recognition and fairness. Understanding these experiences is therefore crucial to evaluating the role of inquiries as mechanisms of accountability and response.

Testimony is often understood as evidential and symbolic. In the case of CSA inquiries have focused on identifying the extent of harm to children, the failures of organisations to protect them and extent of attempts to cover them up (Swain, 2018; Wright 2017), and so have the potential to contribute to processes of public recognition and social healing. However, they also raise questions about whether inquiries can meet the diverse and often complex justice needs of survivors. These

needs may include acknowledgment, voice, accountability, reparation and assurances of non-repetition (Feldthusen et al., 2000; Herman, 2005; Lievore, 2005; Naylor, 2010; M. Wright, 2002; Zinsstag & Keenan, 2017). Procedural justice frameworks suggest that the manner in which individuals are treated within these processes—including opportunities for participation, voice and validation—is central to their sense of justice (Daly, 2014; Lind & Tyler, 1988; McAlinden & Naylor, 2016).

While public inquiries are often presented as mechanisms for accountability and trust restoration, their role is more ambivalent in practice. Sedley (1989) suggests that inquiries may function as a “disease” for individuals publicly exposed, but a ‘cure’ for the state, restoring public confidence. Similarly, Greer & McLaughlin (2017) argue that inquiries can operate as politically calculated responses to scandal, reconfiguring responsibility and managing the temporal unfolding of accountability. Critics further suggest that inquiries may function symbolically, as rituals that reinforce perceptions of transparency without necessarily producing substantive change, or as interpretative exercises in which official narratives are constructed rather than discovered (Ashforth, 1990; Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, 2004; Gephart, 2007). In this sense, inquiries may reframe the state as a problem-solver rather than a contributor to harm.

Although historically inquiries were self-legitimating and defensive of the state, recently they are often explicitly survivor-centred, incorporating survivor input into their terms of reference and participation throughout proceedings (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017). However, if they do not meet their stated commitments or fail to meet stakeholder expectations, they risk fuelling further institutional crisis and scandal.

Existing literature suggests that survivor experiences of participating in inquiries and related processes are varied and, at times, ambivalent. While some individuals report feelings of validation, empowerment and being heard (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023; Moran & Salter, 2022), others describe participation as fraught or even harmful (Colton et al., 2002). Experiences have been characterised as involving intense psychological suffering or traumatising (Brounéus, 2008; Hamber & Lundy, 2020) and, in some cases, as constraining narrative autonomy (Doak & Taylor, 2013). These mixed findings highlight the complexity of survivor engagement in such processes and how such processes are experienced by survivors in practice. They point to the need for further research examining how these experiences are understood over time. They also reflect broader tensions within inquiries, including competing expectations, unclear purposes and the challenge of balancing multiple stakeholder interests (Ireton, 2023).

Although there has been increasing emphasis on survivor-centred approaches, including greater involvement in shaping inquiry processes, questions remain about the extent to which inquiries can meaningfully address survivor needs or deliver substantive justice. There is limited research examining the longer-term impact of participation, particularly in relation to institutional responses following the conclusion of an inquiry.

These tensions outlined above highlight the need to better understand how such processes are experienced by participants. While public inquiries are often positioned as mechanisms of recognition and accountability, there is limited understanding of how survivors experience them in practice. This reflects a broader gap within the literature, which has been described as fragmented and lacking in participant-focused perspectives (Goodwin et al., 2025). Considering public inquiries

and truth commissions together provides a useful framework for examining these experiences across related institutional contexts. To address this gap, a systematic literature review was conducted.

1.2 Systematic Literature Review: An Exploration of the Experiences of Survivors who Gave Evidence at Truth & Reconciliation Commissions & Public Inquiries: A Meta-Ethnographic Synthesis

This review synthesises literature on survivor participation in public inquiries and truth and reconciliation commissions, examining how these experiences are conceptualised and reported across different but related institutional contexts. By synthesising this body of work, it aims to identify key themes, patterns and gaps in current knowledge.

1.2.1 Rationale and Aims of the Research Synthesis

Public inquiries and truth (and reconciliation) commissions (TRCs) are used to investigate issues of public concern. While there is no clear rule, TRCs typically arise following periods of political transition or widespread societal conflict, and public inquiries are more commonly established in stable democratic states to investigate institutional failures or matters of significant public concern (Stanton, 2010). Both share a focus on examining past harms and producing recommendations for the future. Commissions are ‘official, temporary, non-judicial fact-finding bodies that investigate a pattern of abuses of human rights or humanitarian law committed over a number of years’ (United Nations Security Council, 2004, p. 4). Their purpose extends beyond fact-finding to addressing legacies of mass abuse through acknowledgment, accountability, reconciliation and, in some contexts, reparations (González & Varney, 2013). By contrast, public inquiries are independent,

government-appointed, temporary bodies established to investigate particular events or systemic failures, establish facts, identify lessons and make recommendations for institutional reform (Gallen, 2023; Wright, 2017). While they may consider broad systemic issues, such as child sexual abuse, they are not generally established as mechanisms of transitional justice nor do they typically have explicit reconciliation or reparative mandates.

Despite these legal and contextual differences, there is considerable functional overlap between commissions and inquiries, with some authors describing public inquires as forms of truth commission (Gleeson & Ring, 2020). Both are temporary, independent bodies that gather testimony from those affected, establish an authoritative account of past events, examine institutional or systemic failures and make recommendations intended to prevent recurrence (Gallen, 2023). Both may also provide opportunities for public recognition and acknowledgement of survivors' experiences. It is these shared features, and in particular the central role of survivor testimony, that justify considering them together in this review. They have also both been considered having macro value, legitimising governments by restoring public confidence (Winter, 2014) whilst also purporting to benefit victims.

Truth commissions are widely regarded as mechanisms of transitional justice (Crocker, 2000), which relates to the processes societies use to address the legacy of widespread past mistreatment through truth, accountability, reparations and, where appropriate, reconciliation (UN Secretary General, 2004; Méndez & Cone, 2013). Although public inquiries are not typically framed within transitional justice, many pursue related aims, including truth-seeking, institutional accountability and reform. Consequently, both commissions and inquiries may carry public and survivor expectations of recognition, justice and meaningful institutional change.

Consequently, they are considered together here, and the terms ‘TRC,’ ‘commission’ and ‘inquiry’ are used interchangeably here except when referring to a specific body.

The aim of this meta-ethnographic synthesis is to explore how survivors experience participation in public inquiries and truth and reconciliation processes.

Although some qualitative studies explore survivor experiences of testifying in inquiries and commissions, this literature remains limited and fragmented, with little attempt to synthesise findings across contexts. This may reflect ethical and practical challenges of researching trauma-exposed populations, as well as the politically sensitive environments in which many of these processes occur. Nevertheless, there is increasing recognition of the importance of understanding survivor experiences. This meta-ethnographic synthesis therefore seeks to bring together existing research to develop a more holistic and conceptual understanding of how survivors experience participation in these processes, and to identify factors that shape these experiences. In doing so, it aims to inform understandings of survivor-centredness, as well as future inquiry design and related psychological support.

1.2.2 Methodology

1.2.2.1 Design

This study aims to develop a conceptual understanding of survivors’ experiences giving commission testimony. Meta-ethnography was considered appropriate as it goes beyond synthesising findings to providing new holistic interpretations, to connect and explain the parts (Noblit & Hare, 1988), contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of survivor experience. Unlike approaches such as narrative reviews, which summarise existing findings, or thematic synthesis, which prioritise categorisation, meta-ethnography is designed to generate new

conceptual understandings through the translation of qualitative studies. This approach is valuable given the limited and fragmented nature of the existing literature, where generating new conceptual insights is more appropriate than summarising an already well-established evidence base.

Importantly, meta-ethnography focuses on the synthesis of interpretations from primary qualitative studies, rather than the aggregation of raw data, by translating second-order constructs (participants' experiences as interpreted by original authors) into third-order interpretations (the reviewer's synthesis). Its inductive approach allows concepts to emerge through the comparative interpretation of studies which aligns with this study's exploratory nature. Noblit & Hare's (1988) seven phase were followed (Table 1).

Table 1

Meta-ethnography's seven phases (Noblit & Hare, 1988)

Phase	Current Study
1. Getting started	Research aims were established following literature scoping
2. Deciding what is relevant	The Population, Exposure, Outcome and Type of research (PEOT) tool (Bettany-Saltikov & McSherry, 2016) was adapted to develop search terms for qualitative studies (T) on the experiences (O) of survivors at truth commissions (E) (Table 2). Population was screened with inclusion and exclusion criteria when assessing eligibility (Table 3). Figure 1 shows search strategy and stages. Quality appraisal was undertaken using the CASP Checklist (Appendix A).
3. Reading studies	Detailed, repeated reading of included studies was performed.
4. Determining how the studies are related	The various studies are "put together" (Noblit & Hare, 1988, p. 28), requiring an understanding of the studies' relationships. Key characteristics, ideas and concepts were noted and tabulated (Appendix B).
5. Translating studies	Translations were made by identifying common recurring concepts in relation to other concepts in the study and across studies (Table 4 & 5). (Glaser & Strauss (1967) constant comparative model was used to sort concepts (second-order constructs) across the studies into further concepts (third-order interpretations).
6. Synthesising translations	A line-of-argument synthesis (Noblit & Hare, 1988) was made and interpretations were developed into a conceptual framework to make sense of them in totality (Figure 2).
7. Expressing the synthesis	Dissemination to inform TRC and public inquiry development and clinical work is planned.

1.2.2.2 Article Selection

Electronic databases (OpenDissertations, SCOPUS, Web of Science, and EBSCO, including CINAHL Ultimate, MEDLine Ultimate, APA PsycInfo and APA PsycArticles) were searched between 16 and 19 November 2023. Table 2 presents the search terms and truncations.

Table 2

Search Terms

Exposure[1]	Outcome	Type of Research
"transitional justice" or "truth commission*" or ("historical institutional" N1 abuse* AND inquir*) or ("child* sex*" N1 abuse N1 commission*) or "truth project" or (child* N1 abuse* N1 inquir*) or "independent inquir*"	experience* or account* or express* or perspec* or view* or explor*	qualitative or interview* or "focus group*"

Note. Each column represents the division of search terms by the AND function

[1] These are EBSCO database search truncation symbols, equivalents were used for the other databases.

Title and abstract searches were used without date limiters or population to increase search scope. Manual title and abstract screening, and detailed reading were used to focus on studies concerning survivors. Exclusion and inclusion criteria were used to screen papers (Table 3). Studies incorporating data from different populations were only included if they had a focus on survivor accounts (analysis was only of that data).

Table 3

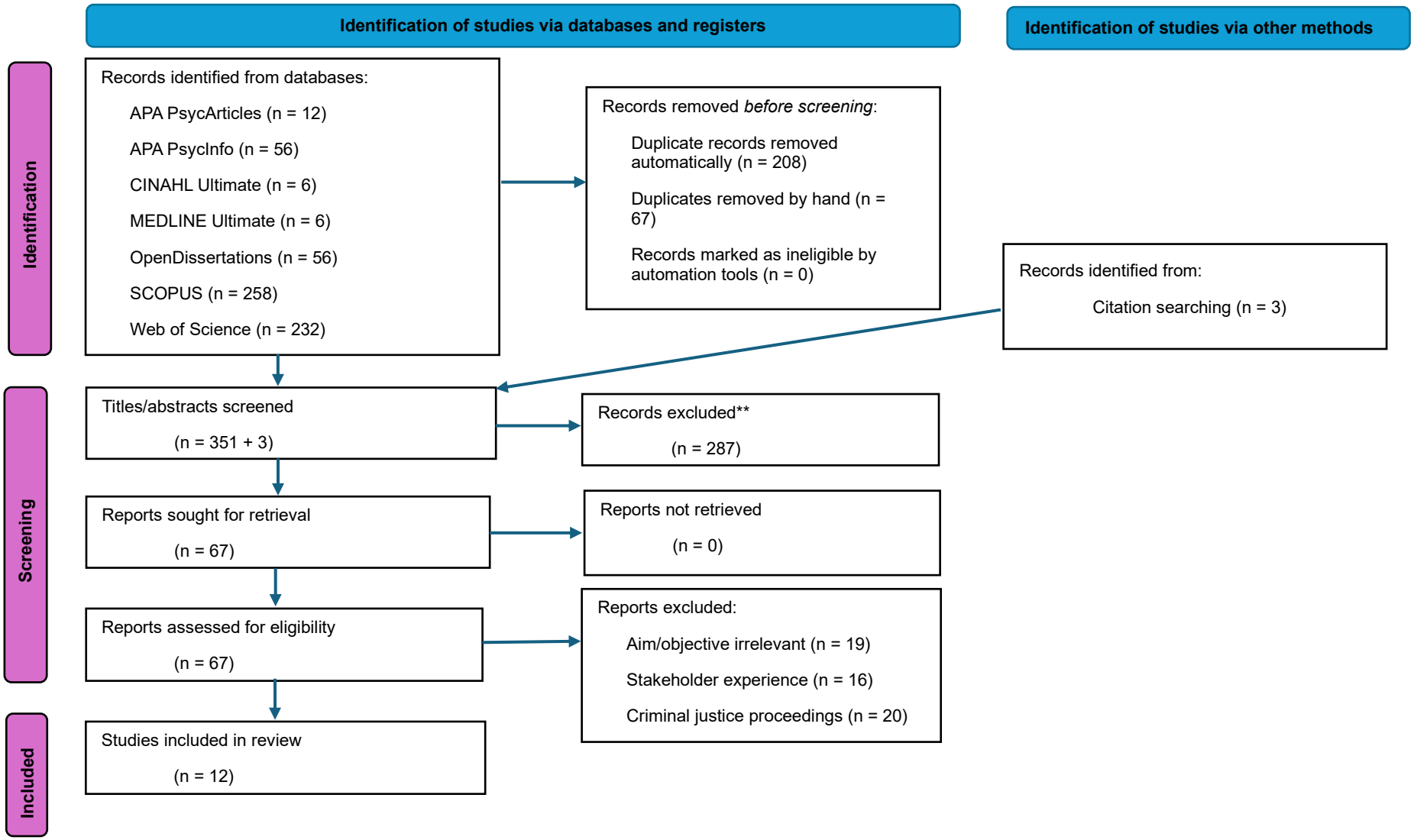
Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Data on survivors' experience testifying in commissions	Only accounts by stakeholders
Commissions/public inquiries	Criminal justice proceedings
Qualitative studies including grounded theory, descriptive, ethnography, phenomenological, thematic analysis; mixed-method (with analysis only of qualitative data)	Quantitative studies
Grey literature such as dissertations and theses, working papers, research reports	Letters, newspaper articles, reviews, media

The PRISMA flow chart (Page et al., 2021) (Figure 1) shows the systematic process.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for Systematic Reviews



1.2.2.3 Data quality assessment

Data quality was appraised using the CASP checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018) (Appendix A). Each criterion was assessed using a 0-3 scale (not met/partially met/fully met), with a total possible score of 20. Hannes, (2011) suggests a study's value may only be evident when synthesising rather than appraising. However, Sandelowski et al. (1997) argue conceptions of quality are too broad to exclude on this basis, so papers were not rejected but were considered for their evidential contribution during the synthesis process.

1.2.3 Results

Twelve studies were included; eleven peer-reviewed articles and one dissertation (Table 4 below). Studies were set in England and Wales, Columbia, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, Australia and four in SA. Guthrey (2016a) and Guthrey (2016b) draw on the same dataset but have different analytic foci. Lundy (2020) uses some of the same data as Hamber & Lundy (2020) but extends it to include further datasets; the analytic focus is related but different. Designs included thematic analysis, textual analysis, grounded theory and content analysis to analyse interviews and focus groups of 338 testifying survivors.

Table 4

Summary of included studies

Study	Aims	Setting	Sample (N)	Data collection	Method	Appraisal score (out of 20)
Barker et al. (2023)	Investigate how historical institutional abuse (HIA) inquiries address survivor needs and avoid causing harm; do trauma-informed approaches (TIA) effectively engage survivors and how; how is epistemic justice linked to HIA inquiries	England and Wales	66 (mixed methods survey); purposive sampling of 7 for follow up qualitative data (2 male; 5 female)	Questionnaire (closed and open questions); semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis	15
Brett (2022)	Explore victim-delegations' roles in the Santos-FARC-EP negotiations; how survivors participate in transitional justice; and whether this approach achieved its objectives	Columbia	52	Interviews	Grounded theory	12

Study	Aims	Setting	Sample (N)	Data collection	Method	Appraisal score (out of 20)
Byrne (2004)	Explore victims' experiences participating in the TRC	SA	30 black SA (57% female), non-random sample	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis (not explicit)	17
Chapman (2007)	Consider TRC's experience promoting intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation, focusing on victim participation and response	SA	7 focus groups, average of n=7, organised by race (snowball sampling)	Semi-structured focus groups; transcripts	Content analysis (methodology not explicit)	12
Clark (2012)	Explore whether and how much truth-telling is healing for victims	SA	4	Semi-structured interviews	Methodology not reported	11
Faku-Juqula (2014)	Explore participant motivation to testify at the TRC; analyse the meanings and impact participants gave 14 years later	SA	30 from Gauteng province (n=16; 12 women and 4 men) and Cape Town (n=14; 9 women and 5 men); snowball sampling	Semi-structured interviews	Grounded theory	17

Study	Aims	Setting	Sample (N)	Data collection	Method	Appraisal score (out of 20)
Guthrey (2016a)	Understand how victims develop expectations about participating in commissions and the impact when expectations are unmet	Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste	19 (Solomon Islands n=12 (6 female, 6 male); Timor-Leste n=7 (3 female, 4 male)); snowball sampling and chain-referral	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis	16
Guthrey (2016b)	Examine the relationship between local norms and truth telling at the Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste commissions	Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste	19 (Solomon Islands n=12 (6 female, 6 male); Timor-Leste n=7 (3 female, 4 male))	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis (methodology not explicit)	13
Hamber & Lundy (2020)	Explore participant motivations, expectations and justice needs. Considers learning from this study informed by transitional justice theory.	Northern Ireland	43 (25 men and 18 women)	Participant interviews	Thematic analysis & content analysis (not fully detailed)	13
Ifaloye et al. (2022)	Examine the extent Nigeria's truth commission benefitted victims	Nigeria	3; purposive sampling	Semi-structured interviews	Textual analysis	11

Study	Aims	Setting	Sample (N)	Data collection	Method	Appraisal score (out of 20)
Lundy (2020)	Assess participants' experiences of the HIAI Inquiry and what was needed for justice to have been realised	Northern Ireland	43 (25 men and 18 women); 5 focus groups with over 75 participants	Focus groups; participant interviews	Content analysis (methodology not detailed)	16
Moran & Salter (2022)	Explore institutionalised dignity as a instrument for survivors' public participation by examining the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse	Australia	26 (10 men, 15 women, 1 nonbinary)	Semi-structured interviews	Reflexive thematic analysis	16

1.2.3.1 Study Appraisal

Table 4 shows each appraisal score (full table with notes in Appendix A). Research aims were clearly stated across the studies, with all using a qualitative approach appropriately.

Most studies used semi-structured interviews which are suited to experience and understanding focused research questions, especially where participants have a personal interest (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Lundy (2020) also used focus groups. Although Braun & Clarke (2013) suggest focus groups are best when participants do not have a stake, Wilkinson, (2015) argues they suit sensitive topics and facilitate sharing. Lundy followed focus groups with 43 interviews garnering rich data. Chapman (2007) also employed focus groups, however, she used less primary data to support her findings and did not state the analysis method, raising questions about the data richness.

Sample sizes varied from 52 to three. Although appropriate for analysis, this limits generalisability. However, qualitative research sampling aims for in-depth understanding rather than statistical generalisability. Flexible generalisability (Goodman, 2017) or transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) through purposive/theoretical sampling and thick description is achievable. Nevertheless, the samples reflect recruitment challenges, especially for researchers based outside the country of study who struggled to establish contacts and faced language and access barriers. Clark (2012), for example, said they only interviewed four survivors due to gatekeepers. The sample had a geographic bias and used a translator. These limitations were weighted in the meta-ethnography. Several studies used translators, but only Byrne (2004) discussed methods to ensure understanding, raising the question how other translations were handled (Clark, 2012; Guthrey, 2016a, 2016b).

Chapman (2007) included focus group averages but not sample number. Several studies did not identify their sampling method which may indicate data bias. Given studies raised lack of representation as an issue at TRCs and inquiries, understanding the samples is especially important and is a limitation.

The researcher-participant relationship was only fully discussed in Faku-Juqula (2014). Given that participants were victims, ignoring this raises questions regarding power dynamics which may have been potentially reminiscent of their trauma, or which pressurised or silenced their sharing. Olmos-Vega et al.'s (2023) framework using reflexivity throughout the research process provides a helpful alternative. Similarly, six studies unsatisfactorily did not mention ethical issues, including informed consent, confidentiality or debriefing.

While research designs were generally suitable, half failed to justify their choice. Several studies did not identify their analysis method or theoretical position, which means assumptions went unidentified (Silverman, 2020). Only Lundy (2020) used a participatory model (Hickey et al., 2018) and Hamber & Lundy (2020) mentioned using representatives in an informal manner, despite several studies (e.g. Moran & Salter, 2022; Barker et al., 2023) supporting commissions having a participatory model and would have potentially benefitted from one. Generally, findings were clearly stated with implications for future commissions and further research drawn out.

1.2.3.2 Findings

Fourteen concepts, derived from second-order interpretations (Appendix B), were identified across eleven studies (Table 5). Interpretations were developed with attention to findings supported across multiple higher-quality studies.

Table 5

Translation and cross comparisons of studies by concept (third-order interpretations)

Summarised Concept	Byrne (2004)	Chapman (2007)	Clark (2012)	Faku-Juqula (2014)	Guthrey (2016a)	Guthrey (2016b)	Hamber & Lundy (2020)	Lundy (2020)	Ifaloya et al. (2022)	Brett (2022)	Moran & Salter (2022)	Barker at al. (2023)
Survivor-centred										X	X	X
Dignifying				X							X	X
Catharsis				X	X				X		X	
Heard	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Choice & control										X	X	X
Social repair					X			X		X	X	X
Survivor-instrumentalised		X	X	X	X			X	X			
Let down	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Retraumatised	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X
Unheard		X	X	X		X	X	X	X			
Poor communication	X		X			X		X				
Inequality maintaining	X			X	X			X	X	X		
Culturally unseen	X	X		X		X						

These second-order interpretations were organised into two overarching categories: **survivor-centred** and **survivor-instrumentalising** inquiry activities, each comprising six contrasting concepts, alongside a synthesised translation (Table 5).

Table 5

Translations organised into pairs with synthesised translations

Survivor-instrumentalising	Survivor-centred	Synthesised concepts
Let-down, promises unfulfilled, expectations of reciprocity unmet, took from survivors without return, survivors felt used	Dignifying, seen and held to be worthy, ameliorates shame, treated with respect, commission aims and survivor needs aligned	Alignment of participant and commission aims and needs, value of survivors in process
Poor communication, testimony taken and not replied, felt disempowered	Choice and control, involved in the process, individualised and flexible	Survivor involvement in process
Unheard, ignored, limited participation and truth	Heard, validated, part of history, believed	Extent survivor's voices are heard and validated
Culturally insensitive, silencing, devaluing of difference and need	Culturally sensitive, participants seen and valued in their difference and needs	Cultural sensitivity and accommodation

Survivor-instrumentalising	Survivor-centred	Synthesised concepts
Inequality maintained, power dynamics preserved, two-tier system, survivors feel weak, effected no change, traumatic powerlessness of abuse reenacted	Inequalities challenged, power dynamics disrupted, social ruptures repaired, social change, stigmas challenged	Attachment to power and social dynamics in process and outcomes
Retraumatising, emotional and physical toll, exposed	Catharsis, healing, sense of self improved	Process impact

Survivor-instrumentalising	Survivor-centred	Survivor positioning

While this dichotomous structure may appear reductive, the literature consistently described inquiry experiences as tending towards either broadly healing or largely harmful. Although individual experiences were often more nuanced, studies identified recurring features associated with these outcomes. Elements experienced as instrumentalising in some contexts were reflected as supportive and validating in others. This apparent diversion may also reflect differences in disciplinary perspectives and research framing, with therapeutic or psychological approaches often focusing on individual experiences of harm, coping and healing, while social and

critical perspectives foreground issues of power, institutional dynamics and accountability.

Aspects of the process which were survivor-instrumentalising could generally be found to have a counter-experience in studies which found a commission survivor-centred and vice versa. One concept, cultural insensitivity, was not explicitly matched, but cultural sensitivity was implicit in the literature. These aspects appear to relate to one another chronologically in that with time there have been developments in recognising survivors' needs and changes in commission processes which have been shifting experience from predominantly traumatising to increasingly survivor-centred and healing.

These concepts were subsequently synthesised to identify key stages within the inquiry process where survivor experience is shaped. This resulted in a line-of-argument synthesis comprising four stages of participation (see 'Line of Synthesis' Figure 2).

The next section looks at these contrasting concepts and synthesized translations in more detail.

1.2.3.2.1 Alignment of Commission and Survivor Aims and Needs – Value of Survivors in the Process

Across the majority of studies, survivors reported a misalignment between the aims of commissions and their own expectations and needs (Chapman, 2007; Clark, 2012; Guthrey, 2016a; Hamber & Lundy, 2020; Lundy, 2020). Participation was frequently associated with expectations of acknowledgment, material improvement,

prevention of future harm, and psychological benefit—expectations which were often unmet.

It was often unclear if promises were casual, explicit, or simply assumed, but there was a sense of them not being met. Giving testimony created an ‘expectation of reciprocity’ and ‘psychological contract,’ the violation of which created ‘anger, mistrust and betrayal’ (Guthrey, 2016a, p. 314). Survivors reported they had done their part, but the commission/government had not reciprocated. Governments ignored or reduced reparation recommendations and failed to prosecute, causing anger and frustration (Byrne, 2004; Faku-Juqula, 2014; Lundy, 2020; Ifaloye et al., 2022; Brett, 2022). Almost all mentioned the lack of long-term psychological support. Chapman (2007) noted the TRC pressured forgiveness, confusing participants and reflecting broader societal dynamics projected onto individuals. Survivors sometimes felt ‘instrumentalized’ (Brett, 2022, p. 491; Guthrey, 2016a, p. 314): after contributing to macro-level political goals, they received no personal benefit.

This contrasts with the dignifying experiences reflected in recent high-quality studies (Barker et al., 2023; Brett, 2022; Moran & Salter, 2022), which described renewed dignity and hope (Moran & Salter, 2022). Incorporating being believed into the process ameliorates shame (Moran & Salter, 2022; Barker et al., 2023). Efforts to make survivors feel comfortable and safe through the environment, support, staffing and thoughtfulness e.g. training taxi drivers and administrative staff in TIA; or supplying good food, provided a different institutional experience from when they suffered abuse, countering its shaming effects (Barker et al., 2023; Moran & Salter,

2022). While some individuals felt disappointed, the process was largely experienced as dignifying, meeting expectations and providing an alternative positive experience.

1.2.3.2.2 Survivor Involvement in the Process

Four studies found commissions' poor communication had a deleterious impact on survivor experience. Poor communication around timings, expectations, dis/advantages of participation, risk, terminology, testimonial dissemination, and commission aims caused distress (Byrne, 2004; Clark, 2012; Guthrey, 2016b; Lundy, 2020). Misleading expectations around commission aims seemed based on misleading communications (Byrne, 2004). Survivors feared they had been forgotten (Clark, 2012), and often felt confused about the process, leaving them feeling disempowered (Lundy, 2020).

Conversely, studies which found the process predominantly positive for survivors, reported commissions giving choice and control. Survivors were involved in process design and had a sense of community control (Barker et al., 2023). There was individualised support, flexibility and continuity of care; survivors felt valued (Moran & Salter, 2022).

1.2.3.2.3 Extent Survivor Voices are Heard and Validated

Six papers mention feeling unheard as distressing. Some commissions only garnered a 'limited truth' (Byrne, 2004; Clark, 2012; Guthrey, 2016a, 2016b). Survivors and local communities were un-consulted about needs, concerns and ideas, leading to a less holistic truth (Clark, 2012). Literacy, access to information, resources and poverty, and impacts on the ability to testify, were unconsidered in

some commissions, leaving some survivors feeling silenced (Faku-Juqula, 2014). Limited survivor participation (Ifaloye et al., 2022), not pairing survivors with appropriate staff, or the commissions' public nature, meant sharing was restricted (Guthrey, 2016b). Some found the environment intimidating and adversarial, and felt that they were the subject of the inquiry rather than listened to (Hamber & Lundy, 2020). Survivors described being overwhelmed and unable to speak freely, lacking confidence, or being asked closed questions limiting their testimony (Lundy, 2020). Some feared their stories went unrecorded, others were distressed by misrepresentation in the media (Clark, 2012; Faku-Juqula, 2014), or the commission inappropriately imputed forgiveness (Chapman, 2007).

In nine studies being heard was a positive outcome of testifying. Many valued being public (Ifaloye et al., 2022), feeling their story became part of history and nationally acknowledged (Clark, 2012). This felt validating. In 'dignifying' commissions, interest was shown not only in trauma but its impact; and being recognised, understood and valued as a survivor was reparative (Moran & Salter, 2022). Being believed conveyed epistemic worth, where survivor-knowledge was valued, which was linked to long-term healing (Barker et al., 2023). Being believed and accepted disrupted the chronic shame which accompanies trauma (Moran & Salter, 2022). Thus, feeling unheard was experienced as destructive, whilst being heard was restorative.

1.2.3.2.4 Cultural Sensitivity and Accommodation

Four studies found commissions culturally insensitive. Studies on the SA TRC noted distinctions between ideas like forgiveness and reconciliation were unclear in

several African languages, meaning aims and expectations were poorly communicated leaving participants confused and disempowered (Byrne, 2004; Chapman, 2007; Faku-Juqula, 2014). Expectations of cultural significance, like burying the dead or holding cleansing ceremonies, were ignored leaving survivors distressed (Byrne, 2004). In some commissions, survivors felt 'humiliated' when public truth-telling was at odds with sociocultural beliefs and norms (Guthrey, 2016b, p. 20), or unable to share properly with staff of inappropriate age and gender causing 'shame and embarrassment' (Byrne, 2004, p. 253). Thus, by not adapting commissions' approaches contextually, survivors felt 'objectified' and alienated (Guthrey, 2016b, p. 21).

Cultural sensitivity was rarely explicitly identified as a positive feature; rather, its presence was inferred through the absence of reported difficulties, suggesting that culturally appropriate practice may function as an unremarkable but essential component of survivor-centred processes. Studies referring to staff training and manner as positive meant they were culturally appropriate (Barker et al., 2023; Moran & Salter, 2022). That the language was not confusing or alienating and public truth-telling was empowering (Brett, 2022) implies communication and the overall process was appropriate.

1.2.3.2.5 Attachment to Power and Social Dynamics in Process and Outcome

Six studies found survivors thought commissions reinforced power inequalities. This occurred through limiting who could testify, leaving some under- or unrepresented (Clark, 2012; Faku-Juqula, 2014), fears that abusers remained in positions of power

(Ifaloye et al., 2022) and the preferential treatment of alleged perpetrators, including greater rights to information, preparation, and choice of representation, creating a ‘two-tier’ system (Lundy, 2020, p. 272). Survivors felt their voices were ‘weak’ in comparison (Lundy, 2020, p. 277). Commission outcomes that failed to provide or reduced reparations, and did not address power relations, economic injustice, structural drivers and wider social relations, left survivors feeling insignificant and overlooked, reinforcing inequalities (Brett, 2022). These dynamics often mirrored earlier experiences of powerlessness, with institutional processes perceived as reproducing, rather than redressing, existing inequalities.

However, commissions adopting a different approach facilitated social-repair and some rebalance of the injustice and inequality experienced by survivors. They transformed relationships between survivors and perpetrators which was healing and brought a degree of social change (Brett, 2022). Commissions also provided public accountability (Brett, 2022; Lundy, 2020). Others studies found that the process provided hermeneutical justice, with its public nature enabling destigmatising ways of speaking about abuse and reducing survivor isolation, alongside epistemic justice through being heard (Barker et al., 2023). Moreover, some survivors found the commissions’ and commissioner’s high status was transferred to them, helping to rebalance the inequities they had experienced (Moran & Salter, 2022).

1.2.3.2.6 Process Impact

Several higher quality studies speak of the ‘emotional and physical toll’ of testifying (Byrne, 2004, p. 246), leaving survivors ‘bare and vulnerable’ (Faku-Juqula,

2014, p. 201). They felt re-victimised and ‘their sense of self-worth’ impacted (Lundy, 2020, p. 269; Hamber & Lundy, 2020). All studies acknowledged this danger, however, some found an ‘inevitable element of reexperiencing that is difficult but manageable’ (Barker et al., 2023, p. 8). Four studies called testifying ‘cathartic,’ meeting psychological needs (Faku-Juqula, 2014; Guthrey, 2016a; Ifaloye et al., 2022; Moran & Salter, 2022). Survivors experienced a beneficial solidarity, and later studies saw shifts in ‘self-worth, pride, hope and sense of themselves as valued and valuable’ (Moran & Salter, 2022, p. 980).

1.2.3.2.7 Survivor Positioning

Survivor-centredness was raised in ten studies as key to survivor experience. ‘Survivor-centredness’ focuses on survivors and responds to their needs (Aldana, 2006). Truth commissions generally claim to be survivor-centred, and although, as Robins (2011) noted, *all* goals cannot be subservient to survivors’ agendas, the studies show there are varying degrees of effectiveness. Seven studies noted survivors felt commissions were not survivor-centred. Some found survivors were not consulted about their needs, concerns or ideas (Byrne, 2004; Clark, 2012). Survivors were not involved in developing and implementing commissions, nor settlement negotiations (Hamber & Lundy, 2020; Lundy, 2020). In contrast, in studies of survivor-centred commissions, survivors had space for agency, dispute, resistance and to create accountability mechanisms (Brett, 2022). In others, survivor needs were considered through a TIA focused on establishing trust, offering choice and control, and giving a sense of empowerment (Barker et al., 2023). Processes were thoughtfully prepared by training non-clinical staff and considering the environment (Barker et al., 2023; Moran &

Salter, 2022). Inquiries which positively impacted survivors placed them at their centre. In studies where participants had negative experiences, their presence and testimony were instrumentalised, and their needs marginalised in pursuit of other goals.

1.2.3.3 Line of Argument Synthesis

These concepts were synthesised into a theoretical framework capturing survivors' experiences of participating in a commission or inquiry. The analysis identified four interconnected stages shaping survivor experience: (1) the alignment of commission aims with survivor expectations and needs; (2) survivor involvement and control; (3) testifying conditions; and (4) outcomes. Several concepts operate across multiple stages, highlighting the recursive and cumulative nature of the process (see Table 6).

Table 6

Synthesised translations organised under the line of argument headings

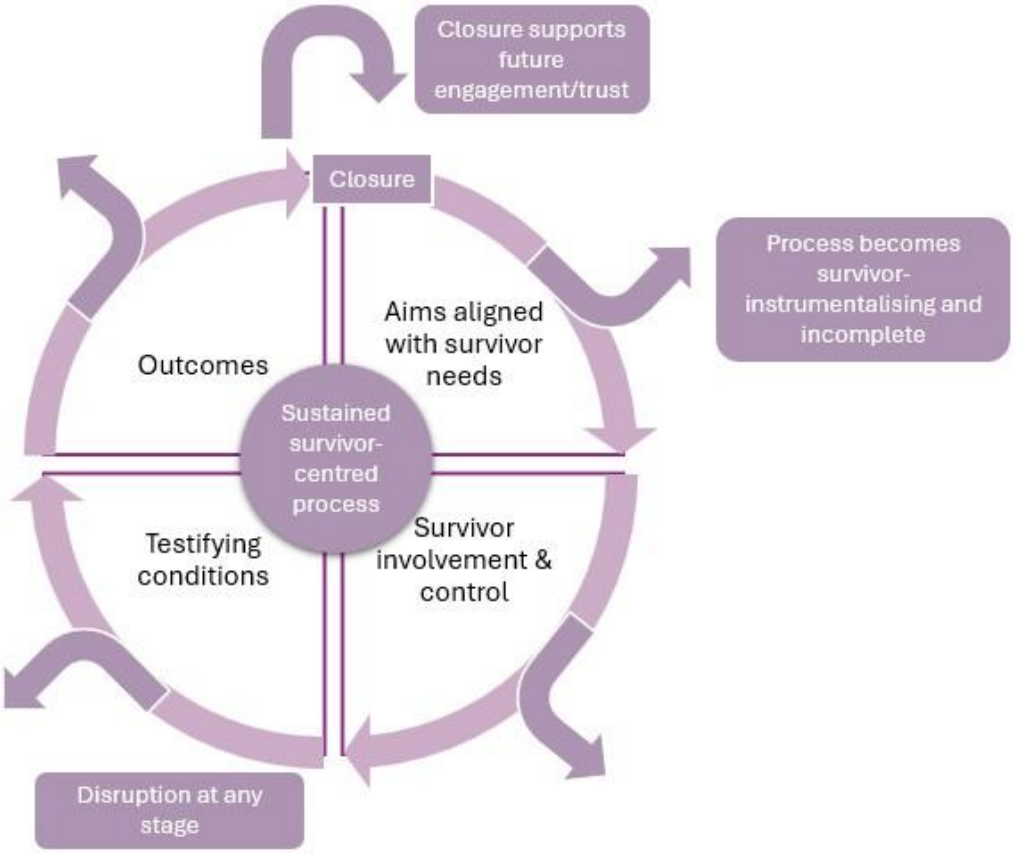
	Line of Argument – Commission processes			
Line of Argument – Commission Processes	1. Commission aims aligned with survivor expectations & needs	2. Survivor involvement & control	3. Testifying conditions	4. Outcomes
	Synthesised Concepts			
Alignment of participant & commission aims & needs, value of survivors in process	X			X
Survivor involvement in process	X	X	X	X
Extent survivors' voices are heard & validated		X	X	X
Cultural sensitivity & accommodation		X	X	X
Process impact				X
Survivor positioning	X	X	X	X

Crucially, the quality of survivor experience is not determined by any single stage, but by the extent to which a survivor-centred approach is sustained across the whole process. Where alignment between survivor needs and institutional action is maintained throughout, participation may be experienced as validating and, for some, contribute to healing and a sense of closure. Conversely, where this alignment breaks down, the process may be experienced as instrumentalising and, at times, retraumatising, with limited capacity for later repair.

When a survivor-centred approach is sustained, the process appears to move towards completion, with outcomes reflecting the aims and expectations established at the outset. In these cases, survivors seem to have a sense of completion, that the process has ‘come full circle,’ culminating potentially, in terms of the inquiry, in closure (Figure 2). In contrast, where aspects of the process become survivor-instrumentalising, such that survivor needs are subordinated to institutional priorities or forgotten, then the process may become experienced as incomplete. Even where later stages attempt to re-establish a survivor-centred approach, earlier breakdowns appear difficult to recover from, leaving survivors feeling marginalised or used.

Figure 2

Integrating Scheme - a Framework for Understanding Survivor Experiences Testifying at Commissions and Inquiries



Note. This table shows a process model of survivor participation in inquiries and commissions. A sustained survivor-centred approach across all stages (alignment of aims, survivor involvement and control, testifying conditions, and outcomes) supports progression towards closure. Where closure is achieved, this may support future engagement and trust. However, disruption at any stage may shift the process towards survivor-instrumentalisation and incompleteness, resulting in unresolved impacts.

From a clinical and practical perspective, this suggests two broad experiential trajectories. A sustained survivor-centred process maintains continuity across stages and is more likely to support resolution. However, this process is inherently fragile: disruption at any stage may shift the trajectory towards instrumentalisation and incompleteness. This helps to explain the apparent duality within the literature, where inquiry participation is described as healing and harmful.

This framework therefore highlights the encompassing and processual nature of testifying experiences. It suggests that efforts to promote “genuine healing” (Peace Agreement Between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front, 1999, Article VI(2)) depend not on isolated practices, but on the consistent centring of survivors throughout the entirety of the process. While individual differences shape how survivors experience participation, maintaining a survivor-centred approach appears to reduce the risk of harm and support more positive outcomes.

This processual understanding of survivor experience also highlights the temporal and relational dimensions of recognition, where validation and justice unfold over time and are contingent on sustained institutional responsiveness.

1.2.4 Discussion

This meta-ethnographic synthesis of twelve studies identified a consistent pattern of paired experiential concepts, including survivor-centredness versus instrumentalisation, dignity versus let-down, catharsis versus retraumatisation, and being heard versus unheard. These pairs reflect contrasting experiential trajectories shaped by how inquiry processes are enacted, not discrete outcomes. Synthesising

these findings, key aspects of inquiry experience were identified: alignment between survivor and commission aims; survivor involvement and control; the extent to which survivor voices are heard and validated; cultural sensitivity; power dynamics within processes and outcomes; and survivor positioning. These aspects were conceptualised within a processual framework, highlighting their operation across multiple stages of the inquiry experience.

The synthesis suggests that survivor experience is shaped less by individual elements than by the extent to which a survivor-centred approach is consistently maintained throughout. Where such alignment is sustained, participation may be experienced as validating and, for some, contribute to healing and closure. Conversely, where this alignment breaks down – through unmet expectations, lack of control, or failures in outcomes – the process may be experienced as instrumentalising and, at times, retraumatising. This helps to explain the apparent divergence in the literature, where inquiries are described as healing (Moran & Salter, 2022) and harmful (Byrne, 2004; Hamber & Lundy, 2020; Lundy, 2020).

The centrality of commission aims is significant. Where these fail to meaningfully centre survivor needs and expectations, subsequent stages are unlikely to compensate. Equally, outcomes are crucial in completing the process. Closure appears contingent on participation and on whether outcomes reflect the promises and expectations established at the outset. However, inquiries often emerge within contexts where governments seek to restore legitimacy or demonstrate responsiveness (Sköld, 2013), introducing tensions between survivor-centred and institutional goals. As Ireton (2023) notes, inquiries operate within fields of competing

expectations, making it difficult to satisfy all stakeholders, despite often being framed as beneficial to survivors.

These tensions are evident around justice. While inquiries are frequently positioned as mechanisms of justice, the ability to deliver is limited. The quasi-judicial nature of inquiries and commissions may foster expectations of conventional justice (McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019), including definitive outcomes such as accountability or redress. However, the absence of binding powers and delays in implementation may leave expectations unmet. At the same time, justice for survivors extends beyond legal outcomes to include epistemic justice, the recognition of their experiences as credible and meaningful (Barker et al., 2023). In this sense, inquiries potentially provide validation, facilitate sense-making, and challenge stigma and power dynamics, but only where survivor voices are genuinely centred.

The findings can be understood through broader trauma frameworks. Herman (2001) emphasises the social and relational dimensions of trauma, highlighting the importance of recognition, validation, and power in facilitating recovery. While inquiries are often positioned as mechanisms for such recognition and may support recovery, the findings suggest that where they fail to centre survivors, they may reproduce dynamics of marginalisation, echoing aspects of the original harm. Similarly, as mentioned, Keilson's (1992) theory of sequential traumatisation highlights the role of post-trauma social responses in shaping long-term outcomes. Inquiries can therefore be understood as part of this post-trauma environment, where institutional reactions to disclosure, such as recognition, silence, inaction or failure to implement recommendations, may contribute to either repair or further harm. Cognitive models

(e.g. Ehlers & Clark, 2000) further suggest that interpretation and response mediate trauma outcomes. Within inquiry contexts, this highlights how survivors' experiences are shaped by giving testimony and how their participation is interpreted, responded to and integrated into broader institutional processes. In this sense, inquiries are not neutral processes, but social contexts that actively shape survivors' trauma trajectories.

Following trauma, individuals may be at increased risk of heightened symptomatology and revictimisation (Graham-Kevan et al., 2015), which may contribute to increased vulnerability within inquiry processes. Given that many survivors have experienced harm within institutional or political contexts, engagement with a state-appointed inquiry may risk re-enacting experiences of marginalisation but may also provide opportunities for validation and recognition. Importantly, these experiences are not necessarily fixed or mutually exclusive, rather they may shift over time, with the same process experienced as supportive in some moments and harmful in others. However, these studies examined here also suggest an asymmetry whereby experiences perceived as instrumentalising or harmful may fundamentally shape subsequent engagement within the inquiry process, making it difficult for the process to later be experienced as fully validating or restorative

The findings also underscore the role of power and institutional positioning. Survivors participating in inquiries are often engaging with institutions implicated in their harm, or structurally similar ones, creating conditions in which participation may either re-enact or challenge prior experiences of disempowerment (Fricker, 2007; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Smith & Freyd, 2014). From the perspective of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007),

power operates through whose accounts are heard, believed and taken seriously. Survivors potentially experience testimonial injustice where their credibility is implicitly questioned, or hermeneutical injustice where their experiences are difficult to articulate within the dominant institutional frameworks. In contrast, institutional betrayal theory (Smith & Freyd, 2014) highlights how power is exercised through organisational responses where harm may arise through inaction, inadequate response or wrongdoing, or alternatively be mitigated through supportive and accountable practices. Inquiries then have the potential to reinforce harm and undermine trust or to function as examples of institutional courage. Together, these perspectives illustrate how power is embedded both in the production of knowledge and in institutional action or inaction. It also highlights the importance of attending to power dynamics throughout the process, including narrative control, whose voices are prioritised, how testimony is received, interpreted and acted up, and how outcomes are determined.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that survivor-centred, trauma-informed, and co-produced approaches should be embedded throughout all stages of inquiry processes (Herman, 2005; Jull et al., 2017). Importantly, support should extend beyond the period of testimony. As the findings indicate, the process does not end with participation; outcomes may take years to emerge, and the impacts of trauma are ongoing (Cloitre et al., 2013; Herman, 1992/2015). A longer-term, holistic approach to support—addressing psychological, social, and material needs—may therefore be required.

Finally, these findings can be understood through a recognition framework (Honneth, 1995). Being heard, believed, and valued function as forms of institutional

acknowledgment, while failures in these areas constitute misrecognition with implications for identity and social standing (Fricker, 2007). This highlights the relational and moral nature of inquiry processes, which extend beyond fact-finding to shape identity, trust, and social belonging.

The importance of outcomes in completing the process further underscores the temporal nature of justice, where recognition unfolds over time (Teitel, 2000). Where closure is not achieved, survivors may remain engaged in ongoing efforts to seek acknowledgment and accountability, suggesting that participation in inquiries is not a bounded event, but part of a longer-term social and relational process. This processual understanding of survivor experience aligns with broader conceptualisations of recognition, identity and justice as dynamic and temporally unfolding, rather than discrete outcomes.

1.2.4.1 Strengths and Limitations

This synthesis contributes to understanding of survivor experiences of testifying within inquiries and commissions by integrating qualitative findings across diverse studies. In doing so, it offers a more integrated understanding of how such processes are experienced and identifies key factors shaping outcomes. These insights have practical relevance for the design and delivery of inquiries, including the development of trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches, and may inform clinical practice, institutional responses, and policy frameworks within transitional justice contexts.

However, several limitations should be considered. The relatively small number of included studies reflects the limited evidence base in this area and constrains the

range of perspectives represented. The included studies also varied in methodological quality, as indicated by CASP appraisal, and in the timing of data collection following testimony, which may influence how experiences were recalled and interpreted. In addition, the diversity of sociopolitical and cultural contexts across studies may limit the transferability of findings where inquiry structures and survivor expectations differ.

As with all meta-ethnographic approaches, the synthesis represents one possible interpretation, shaped by the analytic lens of the researcher (Sandelowski et al., 2006). While efforts were made to remain grounded in the primary studies, alternative interpretations are possible. Nevertheless, the development of conceptual themes and a line of argument provides a meaningful contribution to understanding survivor experiences across diverse contexts.

Future research would benefit from greater use of co-produced approaches, which have been shown to enhance relevance and quality (Hickey et al., 2018), and align with the emphasis on survivor voice identified in this review. Longitudinal research capturing experiences at multiple time points following testimony would be valuable in understanding how relationships to inquiry processes evolve over time.

1.2.5 Conclusion

This synthesis demonstrates that survivors' experiences of testifying within inquiries and commissions are shaped by how these processes are enacted, and the relational context they create. Public inquiries can be understood as key relational environments in which survivors engage with institutions, such that the survivor–inquiry relationship becomes a central mechanism through which recognition, validation or harm are produced. Across the included studies, seven key aspects of

the inquiry process were identified as influential, operating across multiple stages. Central to these findings is the extent to which a survivor-centred approach is sustained throughout. Where this is maintained, participation may contribute to validation, truth-telling, and, for some, a sense of healing and social repair. Conversely, where survivor needs are subordinated to institutional priorities, the process may be experienced as instrumentalising and, at times, retraumatising.

These findings highlight that survivor experience is not determined by isolated elements of participation, but by the coherence and continuity of the process as a whole. This study therefore contributes a processual framework in which alignment between expectations, experience, and outcomes is central to how inquiry participation is understood. A survivor-centred approach must therefore be embedded from the initial framing of inquiry aims through to outcomes and beyond, with attention to whether institutional responses fulfil the expectations established at the outset.

Future research should prioritise co-produced approaches to better understand what constitutes meaningful and effective participation for survivors. Such work has the potential to inform the development of flexible, context-sensitive principles to guide inquiry design and practice, ensuring that survivor needs and interests remain central throughout.

1.3 The Current Research Background: The Independent Inquiry in Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA)

The findings of the preceding synthesis highlight the importance of how inquiry processes are enacted, the extent to which they remain survivor-centred across all

stages and deliver outcomes aligned with survivor expectations. These issues have direct relevance to contemporary inquiries into child sexual abuse. In England and Wales, IICSA represents one of the most significant recent attempts to investigate institutional responses to CSA and engage with survivor testimony at scale.

Established in 2015 under the Inquiries Act 2005, IICSA was tasked with examining the extent to which institutions failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse, to listen to survivor accounts, and to make recommendations to prevent future harm (IICSA, 2016). As a statutory public inquiry it was granted powers to compel testimony and release evidence. The inquiry encompassed a wide range of institutional contexts, including religious organisations, local authorities, schools, and the criminal justice system. Central to its approach was a commitment to hearing from those with lived experience, most notably through the Truth Project (TP), which provided a forum for survivors to share their experiences outside of formal legal proceedings. The TP enabled adults in England and Wales who had experienced CSA to share their accounts, reflect on its impact, and contribute to recommendations for institutional change.

IICSA operated over a seven-year period, reviewing over two million pages of evidence and gathering testimony from over 7000 survivors across multiple years, before publishing its final report in 2022. This scale and duration reflect the complexity of institutional CSA and the extended, multi-stage nature of the inquiry process. The TP ran throughout the inquiry, collecting testimony from over six thousand survivors, while thematic investigations and reports were published incrementally. As a result,

findings and recommendations unfolded over time rather than at a single point, although the final report ultimately set out 20 key recommendations.

IICSA has been positioned as a survivor-centred inquiry, with explicit efforts to incorporate survivor perspectives into its structure and processes, including the establishment of a Victims and Survivors Consultative Panel (VSCP) (Griffin, 2024; *Victims and Survivors Consultative Panel*, 2021). The TP was framed as an opportunity for survivors to be heard, acknowledged, and validated. In this sense, IICSA reflects broader shifts in inquiry practice towards greater emphasis on participation, recognition, and survivor voice.

IICSA can be understood as incorporating elements of restorative justice, through its recognition of harm and its efforts to provide survivors with a voice (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023). This was most evident in the TP, which created a space in which survivor accounts were heard and acknowledged without challenge, and which informed the development of recommendations (Jay et al., 2022). Within the framework of the UN General Assembly's (2005) principles on reparation, this aligns most closely with forms of “satisfaction,” including acknowledgment and truth-telling. However, other key components of reparation, such as financial compensation, direct reconciliation processes and the provision of ongoing rehabilitative support, were more limited or absent. As such, while IICSA contributed to recognition and acknowledgment, its capacity to deliver a more comprehensive form of reparation was constrained.

Nevertheless, the TP has been argued to provide forms of testimonial and epistemic justice, through recognising survivors as credible knowers and validating

their experiences (Barker et al., 2023). This highlights the potential and the limitations of inquiry processes in addressing survivors' justice needs. However, whether these forms of recognition are sufficient in the absence of material or structural outcomes remains an open question.

Despite the scale and ambition of IICSA, concerns have been raised regarding the implementation of its recommendations. While the government initially indicated acceptance of the majority of recommendations, progress in enacting these has been limited, with delays and partial commitments noted in subsequent years across different governments (Braverman, 2023; Sackman & Mahmood, 2025). Survivor groups and the inquiry's chair have expressed disappointment at the pace and extent of implementation, raising concerns that the inquiry has fallen short of its stated aims (*Act on IICSA - The Survivors Trust*, 2025; Dearden, 2023; The Survivors Trust, 2023).

More broadly, some survivor groups had already withdrawn from engagement during the inquiry itself, citing concerns regarding independence, representation, and the marginalisation of survivor voices (BBC, 2017; Laville, 2016; Morris, 2016). These critiques highlight ongoing tensions between the stated survivor-centred aims of the inquiry and the realities of its operation and aftermath.

The limited and delayed implementation of recommendations raises questions about how survivors make sense of their participation, particularly where institutional responses fail to meet expectations of recognition and change. This dynamic can also be understood through the concept of institutional betrayal, whereby institutions fail to meet obligations to those who depend on them (Smith & Freyd, 2014). In the context of IICSA, delays or limitations in implementing recommendations may risk reinforcing

feelings of betrayal. Although efforts were made to centre survivor experiences within the inquiry (Barker, Ford, et al., 2023), these were primarily captured at particular points in time, and the extent to which such recognition is sustained in the longer term remains uncertain.

As identified in the wider literature, such commitments to participation and recognition exist alongside inherent tensions. Public inquiries operate within political and institutional contexts, balancing multiple and often competing demands, including accountability, public confidence, and policy reform. While IICSA sought to centre survivor experiences, it remained a state-appointed process with no direct powers to deliver justice, reparations, or enforce recommendations. This raises important questions about how survivors experience participation in such processes.

Emerging literature on IICSA suggests that survivor experiences may be complex and, at times, ambivalent. While opportunities to give testimony may be experienced as validating and empowering, they may also give rise to disappointment or distress where institutional responses are perceived as insufficient or delayed. In this way, IICSA provides a contemporary context in which the dynamics identified in the present synthesis – relating to survivor-centredness, power, recognition, and outcomes – can be examined in practice.

These tensions point to a gap in understanding how survivors themselves approached participation in IICSA. There is limited insight into the expectations and hopes survivors held when giving testimony, and how these shaped their subsequent experiences of the process. Understanding these expectations is crucial for interpreting experiences of disappointment, evaluating the adequacy of inquiry processes, and

informing more responsive and survivor-centred approaches in the future. This gap is salient given the importance of alignment between expectations and outcomes identified in the preceding synthesis.

The increasing use of public inquiries in the UK, with 18 statutory inquiries ongoing in 2024 (Statutory Inquiries Committee, 2024), further highlights the importance of understanding how such processes are experienced by participants.

Thus, despite its scale and significance, there remains no in-depth research exploring how survivors experienced participation in IICSA over time; particularly how expectations were formed, maintained, or disrupted. Understanding these experiences is important for evaluating IICSA and for informing the design and implementation of future inquiries. The present study therefore seeks to explore how a sample of survivors experienced participation in IICSA, with attention to how recognition, power, and institutional response shaped these experiences over time. This extends existing research, such as Barker et al. (2023) which examined participants' experiences of participation relatively soon after their involvement in IICSA and prior to the governments' response to the recommendations, by adopting a longer-term perspective on how these experiences evolve beyond the point of participation.

1.4 Aims and Research Rationale

The preceding review and synthesis highlight that survivor experiences of inquiry participation are shaped by opportunities to give testimony, and the extent to which inquiry processes remain survivor-centred across all stages and deliver

outcomes that align with survivor expectations. While existing literature has explored experiences of participation across inquiries and truth commissions, there remains limited understanding of how these processes are experienced within specific contemporary contexts, and how expectations, recognition, and outcomes interact over time.

Specifically, there is a lack of in-depth research examining how survivors experienced participation in IICSA over time, despite its scale and significance. As outlined above, IICSA incorporated elements intended to centre survivor voice and provide recognition, most notably through the TP. However, concerns regarding the implementation of recommendations and the extent to which outcomes have met expectations raise important questions about how participation in such processes is experienced in practice.

Understanding survivor expectations is important, as the preceding synthesis suggests that alignment between expectations and institutional response is central to whether participation is experienced as validating or harmful. Where expectations of recognition, accountability, or change are unmet, participation may risk being experienced as incomplete or even as a form of institutional betrayal. However, little is currently known about how such expectations evolve over time, or how they shape survivors' interpretations of their involvement in inquiries.

This gap is especially salient given the increasing use of public inquiries in the UK and internationally, and their positioning as mechanisms for accountability, recognition, and reform. Developing a clearer understanding of survivor experiences

within these processes is therefore important for informing the design and delivery of future inquiries, as well as for supporting those who participate in them.

The present study therefore explores how survivors experienced participation in IICSA over time, focusing on how expectations and hopes held when giving testimony were shaped, met, or disrupted, and how their sense of participation developed. In doing so, it examines how inquiry processes are experienced in practice, including the extent to which they provide recognition, validation, and meaningful response. More broadly, the study aims to contribute to understanding how institutional responses to CSA are experienced by survivors, and to inform the development of more survivor-centred approaches within future inquiries.

This study then addresses the following research questions:

1. How do survivors make sense of the longer-term impacts of IICSA, including its recommendations and subsequent institutional responses?
2. How do survivors experience participation in the inquiry process over time?

Addressing these questions requires an approach that can capture the complexity of survivor perspectives and the meanings they attribute to their experiences. The following chapter therefore outlines the methodological approach adopted in this study to explore these issues in depth.

2. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in this study. It begins by presenting the epistemological positioning and rationale for a pragmatic, mixed methods approach. It then describes the research design, including procedures, measures, analytic strategy and participants. Ethical considerations and plans for dissemination are also addressed. Reflexive commentary is incorporated at points to acknowledge the researcher's role in shaping the research process and interpretation.

2.1 Epistemological positioning and justification of methodology development

Research operates within particular paradigms, belief systems that shape how researchers frame questions and determine appropriate methods for addressing them (Kuhn, 1962). These paradigms combine three key philosophical concepts: ontology (beliefs about the nature of reality), epistemology (what can be known about reality) and methodology (how knowledge is produced) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study adopts a pragmatic ontology and epistemology, alongside a mixed methodology. The following section outlines the rationale for this positioning.

2.1.1 Pragmatic Ontology and Epistemology

This research takes a pragmatic approach, in which all design decisions are guided by the research question, and both objective and subjective knowledge is valued. While ontological positions such as realism (which assumes an objective, single reality independent of perception) and constructivism (which emphasises multiple realities shaped by individual experience) are often considered incompatible,

pragmatism takes a middle path (Morgan, 2014). Accordingly, this study assumes reality exists independently from experience, but it can only be encountered through it. Thus, the world is understood as both real and socially constructed, with emphasis on those aspects of reality and its construction that are most relevant to addressing the research problem.

Similarly, pragmatism adopts a middle ground with regard to epistemology. It accepts there may be basic ‘truths’ but these are shaped by context (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2017). Knowledge is therefore understood as arising through experience and social interaction, shaped by social contexts and interpreted through individuals’ lived experiences. While this acknowledges the socially constructed nature of knowledge and its fallibility, it does not imply that all knowledge is inherently unreliable. Rather, knowledge emerges through the ongoing interaction between individuals and the world, where experience is interpreted and continually reshaped through interaction with social and material contexts (Gillespie et al., 2024). Knowledge, then, is provisional, fallible and evaluated according to its usefulness in understanding real-world problems and guiding action.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study. Survivors of CSA do not share a single, uniform experience and their engagement with a public inquiry is shaped by diverse social, historical and psychological contexts. However, their accounts also speak to meaningful realities and should be understood as valid forms of knowledge. A pragmatic approach therefore allows these experiences to be recognised as both situated and informative, supporting the development of knowledge that is responsive to survivors’ needs and to the challenges they face.

This pragmatic approach enables survivor experiences to be taken seriously whilst acknowledging the impact of social context. It shifts focus away from abstract concerns about reconstructing or deconstructing knowledge, instead prioritising practical and incremental improvements (Morgan, 2014). Accordingly, the research value lies less with whether it perfectly represents an objective reality and more in its usefulness and outcomes. Thus, whether something is empirically ‘true’ is less significant than whether it is meaningful and can inform action. This study then is less concerned with the nature of reality and more with whether the data supports understanding participants' experiences and contributes to improving responses to IICSA and future inquiries.

This emphasis on practical outcomes also informs the methodological approach adopted in this study, as outlined in the following section on the mixed methodology.

2.1.2 Mixed Methodology

Pragmatism emphasises that the research question should determine the research method. While quantitative and qualitative approaches are often positioned as underpinned by distinct paradigms determining what should be measured and studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), this distinction can be overstated as elements of each are frequently used within the other (Krippendorff, 2019). Pragmatism supports methodological flexibility, focusing less on epistemological and ontological differences and more on what different methods can contribute in practice. This enables the

integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches in a complementary way, drawing on both of their strengths.

Within this framework, qualitative and quantitative methods are not viewed as incompatible, but as potentially synergistic, generating insights beyond those produced by either approach alone (Tashakkori et al., 2010). Pragmatism thus provides a rationale and a framework for combining methods in a way that is driven by the research aims.

A mixed methodological approach is particularly appropriate for this study, which seeks to capture the breadth and depth of survivor experiences at IICSA (Gillespie et al., 2024). Quantitative methods allow for the examination of patterns across participants, including the distribution of experiences and perspectives, while qualitative methods enable in-depth exploration of meaning, offering detailed and contextualised accounts. Together, these approaches support a more comprehensive understanding than either could achieve alone.

Pragmatism also considers the practical consequences of the research, i.e. the social and political implications. Given the ongoing political and institutional relevance of IICSA's recommendations, a mixed approach allows findings to be both broadly representative and contextually rich, enhancing their potential impact (Rich et al., 2018). For example, representing the views of a cross-section of survivors would provide greater reliability, while giving nuanced and detailed descriptions would increase validity. Pragmatism also places emphasis on the context, asking what is the most appropriate approach in the contextual situation (Tashakkori et al., 2010). The

sensitive nature of CSA warrants flexibility in participation. Offering both survey and interview options allows participants to engage at a level that feels appropriate, balancing accessibility with depth.

The approach here is primarily inductive, aiming to generate understanding from participants' accounts rather than test predefined hypotheses and without a theoretical frame or guide (Bingham, 2022; Flick & Kennedy, 2018). While induction is often associated with qualitative research and deduction with quantitative methods, this distinction is not absolute (Faems, 2020). In practice, some degree of theoretical influence is inevitable, given the researcher's situated perspective (Chalmers, 1999). Nonetheless, the analysis is oriented towards generating insight rather than testing theory, making an inductive approach appropriate within a mixed methodological framework.

2.2 Design

Building on the pragmatic and mixed methodological framework outlined above, this section details the study design and how these principles were operationalised in practice.

2.2.1 Mixed Methods

Mixed methods research is not only a methodological orientation which flows from underlying philosophical assumptions, it is also a practical approach to data collection and analysis, integrating quantitative and qualitative processes within a

single study. In this research, quantitative data was collected through a survey and qualitative data through semi-structured interviews.

A key rationale for using mixed methods lies in their potential to support social justice aims (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013). Quantitative methods can document patterns in participants' experiences of IICSA, while qualitative methods give voice to those historically marginalised. This is particularly important given survivors of CSA have often been silenced or excluded (Fisher et al., 2018). Combining these approaches therefore enables both the representation and amplification of survivor perspectives.

Mixed methods encourages development through one stage informing the next (Greene et al., 1989). In this study the intention was for survey findings to shape the focus of the qualitative interviews, allowing issues identified quantitatively to be explored in greater depth. However, this aspect was only partially realised due to recruitment challenges, as discussed below.

In addition, mixed methods support complementarity by enabling different aspects of a research question to be addressed through distinct but related approaches (Tashakkori et al., 2010). Here, quantitative data provided insight into broader patterns of experience, while qualitative data offered detailed, contextualised accounts. Combining methods also allows the strengths of each to offset the limitations of the other, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). This approach can also enhance validity through triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moon, 2019; Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016).

However, the benefits of complementarity, offsetting weaknesses and triangulation were not fully realised due to recruitment challenges (see below).

The following section outlines how these design intentions developed in practice, including the shift from an explanatory-sequential to a concurrent parallel design.

2.2.2 A Explanatory-Sequential Design to a Concurrent Parallel Design

Within this mixed methods framework, the study design evolved over the course of the research in response to practical constraints. The study was initially designed as an explanatory-sequential design in which quantitative data would be collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative data to explain or expand upon these findings. In this study, survey data was intended to inform the development of semi-structured interviews, enabling the exploration of emerging patterns in greater depth. This design offered a data-driven approach and the potential to highlight lived experience, as the qualitative phase would be shaped directly by participants' responses.

However, explanatory-sequential designs are time-consuming and rely on sufficient initial recruitment. In this case, slower-than-anticipated recruitment at the survey stage made this approach unfeasible within the available timeframe. As a result, the study adopted a concurrent parallel design.

In a concurrent parallel design, quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) data are collected simultaneously but analysed separately, before being integrated at the interpretive stage. This approach allows for the comparison and combination of

different forms of data, offering the potential for triangulation (Jick, 1979) and a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Thus, as it became clear that survey responses were lower than anticipated, interviews commenced while the survey remained open, resulting in concurrent data collection. Interview participants were recruited from survey respondents who had indicated that they were willing to take part in a follow-up interview. Prior to each interview, the participant's completed survey was read to familiarise the researcher with their background and responses and to inform the interview. This involved familiarisation with the individual participant's responses rather than analysis of the survey dataset. To minimise the survey findings influencing interpretation of the qualitative data, no formal analysis of the survey data was undertaken at this stage. Once data collection was complete, the interview data were analysed first, followed by analysis of the survey data, before both datasets were integrated at the final stage of interpretation.

The shift in design was a practical adaptation and consistent with the study's pragmatic orientation, which prioritises the usefulness and feasibility of research processes, allowing the study's completion. While concurrent designs can present challenges in integrating separate analyses, maintaining a clear focus on the research aims and questions supported coherence across the data.

This flexibility in design also aligns with the study's commitment to incorporating participant perspectives, as explored further in the following section on co-production.

2.2.3 Co-production

Co-production is increasingly recognised as an important approach in research, particularly where it seeks to engage groups who have historically been excluded from knowledge production (Jull et al., 2017). In the context of CSA and public inquiries, a context-sensitive and participatory approach is especially important. Survivors have frequently experienced silencing and marginalisation; involving them in the research process can therefore help to mitigate epistemic and relational injustices and further harm. Conversely, claiming to value survivor 'voice' while maintaining traditional researcher–participant hierarchies risks reproducing existing power imbalances (de Oliveira, 2023).

Drawing on Freire (1996), co-production challenges hierarchical models of knowledge by positioning participants as active contributors rather than passive subjects. This involves recognising lived experience as a form of expertise and incorporating it throughout the research process. In this study, co-production informed the design and development of the research, supporting a more responsive and contextually grounded approach.

A lived experience advisor, Lucy Duckworth (named with consent) who is a Policy Advisor at The Survivors Trust and was a member of the VSCP at IICSA, contributed throughout the research process, including the development of research questions, design decisions and interpretation. A second lived experience advisor, involved in the IICSA Changemakers Survivor Advisory Community, contributed to the development and piloting of the survey. Their involvement was iterative rather than confined to a single consultation, allowing feedback to inform the study at multiple

stages of its development. This input supported the alignment of the research aims with survivor priorities and helped ensure that materials were both accessible and sensitive.

Thus, Experts by Experience (EbE) were involved throughout the study, contributing to its conceptual development, methodology and participant-facing materials. Beyond reviewing documents, including the recruitment poster, ethics application, survey and conference poster, EbEs provided valuable contextual understanding of IICSA, including how the inquiry operated in practice, routes to recruitment, and current issues within survivor communities, such as perceived hierarchies of abuse, relationships between survivor groups and frustrations regarding governmental and media responses. This helped situate the research within the wider social and political context of IICSA.

EbEs informed the study design. They reviewed recruitment materials, the survey and interview schedule, recommending changes to improve clarity, reduce participant burden and ensure concepts were meaningful to survivors. For example, survey items were combined or expanded where appropriate, response options were amended and questions concerning concepts such as justice were refined to avoid ambiguity. Recruitment strategies were also informed by advice regarding survivor events and networks.

Particular emphasis was placed on language. EbEs recommended replacing potentially triggering or stigmatising terminology. For example, avoiding ‘historical abuse’ in favour of ‘non-recent sexual abuse,’ avoiding the term ‘recruited,’ which

some survivors considered potentially triggering and replacing references to ‘their abuse’ with wording that located responsibility for abuse with perpetrators rather than survivors. These recommendations reflected survivors’ expertise in how language can unintentionally reinforce blame, stigma or exclusion, and therefore strengthened the survivor-centred nature of the study. Conference material was similarly revised to emphasise the personal and wider societal impact of participation rather than solely inquiry recommendations. They also suggested updating contextual information including prevalence estimates and economic costs to reflect the most recent evidence.

These changes extended beyond improving readability and accessibility. They ensured that the study materials reflected survivor-centred principles, shaping its conceptual, methodological and ethical development, recognised the importance of language in shaping meaning, and aligned the methodology with the study’s broader commitment to recognition and voice.

This emphasis on accessibility and participant-centred design directly informed the development of the survey, as outlined in the following section on the quantitative method.

2.2.4 The Quantitative Method

Surveys are commonly used in non-experimental, descriptive research to provide generalisable insights, particularly in examining the prevalence of attitudes and experiences (Mathers et al., 2007). In this study, a survey was used to capture patterns in participants’ experiences of and responses to IICSA.

Surveys offer several practical advantages, including efficiency, easy to conduct, accessible, and can reach a geographically diverse sample (Jones et al., 2013). They enable participation at a self-selected time and environment, and allow anonymous participation, which was particularly important for survivors of CSA. To minimise participant burden, the survey was designed to collect only essential information, with careful consideration given to question format and wording to reduce fatigue (O'Connor, 2022).

The survey was developed following consultation with Experts by Experience to ensure it reflected survivor priorities and used sensitive, appropriate language (see Section 2.2.3). The CROSS: Consensus-Based Checklist for Reporting of Survey Studies (Sharma et al., 2021) was also consulted to support transparent reporting.

However, surveys have some disadvantages, they are limited in their ability to capture depth or explain underlying meanings. While they can identify patterns, they offer limited insight into how participants interpret their experiences. For this reason, a qualitative component was included to provide a more detailed and interpretive understanding.

The target sample size for the survey was informed by both statistical considerations and practical feasibility. Assuming a target population of approximately 7,300 survivors who participated in IICSA, an online calculator based on Cochran's equation with finite population correction (Sample Size Calculator, n.d.) estimated that a sample size of 365 participants would be required to achieve a 95% confidence level.

However, this represented an aspirational target. Based on previous follow-up research with IICSA participants, a more realistic recruitment target was approximately 66 participants, mirroring the survey sample obtained by Barker et al. (2023). This was considered achievable within the available time frame.

Fifteen participants completed the survey, substantially fewer than anticipated. This likely reflected a combination of factors, including the sensitive nature of the topic, the time elapsed since participation in IICSA, reliance on voluntary recruitment through survivor organisations with which many participants were no longer engaged, the dissolution of the Survivor Forum established during IICSA, research fatigue, and the limitations of recruitment via social media, where research invitations may easily be overlooked. Consequently, the quantitative component was used descriptively to provide contextual information that complemented and contextualised the qualitative findings, rather than to support inferential statistical analyses.

Although the achieved sample was insufficient for inferential statistical analyses, retaining the survey data remained both methodologically and ethically important. Some participants chose to contribute only through the survey and did not wish to participate in an interview. Excluding their data would have removed the perspectives of participants who had chosen to engage with the study at the level they considered appropriate. Given the study's survivor-centred and co-produced approach, preserving these accounts was considered important to ensure those voices remained represented within the research. Further, as the study explores experiences of recognition, validation and voice, excluding participants who had chosen to contribute only through the survey would have been inconsistent with its

survivor-centred principles. The survey therefore provided descriptive contextual information that complemented the qualitative findings and remained consistent with the study's pragmatic mixed-methods design by incorporating the perspectives of all participants who wished to contribute. The qualitative findings are outlined in the following section.

2.2.5 Qualitative Method

Interviews are well-suited to exploring participants' experiences, perceptions and interpretations, making them appropriate for addressing experience-based research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to generate rich, in-depth accounts of participants' engagement with IICSA.

A semi-structured approach allowed for consistency, flexibility and unexpected issues and questions. An interview schedule (see Appendix C) ensured key topics were covered, while open-ended, non-leading questions enabled participants to guide the discussion and introduce issues of personal relevance. Follow-up questions were used to deepen exploration and clarify meaning, supporting the generation of detailed and nuanced data.

Consistent with a reflexive qualitative approach, the interviewer is understood as actively involved in the co-construction of meaning. The lead researcher therefore engaged in ongoing reflection on how their assumptions, values and interactions may have shaped the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Finlay, 2002) (see 'Reflective Note 1 & 3).

This reflective process is exemplified in the following reflective note, before outlining the procedures used to conduct the study.

2.2.6 Reflective Note 1

In interviews it is often understood the interviewer holds greater power, with the interviewer positioned as the 'expert' (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In research with survivors, this imbalance may be further amplified given histories of silencing and marginalisation (Halvorsen et al., 2020). I was mindful of this dynamic throughout the interviews.

However, in practice, this power dynamic was not always experienced as expected. When discussing IICSA, participants were frequently the experts: they had direct experience of the inquiry, were often actively engaged in survivor communities, and brought detailed knowledge of its processes and implications. This appeared to shift the relational dynamic, allowing interviews to be shaped more by participant knowledge than researcher authority.

This may partly reflect the characteristics of those who chose to participate, many of whom were engaged in advocacy or remained closely connected to the inquiry and its outcomes. This confidence may have facilitated richer data, as greater ease in interviews is associated with rapport-building and more detailed accounts (Harding, 1987; McGroarty & Baxter, 2009). It also enabled me to adopt a stance of curiosity and 'not-knowing' (H. Anderson & Goolishian, 1992), supporting a more collaborative and responsive interview process.

However, it is important to note that this dynamic may not reflect the experiences of all survivors, particularly those who are less engaged or confident. These reflections though informed how the interviews were conducted in practice, as outlined in the following section on procedure.

2.3 Procedure

Participants were recruited through voluntary sampling via survivor organisations and social media. A survey (see Appendix D) was distributed using Qualtrics through networks including The Survivors Trust, a national membership organisation supporting specialist sexual abuse services in the voluntary sector with over 120 member organisations. A recruitment poster (see Appendix E) was circulated via the member organisations, social media and at relevant events (e.g. ActOnIICSA, a voluntary campaign group to raise awareness of IICSA and its recommendations). Participants could contact the researcher directly via email for further information.

Interested individuals could access the anonymous survey by scanning a QR code, following a link, or requesting access via email. Participants were provided with a participant information sheet, consent form and debrief (see Appendix D). This approach enabled participants to complete the survey at their own pace and in a setting of their choosing. At the end of the survey, participants could optionally provide contact details to take part in a follow-up interview.

The study initially intended to use purposive sampling to recruit approximately eight participants for interview, selecting individuals who could provide rich and

reflective accounts (Campbell et al., 2020). This approach, aligned with the study's qualitative aims, was to be informed by survey responses, using free text answers to identify those able to communicate their experiences reflectively, and developed in consultation with the lived experience advisor (Palinkas et al., 2015).

However, due to a low survey response rate, after discussion with both supervisors, this strategy was adapted. All participants who expressed willingness to be interviewed were invited to take part, and the target sample was increased to approximately ten interviews. This pragmatic adjustment enabled the continuation of the study while reducing potential selection bias and broadening participation.

Participants who opted in for follow-up interviews were contacted via email to arrange a video interview using Microsoft Teams. Of those who initially agreed, five later withdrew due to personal circumstances or did not respond, resulting in a final sample of ten interview participants.

Interviews were conducted online, allowing flexibility and removing geographical constraints. Participants received an information sheet and consent form in advance. Interviews lasted between one and two and a half hours, including explanation of the study, consent procedures, and debrief. All interviews were video-recorded via Microsoft Teams.

Participants were offered a £20 Amazon voucher in recognition of their time and contribution. Providing compensation is consistent with trauma-informed research practices, which emphasise transparency, respect and the acknowledgment of participants' expertise (White & Highfield, 2024). The amount was intentionally

modest to avoid undue influence or pressure to participate (Alessi & and Kahn, 2023). Participants who withdrew after interview remained eligible for compensation.

Vouchers were distributed via the finance officer at the University of Essex in accordance with institutional financial procedures, requiring participants to provide an email address for audit purposes. This process was outlined in the consent form.

Following the reflective note below, the next section outlines the measures used.

2.3.1 Reflective note 2

During the interview process, I became increasingly aware of a tension between the modest financial compensation offered and the scale of participants' experiences. The £20 voucher began to feel superficial in light of the injustice many participants described and their often altruistic motivations for contributing. This concern was echoed by one participant, who expressed frustration with the payment, which they considered dismissive.

In response, I adjusted how the voucher was introduced, explicitly acknowledging it as a small and symbolic gesture. This appeared to improve its reception and highlighted the importance of transparency and reflexivity in managing ethical tensions within the research process.

2.4 Measures

Participants completed an online questionnaire via Qualtrics (see Appendix D), collecting demographic information (e.g. age, ethnicity, gender) alongside details of their engagement with IICSA (e.g. if, when and how testimony was given). The survey

was designed to be concise and accessible, with attention to layout, readability and question ordering to support response rates (Dillman et al., 2014). It comprised 17 core items, plus a free-text question for additional comments, followed by five optional demographic questions. Completion time was approximately ten minutes to minimise participant burden.

Several items used five-point Likert scales (strongly agree to strongly disagree), with optional free-text responses to allow elaboration. Likert scales are well suited to capturing attitudes and perceptions. Additional multiple-choice questions allowed participants to select multiple responses and provide their own options. These items were informed by prior research conducted by the researcher and literature on the impact of child sexual abuse and public inquiries (Downing et al., 2021; Herman, 1992/2015). Hilton (2025) found participants in the TP expressed hope that testifying would lead to a change in themselves, a change in relationship between their selves and society, and a change in society. These led to the development of survey items such as ‘overall my expectations of contributing to the Truth Project have been met’ as well as options in items such as ‘when I contributed to the Truth Project I hoped it would…’ which reflect the expressed hopes in that study. Options regarding the challenges of contributing to IICSA were derived from the literature on public inquiries and truth commissions considered in the systematic literature review above.

Data were screened to ensure quality and relevance. Responses containing predominantly non-interpretable or irrelevant text were excluded (n=2). Nonsense text was defined as text with no semantic meaning as well as Latin on unrelated subject

matters. This criterion was selected to ensure participants had engaged meaningfully with the questions and the results had construct validity. Only responses from participants located in England and Wales were retained, verified using platform metadata, to ensure alignment with the study population (n=5 excluded). Responses that did not progress beyond consent were also removed (n=13). These steps were taken to maintain data integrity and reduce the risk of invalid or ineligible responses in online survey research (Goodrich et al., 2023). All exclusions were applied prior to analysis and the exclusion criteria were grounded in the defined study population to ensure the dataset accurately reflected the intended population.

Given the small sample size (n=15), quantitative analysis was limited to descriptive statistics. Free-text responses were analysed using thematic analysis (see below).

Survey responses were reviewed prior to interview to inform follow-up questioning, allowing clarification, elaboration and exploration of individual responses. The semi-structured format enabled flexibility in both question wording and sequencing, allowing interviews to respond to participants' developing accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Open-ended questions encouraged detailed reflection and enabled participants to introduce issues of personal relevance and importance.

Consistent with a reflexive approach, the interviewer was understood as actively involved in the co-construction of meaning. This approach supported the study's aim of generating in-depth accounts of participants' experiences and interpretations of IICSA, capturing both shared patterns and individual variation.

More broadly, the mixed methods design enabled both breadth and depth, combining an overview of participant experiences with detailed, contextualised accounts. In doing so, the study aimed to foreground the perspectives of CSA survivors, a group often marginalised within research and institutional processes, and to contribute to a more balanced evidence base.

After the reflective note below, the following section outlines the analytic approach used to interpret both quantitative and qualitative data.

2.4.1 Reflective Note 3

As the interviews progressed, it became clear that I was not a neutral observer. I experienced a sense of frustration regarding the perceived lack of governmental response to IICSA's recommendations and found myself empathising strongly with participants' accounts. This raised questions about how my responses might shape the interview process. I became aware that I shared with the participants a hope this study would help bring some change and keep IICSA in more public view.

While interviewer neutrality is often emphasised (Anderson-Knott, 2008; Gerson et al., 2020), it may also limit rapport. Empathy can support trust and facilitate more open and detailed accounts (Abbe & Brandon, 2014). Adopting a pragmatic and reflexive stance, I recognised that complete neutrality was neither achievable nor necessarily desirable. Instead, I aimed to balance openness and curiosity with careful attention to how my responses might influence the data.

My institutional affiliations (university and NHS) also positioned me, at least potentially, as aligned with systems participants may have experienced as harmful or

unresponsive. This may have shaped relational dynamics and required particular attention to building trust. Rapport was supported through empathetic engagement, while efforts to maintain analytic integrity included the use of open, non-leading and clarifying questions, and avoiding assumptions.

This tension between empathy and neutrality was therefore managed not by attempting to eliminate subjectivity, but by engaging with it reflexively.

2.5 Analysis

The following section outlines the analytic strategies used to interpret both quantitative and qualitative data.

2.5.1 Quantitative survey data

Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics in Qualtrics. Given the small sample size, analysis focused on summarising patterns in participants' responses rather than inferential testing. This approach supported the study's aim of providing an overview of survivor experiences and attitudes towards the legacy of IICSA and its recommendations, offering a broad contextual understanding of the data (Cooksey, 2020; May, 2017).

2.5.2 Qualitative interview data

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed by the lead researcher. MAXQDA software was used to organise and manage both interview transcripts and qualitative survey responses.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2013, 2019). This approach involves familiarisation with the data, systematic coding, the development and refinement of themes, constructing a thematic map, and writing up. The process was iterative and recursive, with movement between phases as understanding developed (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Consistent with RTA, the analysis prioritised depth of interpretation rather than consensus between coders. Regular supervision meetings supported the development and refinement of themes through discussion and critical reflection, while reflexive journaling and an audit trail enhanced transparency and rigour (Yardley, 2017).

RTA is particularly suited to exploring lived experience, meanings, beliefs and perspectives (Clarke et al., 2015), aligning with the study's aim of understanding participants' responses to IICSA and its longer-term impact. By identifying patterns across accounts, the analysis generated a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of participant experiences.

Finally, in line with the convergent mixed methods design, quantitative and qualitative findings were analysed separately and integrated at the interpretive stage, enabling the findings to be considered in relation to one another.

The following section describes the characteristics of the participant sample.

2.6 Participants

Participants were adults (aged 18+) who had experienced CSA and contributed to IICSA through the TP, forums or public hearings, via written or oral testimony.

Following data cleaning (see 2.4 Measures), 15 survey responses were retained. Ten participants took part in interviews. While larger survey samples are desirable, qualitative research prioritises depth over breadth, with smaller samples appropriate for generating rich, detailed data (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Saturation, i.e. where additional data stops eliciting new information, is key (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Green & Thorogood, 2018). Guides to estimating a robust sample size vary with Braun & Clarke (2013) suggesting ten interviews would be sufficient, whilst Clarke et al. (2015) indicated 6-15 for a professional doctorate. Given the scope of the study and that it is a mixed methods study, 10 was an appropriate number. The amount of rich and detailed data gleaned from the ten interviews also confirmed that this was an appropriate number. Sample size was therefore guided by the study's qualitative aims and practical constraints, and was considered sufficient to address the research questions.

Table 7 presents the distribution of participants by gender.

Table 7

Demographic Data: Gender

Gender	Truth Project	Survey Data	Interview Data
Male	29%	20% (n=3)	10% (n=1)
Female	70%	80% (n=12)	90% (n=9)
Other/Prefer not to say	<1%	0	0

Demographic comparisons with IICSA data (IICSA, 2022) suggest the sample broadly reflects the wider participant group in some respects, but with notable limitations. Males were under-represented, particularly in the interview sample, which is important given known gender differences in help-seeking following abuse and may have been under-represented in the original contributions to IICSA (Lev-Wiesel & First, 2018; Wyles et al., 2025).

Table 8 shows the spread of demographic data related to age in this study, compared to the TP.

Table 8

Demographic Data: Age

Age when taking part (years)	Truth Project	Survey Data	Interview Data
18-19	1%	0	0
20-29	9%	7% (n=1)	0
30-39	15%	13% (n=2)	10% (n=1)
40-49	24%	47% (n=7)	50% (n=5)
50-59	30%	27% (n=4)	30% (n=3)
60-69	15%	7% (n=1)	10% (n=1)
70-79	5%	0	0
80+	<1%	0	0

The age distribution was broadly comparable, although the 40–49 age group was over-represented and younger participants (20–29) were absent from the interview sample.

Table 9 presents the demographic data related to ethnicity in this study compared to the TP.

Table 9

Demographic Data: Ethnicity

Ethnic Background	Truth Project	Survey Data	Interview Data
White	90%	100% (n=15)*	100% (n=10)
Ethnic minority	10%	0%	0%

Note. This broke down into for the survey: White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British 87% (n=13); White: Irish 7% (n=1); and White: Other White 7% (n=1). For the interviews: : White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British 90% (n=9) and White: Other White 10% (n=1).

Ethnic diversity was a significant limitation, with all participants identifying as White. This reflects wider barriers to disclosure and participation among minority ethnic communities highlighted in IICSA research (Hurcombe et al., 2022; IICSA, 2020), and limits the extent to which findings can capture the full range of survivor experiences.

Table 10 presents the distribution of participants by year of contribution to IICSA.

Table 10

When Participants Contributed to IICSA

Year	No of Participants	Interview Participants
2015	3	2
2016	3	3
2017	4	4
2018	3	3
2019	7	4
2020	3	2
2021	6	4

Participants contributed to IICSA across different time points, with a reasonable spread of involvement across the inquiry's duration. Survey responses were more concentrated in later years (e.g. 2017 and 2021), while earlier contributions (e.g. 2015 and 2020) were less represented in the interview sample. Some participants were involved over multiple years, particularly those engaged in advisory roles.

This variation is important, as experiences of the inquiry may have differed over time, particularly given the evolving implementation of trauma-informed practices. As such, participants' accounts reflect engagement at different stages of the inquiry, which may have shaped their experiences and evaluations.

Table 11 shows the distribution of how participants in this study participated in IICSA.

Table 11

Part of IICSA which Participants Contributed to

IICSA Section	No of Survey Participants	No of Interview Participants
Public hearings	2	1
Truth Project (TP)	13	10
The Victim & Survivor Consultative Panel (VSCP)	2	1
The Victim & Survivors' Forum	5	3

Participants had also contributed to different elements of IICSA, most commonly the TP, which was also the largest participation strand. Some participants had engaged across multiple components and over extended periods, particularly those involved in advisory roles. While precise comparative data across all strands are limited, this variation in engagement may have shaped participants' experiences and interpretations of the inquiry.

Overall, the sample provides insight into survivor experiences of IICSA, though with limitations in representation, particularly regarding ethnicity and gender. Given the study's qualitative emphasis following recruitment challenges, the focus is on depth and interpretive insight rather than generalisability (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This reflects the study's pragmatic orientation, prioritising the generation of meaningful and useful understanding despite practical constraints.

The following section outlines the ethical considerations guiding the study.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Essex Ethics Committee (ETH2324-1492). The study adhered to the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS et al., 2018) and the Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014).

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, a TIA was adopted throughout. Survey participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and debrief information signposting relevant support services (see Appendix F). During interviews, care was taken to minimise distress and promote participant safety and autonomy. Participants were able to pause, skip questions or withdraw at any time, and interviews were conducted using empathetic, non-judgemental communication. Participants were encouraged to feel in control and empowered through being transparent and giving choice wherever possible. A debrief period followed each interview to assess impact and provide further support if required.

Although there was a risk of distress when discussing experiences, interviews were designed to focus on participants' engagement with IICSA rather than their experiences of abuse. The researcher, a trainee clinical psychologist, was trained in assessing and responding to psychological distress and clinical risk. In the event of safeguarding concerns, procedures aligned with University of Essex safeguarding policies would have been followed. Specifically the procedures as outlined in the University of Essex Safeguarding Children and Adults at Risk Policy. The researcher would have contacted the university's designated safeguarding officer to discuss what appropriate actions needed to be taken and whether the information would need to be disclosed to external services such as the police or social care. The primary researcher's supervisor was also aware of interviews taking place and was directly contactable for advice and support if this was required. No disclosures of current risk occurred during the study.

Informed consent was obtained for all stages of participation. Interview participants received a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form (see Appendices F & G) in advance in case the participant exited abruptly (Heyes, 2023), and enabled participants to give informed consent based on detailed knowledge of the research process and aims. They were informed of their right to withdraw without consequence within one month of participation. Contact details for the researcher were provided to facilitate this.

Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information. Secure software, Microsoft Teams, was used to host and video record the interviews. Data were securely stored on password-

protected systems in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018) and GDPR (2016). Video recordings were deleted following transcription, and identifying information was stored separately from research data. Only the lead researcher transcribed the data and had access to the transcriptions. Data was stored on a password protected server and will be destroyed after ten years to allow for publication. Access to identifiable data was restricted to the lead researcher.

Participants received a modest financial token of appreciation, designed to acknowledge their contribution without exerting undue influence on participation (as discussed above).

The following section outlines how the findings of this study will be disseminated.

2.8 Dissemination

The findings of this study are planned to be disseminated through a range of academic, professional and public-facing channels to maximise impact. Potential journals include *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, *Journal of Human Rights*, and *Child Abuse & Neglect*, all of which have previously published work relating to child sexual abuse, public inquiries, and transitional justice. Opportunities for conference presentation will also be pursued to engage academic and practitioner audiences.

In addition to traditional academic outputs, dissemination will include accessible formats such as lay summaries, brief reports, and visual materials to support wider engagement (Ross-Hellauer et al., 2020). There will be particular emphasis on ensuring findings are accessible to survivor communities and relevant

stakeholders. Survivor support organisations, including The Survivors Trust, have expressed interest in sharing findings, and materials will be adapted accordingly to ensure clarity, sensitivity and relevance.

Wider public engagement will also be considered through blogs, podcasts, and media platforms (e.g. *The Rest Is Politics*), where appropriate, to contribute to ongoing societal and policy discussions relating to IICSA and public inquiries more broadly. Care will be taken to ensure that dissemination remains ethically sensitive and does not misrepresent or instrumentalise participants' experiences and would ideally be done in conjunction with survivor organisations.

Through this multi-layered approach, the study aims not only to contribute to academic knowledge but also to inform practice, policy and public understanding.

The following chapter presents the results of the study.

3. Results

This chapter presents a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of the interview data with descriptive survey findings and open-text survey responses to illuminate participants' meaning-making around their inquiry participation. The RTA explores how participants' assessment of engagement was constructed in terms of identity, recognition, obligation and state (in)action. The survey data often provides broad evaluative contexts and overall stances.

A table showing which participants contributed to each theme is in Appendix F. It should be noted that themes in RTA are not determined in a quantitative way, but by whether the identified pattern communicates something significant and meaningful for answering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022). Extracts were chosen to strongly and clearly evidence the theme and do not represent every instance in which participants discussed relevant material to the theme.

Six themes were constructed around how participants understood contributing to IICSA and how this has shaped their experiences since it closed. The first theme explores how initial experiences of validation and being heard at IICSA, became hollowed out over time. This left some participants feeling marginalised and experiencing renewed vulnerability after participating. The second theme examines how participants positioned themselves as agents of change through participation, either initiating or sustaining activist engagement. The third theme conceptualises a liminal positioning between a silenced-powerless self and an empowered-agentic self. This illustrates how activism coexists with marginalisation and renewed vulnerability.

The fourth theme generated understands survivor communities as places of relational validation, experienced as spaces of safety, or desired or contested space. The fifth theme produced concerned how participants experienced IICSA as morally and temporally unfinished until the recommendations are put in place. The sixth theme highlights cyclical activist engagement. Withdrawal is seen as a strategy of self-regulation, reflecting fluctuating emotional capacity, rather than a rejection of activism.

Participants' meaning-making about their IICSA participation was interpreted as structured around their perceptions of state action and state torpor. State (in)action was not treated as a theme, but an organising analytic frame through which participants' meaning-making about inquiry participation was structured. After the thematic analysis there is a thematic model which is a visual representation of the relationships developed through the analysis, before looking at participants' overall interpretative stance. Participation in IICSA seems to have enabled participants to reclaim their voice and situate their experiences within a broader chain of accountability. However, the perceived absence of governmental action undermined this recognition, producing a ongoing process of identity negotiation, deferred closure and cyclical activist engagement.

3.1 Theme 1: “we was hoping to… elevate our status from worthless to worth something… but… we're still worthless”: Symbolic Listening, the Hollowing Out of Validation

3.1.1 Interview Data

This theme depicts the emotional and political contradiction of being listened to within the inquiry while perceiving no timely or meaningful government action in response. Initially, contributing was validating but this recognition was subsequently experienced as hollowed out by a lack of concrete change. The gap between voice and action was experienced as deeply disillusioning and hurtful, evoking feelings associated with earlier abuse. The inquiry process, which was generally considered unfinished until the recommendations are in place (Theme 5), was therefore experienced as simultaneously affirming and damaging.

‘Symbolic listening’ refers to the state acknowledging testimony without translating it into meaningful policy action, i.e. in this context, enacting the recommendations. Consequently, recognition was experienced as procedurally genuine but substantively incomplete. While IICSA’s TIA validated participants in the moment, over time the perceived failure of government to act hollowed out that validation, rendering it symbolic rather than substantive. Across accounts this erosion was associated with betrayal by the state, re-silencing, moral injury and powerlessness.

Participants grappled with a tension between the positive experience of contributing and the subsequent lack of action, which left them feeling worthless.

“Georgina’s” account vividly captures this movement from hope and recognition to disappointment and renewed devaluation.

> “And this was the opportunity to actually tell the world what we really wanted to say. And we all did… We gave it everything and summat [sic]. We were so hopeful. And can you imagine when you get yours out, when you raise yourself to that elevation, you're buzzing and then think of how far we've fallen? And we're still falling because the government's still ignoring it. So we're just falling and falling. We're just endlessly falling. We're never going to be catched [sic]. Any things that could have caught us are being marginalised and reduced because it's too expensive, but not important enough, we’re not worthwhile. I mean, if I could kill myself, I would have killed myself ages ago doing this because it's made me want to kill myself every single minute of the day because it is just reaffirmed, it's negatively reinfirmed [sic] that idea that I am worthless, that I am the dregs of society, that I am disgusting and unpalatable to the common UK taxpayer, to the point where they wouldn't even deem to put a penny towards my way.”

This account illustrates how participation initially generated hope, recognition and an enhanced sense of self-worth (“you raise yourself to that elevation”). However, this sense of elevation it provided was temporary and these gains were undermined by apparent perceived state inaction. The repeated imagery of “falling” in the present tense constructs governmental inaction not as a single disappointment but as a continuing descent, compounded by the passing of time. The continuing absence of action is experienced as actively reinforcing earlier beliefs of worthlessness. Her description of feeling like “the dregs of society” suggests that institutional inaction

becomes a form of renewed social devaluation, echoing earlier experiences of being unheard and unprotected. Georgina describes a profound sense of degradation, positioning herself as “the dregs of society” and “disgusting and repugnant to the common UK taxpayer.” She expresses a sense of insignificance and futility following the perceived inaction: ‘it’s made me want to kill myself’. Her sense of worthlessness is experienced as a consequence of the perceived inaction of both government and society.

Engaging with the inquiry often provided a sense of self-assurance and contentment, which was undermined over time. “Janice” reflected:

> “yeah I felt, I felt proud of myself. And I felt hopeful, and I felt like one voice on its own isn’t enough, but if you add them all together and they listen to everybody, then you can’t ignore tens of thousands of people. Turns out you can, but nevermind.”

Later she explained:

> “All you see on the news is people dying, people committing suicide and people suffering, and the only message I can infer from that is that you don’t matter. And it took a very long time to risk feeling that I mattered enough to say something. And then you do, and they’re like, oh well! I can shout and scream all I like, I’m just told I’m hysterical, I’m told I’m being borderline…”

Janice’s account traces a movement from internal self-recognition (“I felt proud of myself”) and collective hope to an externally imposed social devaluation (“I don’t matter”). Being proud of oneself is a form of self-validation which reinforces a sense

of personal worth, something often destroyed by CSA. The contrast between feeling that she "mattered enough to say something" and subsequently being dismissed as "hysterical" or "borderline" suggests that the validation experienced during the inquiry was subsequently undermined. These labels also reinforce the societal stigma around CSA, something participants hoped IICSA would change (Hilton, 2025), suggesting that the validation experienced during the inquiry was progressively undermined. Janice later adds that the realisation that action had not happened was “soul destroying… [as if] you don’t give a shit… it [CSA] still doesn’t matter. The courage required to speak (“it took a very long time to risk feeling that I mattered enough to say something”) therefore intensified the impact of perceived inaction. The harm was not located in participation itself, but in the erosion of the validation it initially provided over time.”

This pattern of feeling heard during the inquiry and then feeling worthless again as governments did nothing is framed as echoing many CSA survivors’ experiences of being silenced and unheard as children. While contributing to IICSA brought personal, internal gains, these were often undermined by the perceived external valuation reflected in its reception.

“Colleen” expressed the tension between the experience of testifying and the sense she was left with. Contributing was powerful and transformative:

> "It was emotional but... really pleased that it was out there… I wasn't just another silenced survivor. I've spoken my truth... one of the most difficult things is believing yourself... because… that part has always doubted what my body

> told me… so it was very helpful to speak my truth and feel believed and listened to and heard. I think that was quite liberating."

Colleen's account illustrates how for someone who had "always doubted" what her body had told her, being able to "speak my truth and feel believed and listened to and heard" represented a fundamentally different experience of disclosure. Rather than being interrogated and disbelieved, as she later explains had happened when she first disclosed her abuse, the trauma-informed approach enabled recognition, validation and self-belief. It was "done in a way that was the opposite" of her earlier experiences.

However, when reflecting on the years following the inquiry, she describes a striking reversal:

> "I think it's shocking that this wealth of information is there… it's as though it's made no difference whatsoever. And it does kind of erm mirror the experience of, of people who've been abused… not being seen and not being heard. And that's a tragedy really."

Colleen draws parallels between their experience of perceived government inaction and the childhood abuse they suffered. Having been encouraged to "speak my truth" and feel "believed and listened to", the subsequent absence of meaningful action was experienced as "mirror[ing]" the original abuse through "not being seen and not being heard". Asking survivors to trust both themselves and an institution, without subsequent response, was experienced as un-containing and a failure of recognition.

Colleen later notes:

> “I guess I feel it's about shinning a light in the dark corners. And that's what is in this report. But the lights been turned off again. So I think this inquiry did really well - shine a light in the dark… and highlighted where it all goes wrong, and then made recommendations as to how that could be put right. And the fact that it hasn't happened means justice isn’t being done.”

Collen’s metaphor of “shining a light in the dark corners” positions the inquiry as revelatory and morally purposeful (both illuminating both participant’s personal experiences and the wider issue of CSA within society). However, the subsequent image that “the light’s been turned off again” reframes recognition as temporary illumination rather than lasting transformation. The use of “again” situates the governments’ torpor within a longer history of silencing. In this metaphor, the state holds the power to switch the light on and off, and the participants are merely subject to it. Institutional listening is a powerful tool, and delays in action are not neutral but perceived as re-enacting earlier invisibility both personally and societally.

“Moira” also described the restorative impact of contributing:

> “At the time it felt cathartic… for the first time somebody really wanted to know. After the way that I was treated at school... So this was… an opportunity to be heard, to be seen, to be acknowledged, to have maybe some accountability for institutions… [the] first opportunity for someone, for it all to be taken seriously, rather than… dismissed and minimised.”

For Moira, participation was positioned as a corrective experience. After earlier experiences of being “dismissed and minimised,” contributing to IICSA offered an “opportunity” for recognition, acknowledgment and institutional accountability. It provided validation that had previously been absent.

However, with time, this meaning changed as governments failed to implement the recommendations:

> “it’s disrespectful and dishonourable to survivors and their experiences, in my opinion… survivors don't matter… part of that taboo of society that, oh we’ll forget about sexual abuse, it doesn't really happen. We'll pretend it doesn't happen. We'll sweep it under the carpet and we'll just do the report to tick the box but not do anything after that… for all of the people like myself, who took the time and that effort to submit their evidence for the inquiry, it's meaningless if they don't, then follow up on it.”

Moira’s account suggests simply listening is insufficient; hearing needs to be demonstrated through action. Over time, the governmental response appeared to render IICSA's purpose of recognising what had happened increasingly hollow, reinforcing stereotypes and stigma.

The lack of implementation transformed what had initially been “cathartic” into something “meaningless,” and “disrespectful and dishonourable” to survivors. Government inaction was experienced as reinforcing the wider societal taboo surrounding CSA and communicating that survivors “don’t matter.” Consequently, the inquiry's initial recognition became hollowed out, reaffirming participants' sense of marginalisation and diminished social value.

> “Claire” also noted the personal transformation associated with participation: “Disclosure was the toughest thing I've ever done, but… I was believed, that's the biggest thing. It gave me my strength to be able to tell my story to anybody. I'm not ashamed of myself anymore, I lost all my shame because of my truth was out there and I was believed… it takes a lot of courage to come out and say the truth, if it's been a hidden thing.”

Claire describes being believed as transformative. Disclosing at the inquiry and being believed gave her the strength to tell her story openly and changed her relationship with herself. She “lost all my shame” because her “truth was out there” and she “was believed,” suggesting that the inquiry challenged the self-blame often associated with CSA, which allowed her to reposition herself as someone whose experiences were worthy of belief. Being believed was empowering and giving her voice and changing her relationship to her experiences.

Testifying was such a courageous act, “it takes a lot of courage to come out and say the truth, if it's been a hidden thing,” that one’s self-regard shifts, and, in turn, relationships with others. This speaks to a symbiotic relationship in which participants must find the courage to disclose in expectation that the inquiry will recognise and validate their account, an expectation that, across participant accounts, extended to meaningful action.

However, Claire also described how over time she came to see participation as involving a transfer of agency:

> "…although I can make the recommendations based on my own experience, I hold no power. I've given that to IICSA effectively… and they don't hold the power because… the government are the people that hold the power… that's a big thing because you lost power in the first place. So you're always trying to get your power back."

Claire's account suggests contributing requires the strength to tell one's story and relinquish control of it in expectation that the state will act. There is a transfer of agency and responsibility to the state. When change did not materialise, this lack of power was experienced personally, with participants perceiving themselves as powerless. This echoes earlier occasions of lost control, although Claire here does not frame it as regression but as awareness of a structural hierarchy, "the government are the people that hold the power." Recognition here is conceived of as politically constrained.

Powerless here is depicted as mirroring the powerlessness CSA survivors experienced as children, alongside a profound desire to regain power. While IICSA offered that hope of empowerment, perceived state inaction renewed the sense of childhood powerlessness. As time passes without apparent state action, the experience loops back to earlier harm. The transfer of power to IICSA can therefore be understood an act of faith predicated on the hope for change.

This theme then reflects a distinction participants drew between being listened to and being acted for. Whilst participants described positive, enriching interactions with inquiry staff leaving them feeling heard and valued, the perceived failure to

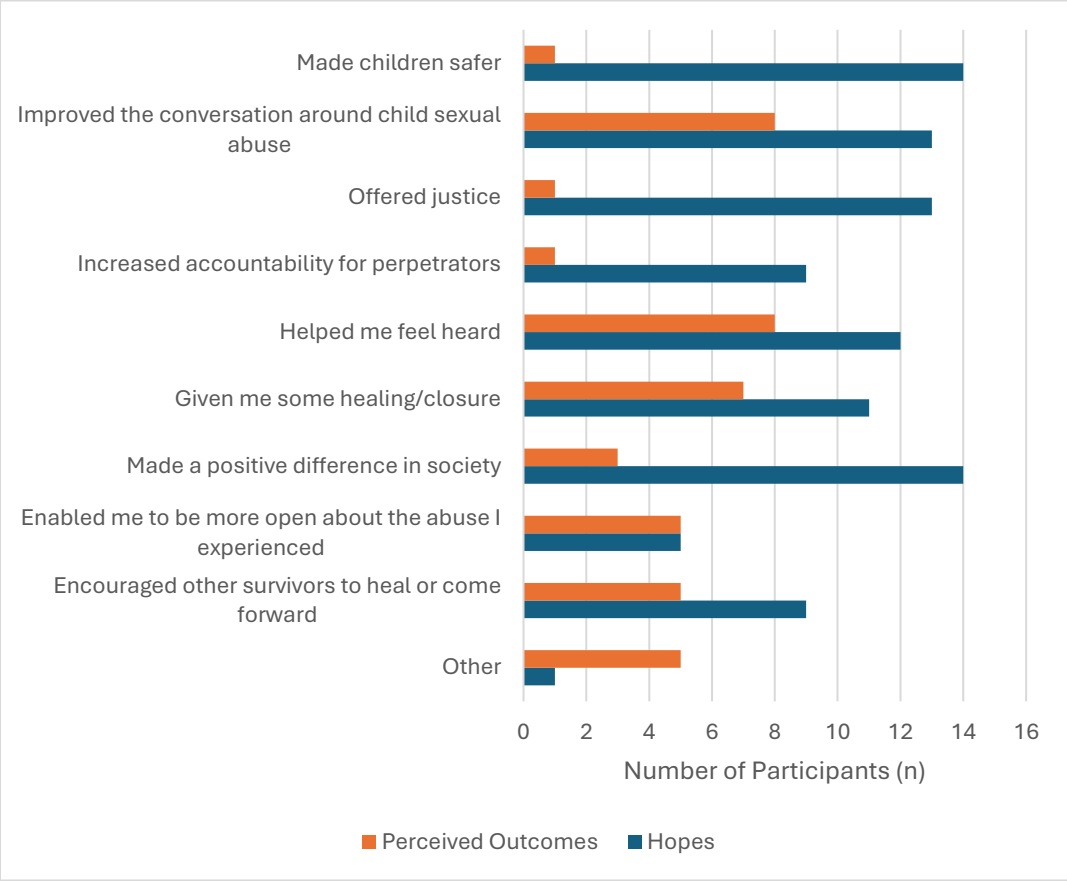
implement recommendations led to questions about whether their testimony was ultimately respected. Validation, which the inquiry provided, was experienced as increasingly hollowed out over time, becoming symbolic rather than concrete.

3.1.2 Survey Data

Descriptive survey findings contextualise this disconnection between recognition at the inquiry and the impact of the state inaction. Survey items 3 and 4 have been combined into the chart below (Figure 3). Item 3 inquired as to the participant's hopes for IICSA; whilst item 4 asked what they thought it had achieved.

Figure 3

Comparison of Participant Hopes and Perceived Inquiry Outcomes



Note. Participants selected from a list of outcomes in response to the items: 'When I contributed to the inquiry I hoped it would…' (item 3 on the survey) and 'I think the inquiry has…' (item 4 on the survey). Options were derived from the literature (see Section 2.4 'Measures' and Appendix D), with an additional free-text option.

Participant hopes spanned all the domains, including hopes related to making children safer, improving the conversation around CSA, justice and making a positive difference in society. Fewer participants reported hoping participation would help them

be more open about their own abuse. Across the domains, no hope was widely perceived as having been fully achieved. The ‘other’ category selected by some participants was not elaborated on in the free-text responses.

This pattern visually provides context for the recognition-repair gap we interpreted in the interviews. There was a divergence between participants’ hopes for structural change and their assessment of what has been achieved, which mirrors interview accounts of symbolic listening and hollowed out validation. Although participants felt heard and to some degree more able to speak about their experiences, far fewer participants felt the inquiry had delivered justice, accountability or meaningful societal change. This pattern contextualises qualitative accounts of feeling as if being heard was symbolic and hollowed of validation as time passed. Being heard was emotionally meaningful, but inadequate without material change.

Survey qualitative quotes also support this theme,

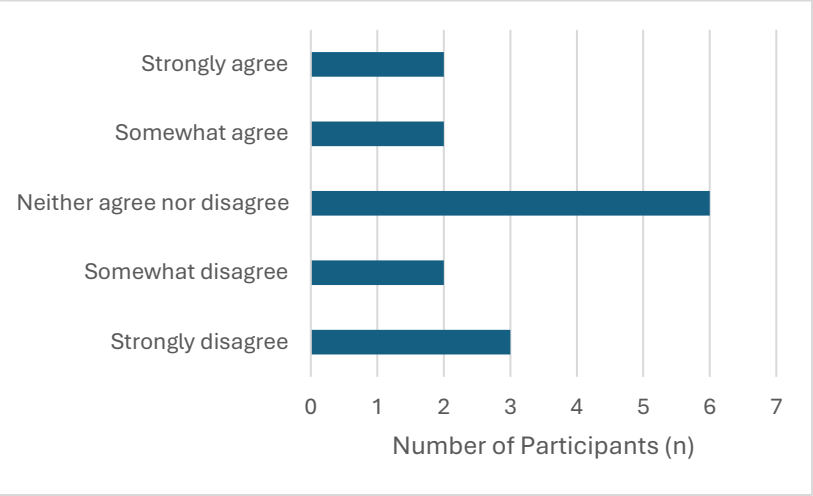
> “I thought that they would do something with my story, and the collective stories of hundreds (thousands?) of survivors. It seems that they have "listened" and then chosen to do nothing, which is incredibly re-traumatising and simply compounds the damage / distress.”

Participants found being heard emotionally validating, but this validation was eroded by subsequent state inaction, producing feelings of betrayal, re-traumatisation and moral injury.

Survey participants were also asked whether they believed their contribution to the inquiry had been honoured (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Perceptions of Whether Participant Contributions Were Honoured



Note. Participants responded to the statement, 'I believe my contribution to IICSA/the Truth Project has been honoured.' Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

This chart shows a cluster around a neutral position on whether participants' contribution to the inquiry had been honoured. There is some disagreement, including strong disagreement, and some agreement. There is not a strong endorsement of participant testimony being honoured.

This is supported by the open text responses on the item, including,

"There's no honor [sic] to this now unless the uk [sic] governments stop ignoring iicsa [sic]"

> “The Government has not honoured my contribution to the Truth Project because it has not implemented the recommended changes.”
>
> “The team at IICSA were brilliant but until the government itself implement the recommendations my participation will not have been honoured.”
>
> “I thought that they would do something with my story, and the collective stories of hundreds (thousands?) or survivors. It seems that they have "listened" and then chosen to do nothing, which is incredibly re-traumatising and simply compounds the damage / distress.”
>
> “[Honoured] By iicsa [sic] but not by the state or policymakers”
>
> “honoured... well nothing has been done with the information in terms of governmental action ...so that's not being honoured, but I was promised nothing more than to be listened to have, have my testimony saved so that was honoured.”

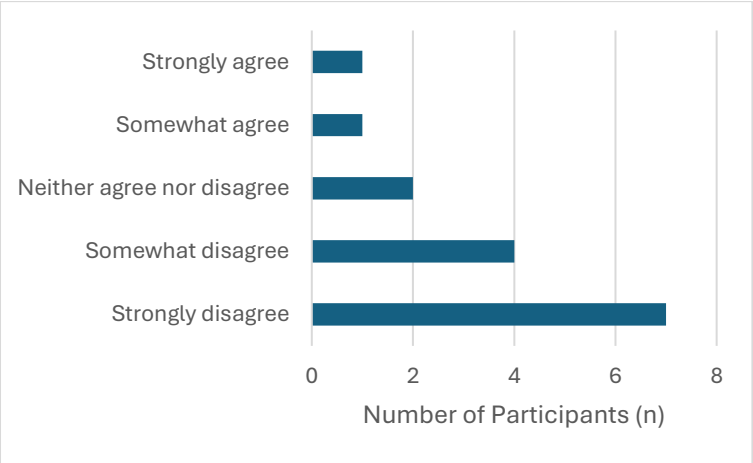
These responses speak to the importance for participants of recognition being translated into respect and action. ‘Honoured’ has a moral aspect to it and reflects the sense of an agreement being entered into. Participants are understood to consider the receipt of testimony as an obligation to recognise and respect it, and that is not a passive state but one which requires action. There is an implied moral contract where survivors disclose, the state via the inquiry listens and then acts. Such a contract was not formally promised, indeed inquiries have no power to enforce their recommendations, however, this speaks to the unspoken assumptions which surround inquiries and participants’ expectations. It reflects participant understanding

and meaning-making, rather than a legal obligation. As “Dorothy” noted, “we all thought that once the inquiry had finished, the government would just implement the recommendations. We didn't know that they wouldn't. We didn't know that they couldn't be forced to.” So although participants were not promised this, they still held it as an expectation. And when this last element fails, participants experience a sense of betrayal. The ambivalence with regard to honouring their contributions suggests recognition at the level of listening did not translate into lasting or meaningful validation.

This ambivalence is more evident when participants were asked about whether the government had valued the evidence and recommendations which emerged from the inquiry (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Perceived Government Valuation of IICSA Evidence and Recommendations



Note. Participants responded to the statement: “I feel that governments have valued the evidence and recommendations from IICSA.” Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

Responses were weighted towards strongly disagreeing. This indicates that even when contributions may have been acknowledged symbolically, participants did not perceived them to have taken seriously in political or policy terms. Many participants expressed scepticism or outright rejection of any meaningful action by the state in the open-text sections:

> “They clearly don't care”

> “If Governments had valued the evidence & recommendations made in the report, then they would have implemented all the recommendations “

> “they have done nothing, they continue with a discourse that the evidence disproved, and do nothing to educate society about familial and sibling abuse”

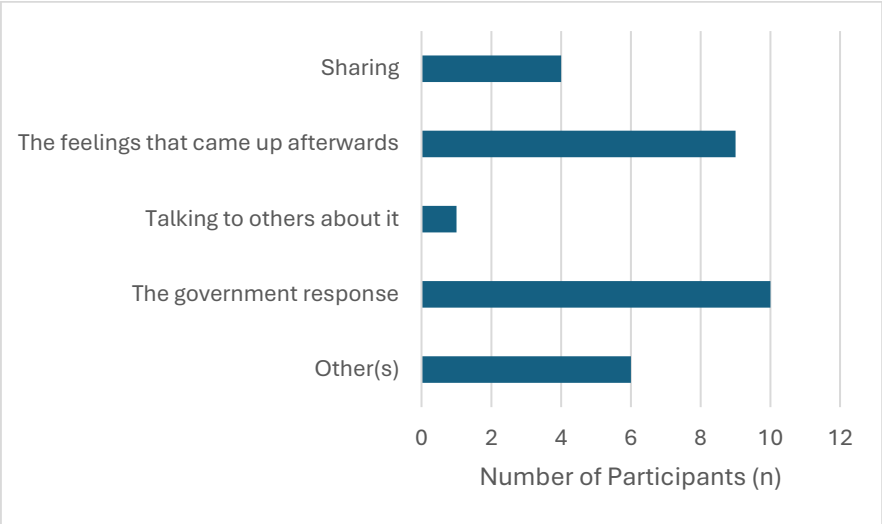
One participant wrote “Like, were they [the recommendations] received at all??? Feels like they were just thrown to the wind.” Another described the governments’ responses as “just lies”. These reflect the experiential distinction between being listened to at IICSA itself and being taken seriously at a structural level developed from the interview data. For these participants, state inaction was not simply a delay, but a failure of government valuation, which makes sense of why participants would feel that the validation they received had been hollowed out.

It should be noted, one participant states “I know they [the current government] are working towards implementing the recommendations,” whilst acknowledging the previous governmental response was “damaging.” So not all participants may have experienced the same degree of hollowing. The extent to which participants believe in the current government’s claims that they will act will impact their current experience, and this speaks to how live and current their relationship to the state and their actions are. It is possible the government could act and reinstate the sense of validation that was originally given through IICSA, going some way to undoing the damage and hollowing.

This is further contextualised by the survey responses concerning the hardest part of contributing to IICSA, which illustrate how key the institutional response is to participant experience (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Perceived Challenges of Contributing to IICSA



Note. Participants were asked: "The hardest parts of contributing to IICSA/the Truth Project were…" and selected from a list of options derived from the literature (see Section 2.4 and Appendix D), with an additional free-text option.

Whilst sharing and the feelings that came up afterwards were identified as difficult, the most endorsed option was the government response. This was complemented by some of the open text responses, such as,

> "Further negative reinforcement from uk [sic] governments"
>
> "The lack of government response, their negative and damaging response and the lack of their accountability."
>
> "Feeling as though even after being able to tell my story after so many years, it still didn't matter."
>
> "Being ignored by the uk [sic] governments"

This provides more background for the distressing impact the perceived absence of meaningful state action had, and how the validation that IICSA initially provided was considered eroded by this.

3.1.3 Theme 1: Summary

This theme of listening being symbolic and the hollowing out of validation actually speaks to participants' sense that contributing to IICSA was valuable personally and morally. It provided catharsis and hope, and, significantly, a sense of being heard and validated. With time though, that sense was eroded by the state's perceived inaction, leaving feelings of distress, marginalisation, re-traumatisation and worthlessness. Across accounts, recognition and validation, at the point of testimony, was experienced as meaningful and, at times, transformative. But they were described as contingent rather than stable. Without tangible change, participants reinterpreted this recognition as symbolic rather than consequential. This reinterpretation led to feelings variously described as betrayal, re-silencing, moral injury, reasserting perceptions of powerlessness and re-traumatisation.

Whilst Theme 1 examines a pattern of hollowed out validation, participants did not perceive themselves as solely recipients of institutional failure. Alongside disappointment many articulated a reconfigured self-understanding. Theme 2 then shifts focus from institutional recognition to self-positioning. Participation enabled some to reposition themselves as agents of change, even in the context of state torpor.

3.2 Theme 2: “it unsilenced me”: Repositioning the Self as an Agent of Change.

3.2.1 Interview Data

The second theme illustrates how participants constructed participation as morally meaningful at the level of self-identity. Contributing enabled participants to reposition themselves from simply private survivors to public agents of change. Repositioning is a shift in self-understanding. For some, this meant transitioning from being silenced and isolated recipients of harm, to political actors capable of influencing change with voice, part of a collective (Theme 4). IICSA functioned as an activation point, initiating or continuing activist engagement. Activism and speaking up became part of participants’ self-identity, a way of reclaiming moral agency and expression of values. Activism could function then as identity repair and expansion, challenging earlier experiences of helplessness.

There is a pattern of meaning-making through which activism can collapse temporality, allowing the adult-self to fight for the child-self. And the present individual is empowered to battle for their past and future selves, which enriches the experience of being an agent of change. In contrast, for those already engaged in activism prior to IICSA, this role was established and less contingent on the inquiry.

For those whose activism was initiated through IICSA, the initial validation it provided acted as a catalyst, which was later fuelled by perceived state inaction. However, activism was not wholly reliant on state response. Rather participation provided a reflexive shift in self-understanding. Although identity transformation was shaped by the inquiry process, it ultimately extended beyond it. Unlike Theme 1,

where validation remained tied to the state response; here participants described a sense of self that, once activated, no longer depended on state validation, despite continuing to interact with it.

Janice noted one impact of contributing was:

> "It lit a bit of a fire under me and it kind of helped me realise that I am really passionate about making a difference and about doing something... that's probably a part of what I need to do... if you've got all that energy try not to be bitter about it. Try to channel it somewhere... do something good with them."

Janice describes testifying as catalytic. Rather than activism being externally imposed, her account reflects an internal realisation about her values and identity. Her emphasis on "channel[ling]" energy into "something good" suggests a deliberate transformation of emotional energy into moral action. Rather than being overwhelmed by her feelings, she repositions herself as someone capable of directing them. The shift is behavioural and ontological, reflecting a changed understanding of herself. Participation revealed that activism was “part of what I need to do,” suggesting it has become incorporated into her sense of identity.

For Moira, this transformation emerged more slowly.

> “giving the evidence to IICSA opened up the door that wasn't there before. The door was, wasn't even there, the door was hidden. And so IICSA kind of revealed the door. And then I found the key when I wrote the evidence. And then, after I spoke to the police… the door was visible then. So the door wasn't even there, and IICSA opened that door, and it unlocked the door. So if I hadn't

> have had IICSA I'd, I, like I said, I don't think I'd ever have got to the point now where I've even been looking at it. And… I started a claim against the school. I don't think I'd have done any of that without having done IICSA the first place. It would still have been silent still in me. So it unsilenced me, whether it unsilenced society I don't know but it unsilenced me so it had, it opened that door... And I think it needed to be opened because it's impacted life without me knowing it."

Moira uses an extended metaphor of a "door," constructing participation as a process of revelation and access. There was no "door" before IICSA, no means of moving forward, but IICSA "revealed" and "unlocked" it. But it was Moira's action in writing her evidence that became the "key." Using that key and walking through that door, through testifying, "unsilenced" her and enabled her to take action. There is a gradual transfer from institutional recognition to personal agency. Participation created possibilities that extended beyond the inquiry to subsequent activism, legal action and disclosure, allowing previously hidden parts of herself to emerge. The disconnect between the personal act of testifying and the societal change is explicit when she says, "it unsilenced me, whether it unsilenced society I don't know." The primary transformation is in the self, reflecting one of the central tensions that emerge in the themes: participation generated profound personal transformation even where broader institutional or society change remained uncertain.

Similarly, "Rachel" described how testifying led to greater openness and advocacy. From sharing at the TP, Rachel found a voice in public advocacy, "So that's the positive things that I've taken from it that I did actually start talking a lot more. I

talked openly with my place of work… And I went on to share with other things.” Her account reflects a growing openness and willingness to occupy a public space that was initiated by testifying. The repeated use of “I” positions Rachel as an active agent, not simply a recipient of change.

Rachel continues, “it was huge for me… massively empowering and it felt… amazing to be able to do that and know that there were places that wanted to hear about it… I would never have had any of that if it hadn't been for the for the Truth Project.” This empowerment was both personally significant and relational: her voice was wanted and heard. Inquiry participation appears to have encouraged and recalibrated Rachel’s sense of herself as someone whose story has value. Activism functions then as an ongoing expression of this identity, rather than something dependent on state action.

“Rosemary” also spoke about the profound impact participation had on her:

> “it was definitely a turning point in my life to finding friends who the same thing have happened to… We'll sit down and talk about what happened all evening… I've just met so many wonderful people. I'm involved with so many projects, it really has been a changing point in my life.”

Rosemary's account positions participation as a biographical turning point. Rather than simply enabling disclosure, it transformed her social world. Finding "friends who the same thing have happened to" enabled forms of openness and connection that had previously been unavailable, while involvement in survivor groups and wider projects expanded these opportunities. Rosemary adds, "I've just got

involved with everything, to be honest. I just really enjoy the activism parts of it... I've done so many campaigns... I just really enjoy it. I enjoy the campaigning." Activism is not simply framed as an obligation that arises from injustice but as something intrinsically rewarding. It is not burdensome but energising and meaningful. Participation appears to have recalibrated Rosemary's sense of self and created new relational and civic opportunities.

For some, activism was key to their lives and how they saw themselves. Dorothy noted, "IICSA's become my life now XXXX, 'cause I won't let it go." This language suggests activism has become internalised as a core part of her identity. For Dorothy, the part of her that continues fighting was planted in her childhood abuse and funnelled through IICSA, "it doesn't feel like there's a choice [to fight] because I wasn't listened to when I was a kid. And now I've got my voice there's a duty, to keep banging on the door. And, there isn't a choice for me." Thus, Dorothy's inability to fight as a child is, to some extent, resolved through fighting as an adult. This, along with the repetition of having no choice, reinforces the framing of activism as key to her identity. Temporality fades away as the adult self acts on behalf of the child self. Activism appears to function as a reclamation of power previously denied in childhood. For Dorothy, speaking and campaigning become mechanisms through which participants renegotiate earlier experiences of voicelessness. Activism becomes a means of aligning past and present selves.

Dorothy's activism pre-dated IICSA and she held a different relationship to participation than those for whom activism emerged through it. The inquiry did not initiate change, but reinforced an already established identity. It seems Dorothy's

activist self is embedded due to the state's (in)action, her self-identity and sense of moral duty, "it's part of me, it's part of my DNA." While she describes a lack of choice, this coexists with a strong sense of agency. The reclamation of voice, "now I've got my voice there's a duty," remains central. Although this predates IICSA, it mirrors the broader pattern whereby voice-finding enables empowerment and sustained engagement. Embracing this sense of self may function as a form of regulation and self-care, important for maintaining wellness.

The public inquiry process, whereby recommendations are made without any obligation on governments to implement them, leaves survivors, several years later, continuing to advocate for their enactment (see Theme 5). Compared to the gigantic monolith of political and societal structures which they are hoping to impact, participants are often already drained by the harm they have sustained and the process of an inquiry. Yet it falls to them to sustain the campaigning and keep the issue in the media and political view. Dorothy notes, "I'm literally everyday bringing it right back to the IICSA." Their shifted or renewed sense of identity means activism does not feel optional. Janice noted, it "is an important part of staying well," suggesting activism can function as self-regulation. Across participants, there is a pattern of meaning-making where their sense of themselves as agents of change cannot be easily undone. Their repositioned identity as an activist appears to repair their sense of self damaged by abuse and is a way of reclaiming their moral agency that is not experienced as optional.

"Francine" also described activism as closely bound with their sense of self. She explained in the face of government inaction, "It means that I actually, now in this

very, very vulnerable state of having to be really careful with my health, making sure that I sleep enough, I've really got to fight, to stand up and speak up." Activism here is less a choice and more a matter of self-preservation and existential necessity, becoming “an important part of me staying well” (see the next quotation). The metaphor of “fighting” conveys urgency, strength and resistance, whilst her reflection that participation gave her “a purpose” frames activism as life-structuring. It is also a moral obligation, as Francine explains:

> “you don't leave anyone behind. You don't leave. If, if people are still there and still going through stuff, you don't just like dust yourself off and sod off… I'm realising it's an important part of me staying well is continuing to, to do things and make change.”

Both quotations convey a profound sense of moral responsibility.

Yet this empowerment is precarious. For Francine, it coexists with significant health concerns: “But I've got to also hope that my health is strong enough as well because it's a huge, it's a huge step. But if I don't give my voice how on Earth is this ever going to change?” (see Theme 6). The need to “stand up and speak” reflects a sense of profound responsibility: “if I don't give my voice how on Earth is this ever going to change?” Thus, she has repositioned herself as an agent of change with a considerable moral obligation which coexists with physical and emotional challenges. Agency here is constructed as vital, hard-won and effortful.

Francine’s sense of moral obligation was echoed by Dorothy, who explained:

> "You do get really tired and you do want to walk away, but if you walk away then it, literally the whole of the IICSA, gets swept under the carpet and wiped from people's memories. And I won't let that happen because my voice is in that book, so is my sisters, so are my friends, and so are 7000 survivors."

Dorothy also describes activism as a continuing moral responsibility, locating that responsibility in preserving the voices of those who contributed to the inquiry. Although she acknowledges becoming "really tired" and wanting to "walk away," doing so would mean allowing the inquiry and those whose voices it contains to be forgotten. The report is experienced as carrying the voices of survivors, creating an ongoing obligation to protect both their testimony and its public significance.

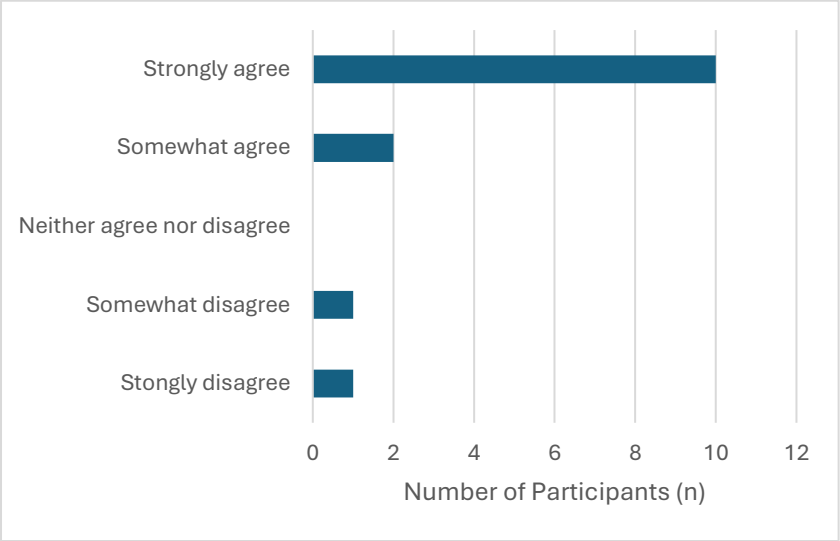
In doing so, temporal boundaries collapse as participants advocate simultaneously for their adult selves and their childhood selves, while individual and collective identities also merge. Dorothy's "my voice... my sisters... my friends... 7000 survivors" moves from the personal to the collective, positioning activism as representing not only herself but the wider survivor community. Present activism is experienced as repairing past silence and damage while seeking to prevent future harm, such that individual and collective needs for recognition and change become increasingly intertwined.

3.2.2 Survey Data

Survey participants reported largely being glad to have participated in IICSA, but this did not equate to an endorsement of institutional effectiveness (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Extent to Which Participants Are Glad They Participated in IICSA



Note. Participants responded to the statement: “Looking back, I’m glad I participated in the Inquiry.” Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

In this chart which asks if participants were glad they participated in the inquiry (Figure 7) most participants reported being glad, with the majority ‘strongly agreeing’. Only a minority disagreed with this. However, this positive evaluation did not equate with satisfaction of the outcomes though. The optional qualitative data collected for this item suggest these results reflect how contributing to IICSA provided personal development and aligned with personal values, whilst concurrently fuelling frustration at the governments inaction (also see Figures 3 and 6). Comments such as, “I felt stronger for speaking out” and “the most important thing I’ve taken away from IICSA is validation” place benefit not in terms of institutional change but in self-transformation.

Gladness then seems less an endorsement of outcomes and more an affirmation of having acted in alignment with personal values. Participation becomes morally meaningful even where structural change is uncertain.

Further, although the majority were pleased to have engaged with IICSA this positive evaluation did not necessarily equate with satisfaction with the inquiry outcomes. Comments included, “Uk governments still ignoring our work,” “I feel used by the UK governments where they used IICSA and now ignores all the work we did over many years…” and “the fact that it feels as though nothing has been done is... appalling, disheartening, devastating...” Thus, although participants described participation as meaningful at a personal level, they simultaneously experiencing a profound frustration and distress at the lack of material change, which links to the symbolic listening theme above (Theme 1). Agreeing that they were ‘glad to have participated’ may be understood as a form a self-affirmation and/or moral positioning which speaks to a self-identity as an agent of change, rather than an endorsement of the inquiry’s institutional effectiveness. This gladness co-existed then with the experiences of hollowed validation, illustrating how participation could be simultaneously affirming and destabilising. Such gladness then is a form of self-recognition in the face of state torpor.

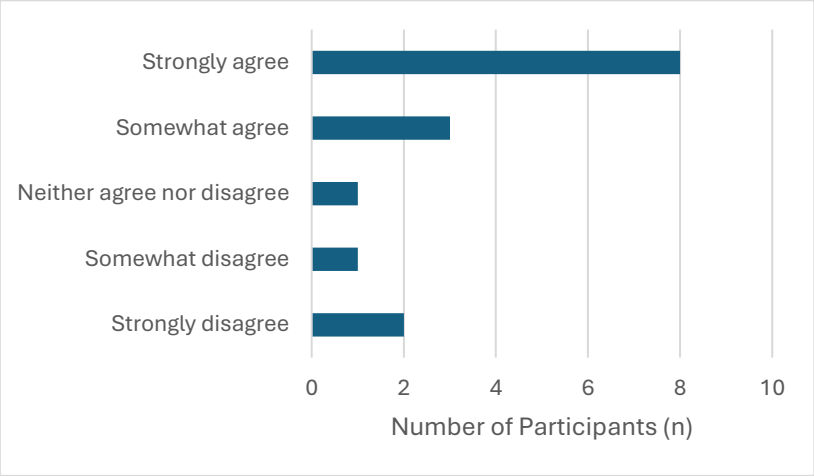
The survey also provided more context around participants’ sense of themselves as agents of change with comments such as, “participation provided me with a means to influence political decisions” and “it was just all part of [sic] day’s work as a survivor working for change.” This supports our understanding of survivors (re)newed sense of

themselves as agents of change. Survivors became participants, and through contributing became actors in the world, not simply those acted upon.

This theme is further contextualised by the following survey item (Figure 8):

Figure 8

Participant Agreement That Sharing Experiences at IICSA Was Beneficial



Note. Participants responded to the statement: “In retrospect, it was beneficial to have shared my experiences at IICSA/the Truth Project.” Responses were measured on a 5point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

The majority agreed that participation was beneficial, a minority disagreed indicating some ambivalence among the respondents as a group. This mirrors the ‘gladness’ of the previous survey item and reflects an overall positive retrospective positioning. However, ‘beneficial’ links not only to emotion but to value. This suggests

participants gained personal or moral value from participation even when expectations were unmet. This provides further context to the theme of repositioning the self as an agent of change.

Most respondents assessed their participation as beneficial, suggesting that meaning was derived from the act of testifying itself, irrespective of the outcomes. That value seems to have been of a personal or moral value. A minority disagreed or were ambivalent which suggests this sense of benefit was neither universal nor uncomplicated and the degree to which benefit could be appreciated in the face of state inaction seems to be vary. This retrospective framing coexisted with accounts of unmet expectations, the hollowing of validation, and distress (Themes 1 and 3), highlighting the layered and undulating nature of participants' meaning-making. Repositioning the self as an agent of change was viewed as a positive empowered act, although at times this was harder to access (Theme 3).

3.2.3 Theme 2: Summary

This theme captures a pattern in which participation functioned as a catalyst for self-repositioning. Across accounts, contributing to IICSA was described as activating, revealing or strengthening a sense of moral agency. Participants moved from being positioned as recipients of harm to agents capable to making change. This repositioning did not rely on government action, but reflected an internal shift in self-understanding. Activism was framed variously as passion, purpose, enjoyment, duty or existential necessity. In each case, advocacy was incorporated into identity. Even as institutional inaction was experienced as disheartening, participants frequently maintained a sense of personal benefit and alignment with their values. Reclaiming

their voice was empowerment, a way of reworking earlier silencing and asserting agency in the present, often collapsing divisions between self and others, and time. This was done despite a sense of being let-down and failed by the state.

Although Theme 2 highlights how participants could construct themselves as agents of change, empowerment was not stable or uncontested. For many this sense was accompanied at points by renewed vulnerability. Theme 3 explores the tension between empowerment and vulnerability, conceptualising participant experience as reflecting a liminal position between a silenced-powerless self and an empowered-agentic self.

3.3 Theme 3: "It is a bit of a tightrope": A liminal identity between a silenced-powerless self and an empowered-agentic self

3.3.1 Interview data

This theme captures how participants may be understood to occupy a liminal identity position between a previously silenced powerless-self and a partially empowered agentic-self. Liminality here refers to an unstable and ambivalent identity, shifting across contexts in response to recognition and institutional response. These positions are structured by differing power relations: the silenced and the empowered. Unlike a transitional stage moving towards resolution, this liminality is sustained by ongoing state inaction, preventing the integration of these selves.

While silence can function as resistance and/or agency, the silence described by participants here was not chosen. Participants had broken silence through

contributing to the inquiry yet describe renewed silencing through the perceived failure of institutions to respond. The silence is therefore experienced not as agency but as imposed through institutional inaction.

For many, IICSA was initially validating, with their silenced-powerless self finally feeling heard and enabling a sense of empowerment and agency in adulthood. However, perceived governmental failure to enact IICSA's recommendations led to a renewed sense of silencing, echoing earlier experiences of not being believed, heard or protected. There was a loss of power and recognition, reinforcing feelings of worthlessness and moral betrayal that the state had not upheld what participants considered an implicit obligation to honour their participation. There is a pattern where state inaction, when in focus, shifts participants from empowered-agentic selves, which externalises responsibility to institutions and the state, to silenced-powerless selves, echoing earlier experiences in which blame is internalised, often becoming shame. Importantly, participants did not fully return to pre-testimony voicelessness. Rather, participation altered their relationship to voice and agency, producing an identity position in which empowerment and renewed marginalisation coexist.

The tension between these positions meant participants occupy a liminal, between-state in which empowerment and vulnerability appeared to coexist. Arguably, participants do not fully return to a child-self, fully silenced because there are patterns (Themes 1 and 2) in which the invitation to have voice is empowering and healing, even if the institutional validation is lost; but conversely the empowered-agentic self cannot be fully embraced because there are continuing circumstances which are experienced as silencing and marginalising. This between-identity is produced

internally and through the social and institutional processes which participants were subjected to.

Accounts did not suggest a stable or resolved post-inquiry identity. Instead empowerment and vulnerability fluctuated depending on context, with identity remaining fluid rather than resolved. Liminality here represents an ongoing negotiation between empowerment through voice and renewed experiences of marginalisation, rather than a transition toward closure.

Across accounts, power emerged as central to creating liminality. CSA is marked by powerlessness; participation redistributed power through giving voice and recognition; and state inaction reasserted external control destabilising agency.

Claire illustrates how recognition and validation, and powerlessness coexist. Testifying was profoundly affirming, requiring and generating strength and courage, and provoking self-acceptance: “It gave me my strength to be able to tell my story… I lost all my shame because of my truth was out there and… I was believed… it takes a lot of courage...” Recognition, “being believed,” is transformative, displacing internalised shame through public acknowledgement. Having the courage to speak and being believed are framed as the central mechanisms of empowerment.

The location of power is especially significant, as Claire understands it: “that's a big thing because you lost power in the first place. So you're always trying to get your power back.” Possessing power can connect participants to their earlier experiences as harmed and unheard children. So the empowerment from testifying is complicated when Claire later reflects, “I hold no power. I've given that to IICSA

effectively.” Testifying becomes a transfer of agency: her story, her power, handed over. By entrusting testimony to IICSA, Claire positioned the government as responsible for acting on it, “It's down to a governmental thing now for them to take, make change.” When action did not materialise, Claire’s powerlessness is re-experienced, but Claire does not return to pre-testifying voicelessness because responsibility remains externalised to the state. Thus, the contrast between “being believed” and ‘holding no power’ reflects an unstable boundary between a recognised, empowered self and a powerless one.

Rachel also experienced shifts in self. Participating gave her a public empowered voice, “I did actually start talking a lot more... And I went on to share with other things… it was huge for me… massively empowering.” The repetition of “talking,” “sharing” and being heard positions voice as the primary form of agency. This experience initiates further sharing, extending her voice into new contexts. However, this sense of empowerment shifts when considering governmental inaction. She describes feeling “forgotten again… that I don't matter.” The word “again” positions this feeling within a longer history of silencing. Empowerment and marginalisation can coexist in the same narrative. Rachel can be an advocate, whilst simultaneously experience returned feelings of invisibility. This illustrates the oscillation between an empowered-agentic self and a silenced-powerless self.

For Moira, contributing redistributed power on a personal level. She describes how testifying “made me face up to things and… take action… It's kind of given me that voice back… it was taking some control back like and taking some power back.” The repetition of “back” indicates a process of restoration after loss. This returned

power and agency is linked to accountability, “my accountability, my school's accountability, and then that community accountability...” Accountability is placed at multiple levels: personal, institutional and collective. Moira was able to locate her own accountability alongside that of the school and wider community, situating her story within a broader chain of responsibility. Thus testifying was not simply a process of sharing but of reevaluating responsibility.

However, this sense of restored agency is subsequently undermined when considering the lack of implementation, “there's no point in doing a report and recommendation as if you're not going to do them.” The process which was empowering is reframed as “just lip service.” It is experienced as communicating that “survivors don't matter… we’ll forget about sexual abuse... We'll pretend it doesn't happen. We'll sweep it under the carpet.” This sense of diminished worth and that their experiences are “taboo” conjures up earlier silenced experiences, “when you're at a school, you've got no power and no control over what happens.” However, empowerment and agency are not entirely lost, IICSA has helped her “know what I need to change and take action,” but they are in flux and contextual.

In the broader context of the title quote, Colleen states,

> “it's a time [now] when I can look at this and I can stop banging on doors because there's a part of me that's pretty determined to be heard, but it is easy to get triggered and if you deal with somebody who's… really not interested… it can put you back in a very emotional place again. It is a bit of a tightrope”

This captures the instability of identity, activism is a “tightrope” which one can easily fall off. The metaphor conveys the instability and effort to balance. There is the “determination to be heard” alongside the risk of being “put… back in a very emotional place.” An uninterested person does not hear and implicitly silences. Activism then requires negotiating empowerment and vulnerability. Rather than resolving earlier experiences of silencing, participation produces an ongoing process of balancing between these two identity positions.

In these accounts, the sense of powerlessness echoes earlier experiences of childhood silencing, but participants did not describe fully returning to that position. Recognition through IICSA remained significant. Instead participants seem to move between two positions: one grounded in empowerment through voice, an empowered-agentic self, and another, silenced-powerless self, reactivated by perceived state disregard.

Notably participants who had established an empowered-agentic self prior to IICSA did not describe this liminal pattern. Their sense of empowerment was more embedded and less disrupted by state inaction.

These themes collectively suggest contributing to IICSA enabled participants to feel heard and supported the development or affirmation of an agentic identity. However, the lack of government action undermined this recognition. Together, these experiences produced and sustained a liminal identity, in which participants occupy an unstable space between an empowered, activist adult self and a re-silenced child-self.

3.3.2 Survey Data

Survey data provides further context to this theme. Figure 7 above, 'Extent to Which Participants Are Glad They Participated in IICSA,' shows how the majority of respondents were 'glad' to have participated. However, the comments cited above, have led us to interpret this gladness as less based on the institutional achievements of IICSA and more about the having acted in alignment with their values, reclaimed voice and honouring their younger selves. Gladness then is a form of self-recognition despite the lack of material change. This expands how we understand the changing identities which IICSA left participants with. As one survey participant explained, "I am happy I participated because I know in the long term it will make a difference." Their participation was an act of social action. Whilst another said,

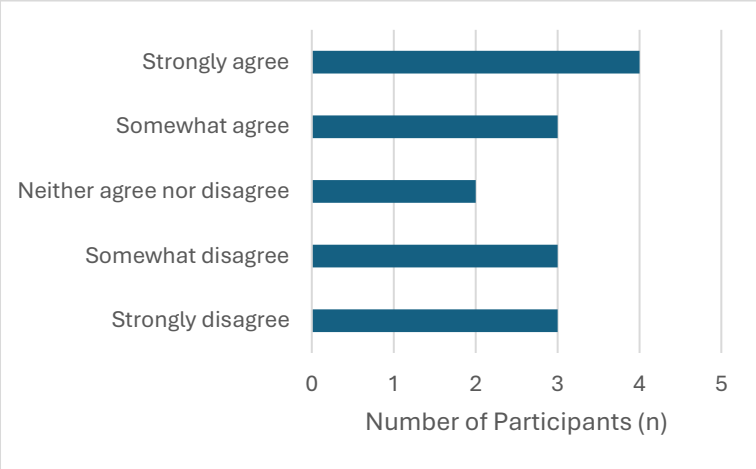
> "I was glad to have the opportunity to share my experiences and opinions. However during the iicsa [sic] it became evident that victims of child sexual abuse were not the main focus for the uk [sic] governments. I feel used by the uk [sic] governments where they used iicsa [sic] and now ignores all the work we did over many years."

The gladness relates to a sense of making a difference and a shift in identity to someone who is empowered, it is a form of self-recognition, but concurrently there is a self that feels "used" and ignored by the state, and participants can slip between these depending on the context.

Survey item 2 looked at whether overall participants' expectations of contributing to IICSA had been met (Figure 9). The results were fairly split showing great variability in this.

Figure 9

Overall Evaluation of Whether Expectations of IICSA Were Met



Note. Participants responded to the statement: “Overall, my expectations of contributing to the inquiry have been met.” Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

In terms of whether their expectations had been met through IICSA, participants were fairly divided showing differences in interpretation. The variety of responses reflects the complex and layered meanings participants attach to inquiry participation, which are more fully elaborated in the qualitative themes.

The wide variability contrasts with the consistent endorsement of gladness (Figure 7) and the responses around whether specific hopes had been met (Figure 3). The qualitative analysis and Figure 9 suggest that participant expectations were complex and varied, including hope for recognition, personal validation, collective

solidarity and real-world change. Whilst there is a degree to which participants felt heard, expectations around the implementation of the recommendations and state action were often experienced as unmet. The range of responses to this survey item then may be a product of this ambivalent evaluation of participation. That is ambivalences captured in the themes of symbolic listening with hollowed validation (Theme 1), a sense of the self as an agent of change (Theme 2) and living with deferred closure (Theme 5, discussed below), and linked here to the theme of a liminal self positioned between empowerment and renewed silencing.

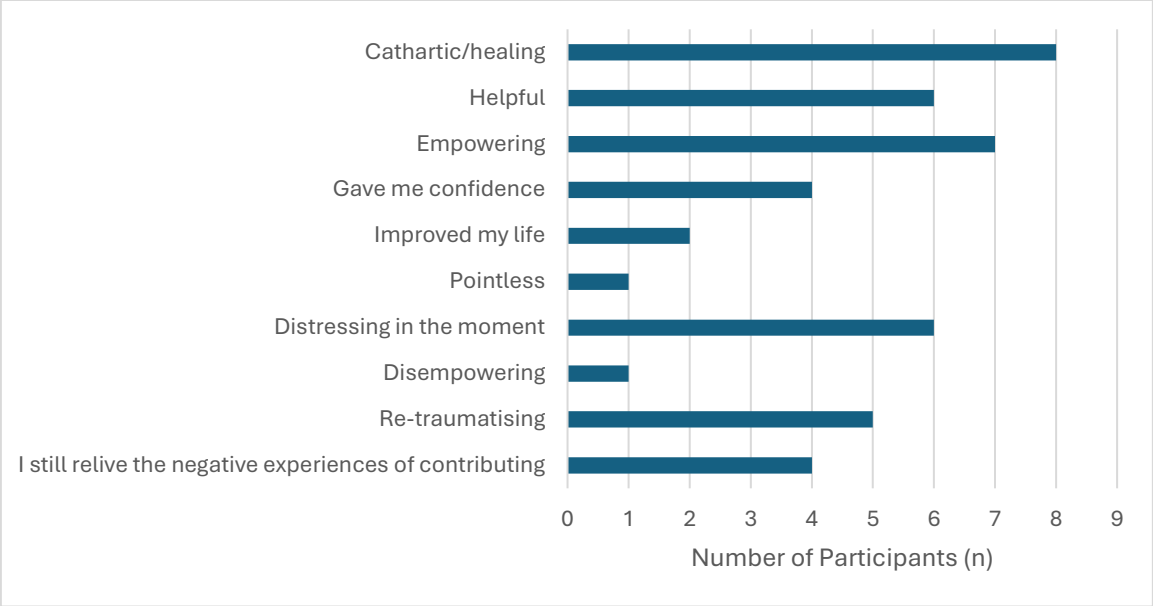
This sense of liminality in self was seen in the open survey responses too, where there was a fluctuation between feelings of empowerment and disappointment. This empowerment was often described as contingent on subsequent state action. One described “the fall” after the inquiry as feeling greater precisely because of the earlier sense of empowerment. The metaphor of falling suggests recognition raised expectations and self-perception intensifying the impact of perceived inaction, which another participant commented “silences us once again.” There is a sharp contrast between the sense of empowerment testifying engendered and the powerlessness that followed.

While identity is always shaped by context, participants’ accounts suggest the combination of recognition followed by perceived state inaction created a sustained sense of instability between a self that is empowered and one that is again marginalised.

Descriptive survey findings illustrate how participants relate empowerment and distress (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Retrospective Evaluations of Contributing to IICSA



Note. Participants were asked: “Looking back, contributing to the inquiry was…” and selected all applicable options from a list derived from the literature (see Section 2.4 and Appendix D), with an additional free-text option.

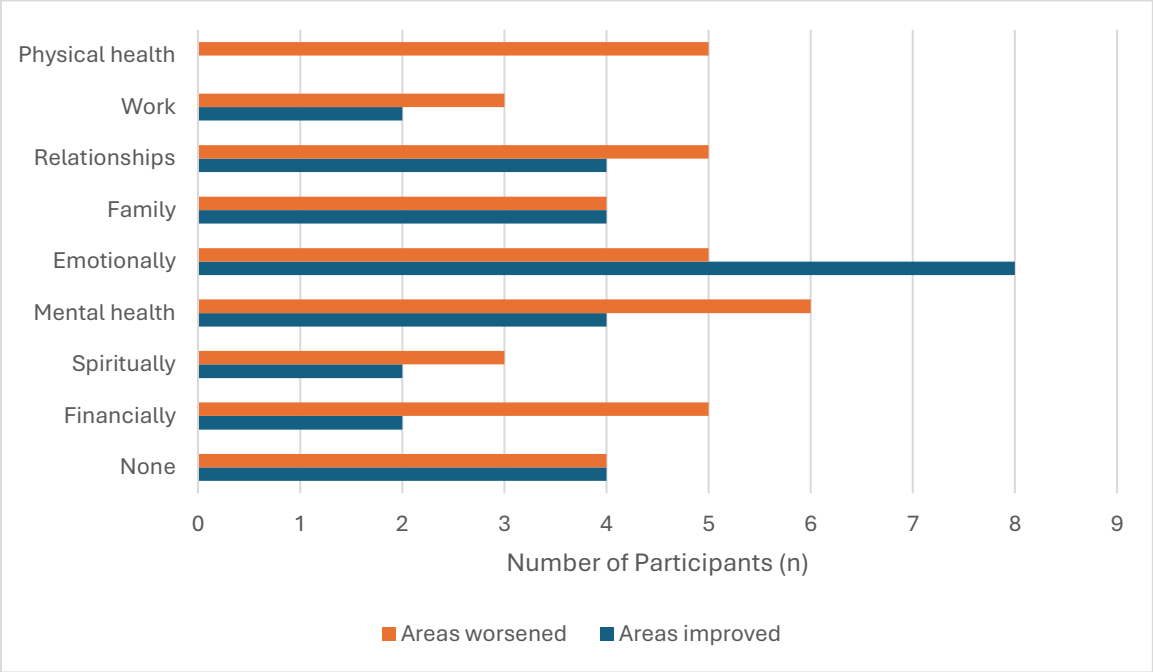
This chart shows how participation experience is ambivalent and tension-filled. Many respondents described contributing as cathartic, empowering, helpful and confidence-building. Yet a number also reported participation as distressing, retraumatising and/or that they continue to relive negative aspects of contributing.

This tension mirrors participants' accounts of a liminal self positioned between empowered and renewed vulnerability.

This "tightrope" of identity is further contextualised by the following chart (Figure 11) which combined two survey items ('Areas of my life that have got worse since contributing to IICSA' and 'Areas of my life that have improved as a result of contributing to IICSA'):

Figure 11

Perceived Areas of Life Improved and Worsened Following Participation in IICSA



Note. Participants selected all applicable options in response to two items: “Areas of my life that have improved as a result of contributing to IICSA” and “Areas of my life that have got worse since contributing to IICSA/the Truth Project.” Response options were derived from the literature (see Section 2.4 and Appendix D) and included a free-text option.

The chart shows the direction of impact (improved or worsening) across life domains. It shows improvements and worsening, and demonstrates the coexistence of benefit and harm. There is a huge variability in responses. Whilst several participants reported improvements in emotional well-being, others reported deterioration in mental health, relationships, financial situation and physical health as

a result of contributing. This provides a descriptive backdrop for understanding the liminal nature of self-identity after contributing, where despite improvements in mental health, other areas have declined, and empowerment and vulnerability can be experienced simultaneously rather than simply in sequential time periods.

3.3.1 Summary: Theme 3

Theme 3 captures participants' experiences of a liminal identity positioned between a silenced-powerless self and an empowered-agentic self. Whilst participation in the inquiry enabled survivors to reclaim their voice and agency, perceived government inaction produced an ongoing oscillation in which vulnerability and empowerment coexisted rather than replaced each other.

As participants held this tension between empowerment and renewed experiences of silencing, many supplemented institutional recognition with relationships with other survivors. Theme 4 therefore examines how community functioned as a space of relational validation in which survivors identities were affirmed, negotiated, or at times contested.

3.4 Theme 4: "Being in a room just full of people the same as me": Community as relational validation and its limits

3.4.1 Interview Data

This theme explores how participants located meaning not only in their relationship with the state but with the survivor community. Community functioned as a form of relational validation. It represents a horizontal line of recognition through

which survivors feel seen, understood and legitimised by those with similar experiences. Unlike institutional listening which may be understood as a vertical, hierarchical structure which was often experienced as hollowed by state inaction (Theme 1), community offered ongoing interpersonal validation. “Being in a room full of people like me” (Rosemary) provided a space without stigma and the burden of explanation, allowing participants to occupy a shared survivor identity without contestation (similar in nature to the TP but ongoing and broader in scope). It provided a relational space in which the empowered-agentic self (Theme 2) could be empowered even when institutional recognition was perceived as uncertain.

However, this relational validation was not universally accessible nor uniformly stable. Community could be fragmented, hierarchical or politically contested, revealing that community solidarity itself was shaped by power dynamics and resource constraints. Thus, community operated as a safe space and battleground, where survivor identity was collectively affirmed but also where it’s limits and fractures became apparent.

Community offered epistemic safety where CSA experiences were taken as reliable, legible and credible. This stabilised identity by countering earlier (and at times concurrent) experiences of silencing and marginalisation. Unlike institutional listening from which continued validation relied on the implementation of recommendations and policy follow-through, community validation was immediate and embodied. It did not offer structural change or broad shifts in societal stigma, but offered recognition, and environments free from stigma through shared presence. For

some this collective affirmation provided personal affirmation and strengthened their sense of legitimacy as survivors.

Going to IICSA and meeting other survivors, particularly forum meetings, for Francine was impactful. She said, “to walk into that room and see other survivors… this is my community, whether I want it or not.” There is a sense that belonging is not wholly chosen, but arises from shared experiences. Francine’s description of it as “very healing” positions it as a corrective to an earlier sense of isolation. Validation comes not through institutional authority, but through the recognition of shared experience and sense of belonging. In this way community functions as a form of interpersonal affirmation where survivor identity is supported horizontally through mutual recognition.

Rachel also mentioned the significance of being a part of something. There was a sense of collective purpose “it felt like everybody was joining together or something.” Despite the tentative phrasing, “or something,” suggesting the collective’s form was difficult to define, there was an emotional significance to it. “Joining together” can be understood in contrast to the isolation that often characterises the impact of abuse and its aftermath. Community was connection with others which “felt… really good” and provided a means of keeping “informed about what was going on.” Connection was interpersonal and with the goings on at IICSA. For Rachel, the inquiry created opportunities for survivor community by physically bringing people with shared experiences together. Belonging emerged through recognising the same shared experience of both past harm and present participation.

For Rosemary, these connections were meaningful. The experience which contributed to separation from wider society, their abuse, now became a basis for connection and community. Being “in a room full of people like me” removed the burden of explanation and justification which characterised participants’ experiences in wider society. Rosemary emphasises that she did not need to explain “why you didn't say anything… you don't have to explain why you let him do it.” Community operated then as a form of mutual validation and a place of epistemic safety, removed from stigma and allowing a different survivor identity to be experienced. Within such a space experiences of abuse are treated as credible and understandable, removing the need for justification that frequently accompanies disclosure in other contexts. Being around others who shared those experiences was validating and empowering (as mentioned earlier by Francine). Community functions as a place where survivor identity is legible without negotiation or defence. Thus, the recognition which IICSA provided was enhanced and broadened by the recognition found in the community.

Community was also an inspiration for activism broadly in society and for individuals in their own lives. Francine directly linked community with confidence. Knowing others, “understand and are on board and want to make a difference… makes a huge difference… it's given me a lot of confidence in my own personal fight, it's giving me validation.” Community is positioned here as a source of emotional reinforcement that sustains participants individually and in advocacy, with silenced and empowered selves (Theme 3) acknowledged here. There was normalisation and empowerment through community and collective recognition: “it gives me gives me huge encouragement to know… so many people understand.” The relational

validation provided personal validation, which anchors identity. Community strengthens participants to keep advocating and fighting for themselves.

However, not all participants experienced the same sense of community. For some, as in all communities, it was fraught. The sense of identity which it fostered could feel oppressive and excluding. Georgina describes tensions within the IICSA forum through factionalism:

> "That's when I really noticed that it became them and us, so 'them' were the forum team and 'us' was the victims and survivors. But then you could add the XXX XXX crew who were the sort of the, the brown noses to the forum team… they're quite often the ones that run charitable organisations. So they're determined by funding, they're controlled by the funding as well… they're not our friends. They're like friends to the funders"

This vocabulary emphasises a politically impacted structure, rather than a simply solidaristic one. In Georgina's interpretation, the reliance of survivor organisations on funding had led them to be aligned with institutional interests, blurring the boundaries between the survivor space and institutional power. There is a perception as a result that survivor spaces may reproduce the hierarchies they seek to challenge.

Georgina's activism and how that presented created difference with other survivors. She recalled being warned about "the horrible ones" when she began attending the IICSA Forum meetings, before reflecting,

> “I think it turns out that I might be one of the horrible ones because… we were the more vocal ones in the meetings and we were trying to raise things that they weren't… on the itinerary. So we were always being, like, controlled and shut up and silenced.”

Relational validation was not always straightforward but could be complicated or fail. The survivor community was also not universally welcoming and understanding, which could impact participants’ sense of self. Georgina's repositioning of herself as “one of the horrible ones” reflects how being vocal and challenging the boundaries of acceptable discussion could become a basis for differentiation within the survivor community. Rather than providing straightforward communal recognition, the survivor space could therefore reproduce experiences of differentiation and silencing, compounding isolation and negative self-image.

Georgina’s observation, “we've all got similar experiences, but not the same” captures the complexity of recognition within the survivor community. Although from the outside participants may appear to share a common experience, in reality they are not necessarily alike. Thus, recognition cannot be taken for granted, and when it does not come to fruition it can create a sense of shame in those not recognised, that may, in turn, be expressed through the shaming or negative positioning of others. This dynamic can be seen in the categorisations operating within Georgina's account: having been warned about “the horrible ones”, she reflects that she herself “might be one of the horrible ones” whilst positioning others as “brown noses” or “controlled by funding” rather than acting in survivors’ interests. Nevertheless, the expectation of community mean that “we're all supposed to be nice to each other and… follow the

rules of the group and be respectful." Georgina contrasts this expectation of cohesion with a survivor community characterised by difference, hierarchy and factionalism. The expectation that shared survivor identity should produce solidarity sits uneasily alongside Georgina's experience of disagreement and differential recognition.

Georgina uses language which conveys her assessment of the insidious impact of IICSA on community describing how it had "become this toxicity in the survivor-victim community" and "a sickness of poison within our community." The lack of horizontal recognition is not simply an absence, but it is an active force of negativity. When relational validation is on offer but inaccessible, for whatever reason, it not only fails to provide validation and empowerment, but can feel harmful. The isolation which it could remedy is reinforced. The 'other' is not only society, but one's own community.

Georgina captures the ambivalence and difficulties within the survivor community through the metaphor of a family:

> "we've all got similar experiences, but not the same. But we're all, we've all been abused, so it makes us sort of like family, but a really dysfunctional family. So we don't all get on. Some of us absolutely each hate each other. And that is evident."

This metaphor suggests closeness and conflict. Different individuals are tied together not by choice but their shared experience of abuse. They remain different and can struggle to get along. Georgina presents almost opposing forces: hatred and correspondence. It speaks to the power of commonality, that instead of wholly

breaking apart they remain within the metaphorical family. They belong, even whilst they dislike each other.

Georgina's observations, "we are a spectrum of different kinds of survivors because we've all got different experiences," that there is "a hierarchy" and "a left and right of the victim and survivor community," highlight the diversity, divisions and power dynamics that coexists within the same collective identity. Community becomes a place where solidarity and division live together. The shared experience of abuse creates relational proximity but also differences in interpretation, activism and institutional engagement. This produces uneven recognition and relational tension, with shame operating not only internally but between members of the survivor community.

However, there is a longing for true community and belonging. Despite the problems she identifies within the survivor community, Georgina explains that "we're never given the opportunity to actually stand proud as a community in the UK. So we're just left to sort of fend for ourselves as a consequence." Her account therefore retains the possibility of, and a desire for, a "proud" and united community, despite her experience of its divisions. Community then could be a safe space for some, providing relational validation but a battlefield for others, vulnerable to the same dynamics of authority, power, silencing, shame and marginalisation present in wider institutional and societal contexts.

Community, despite its pitfalls, is not always accessible. For some, IICSA offered the promise of community and connection, which it never delivered. This was

especially evident for two participants who had submitted their TP evidence in writing. For Rachel, the inquiry gave an awareness of a survivor community without providing access. She knew that “there must have been hundreds and hundreds of people that came forward” but “I didn't have anyone to talk to”, adding that she would have liked contact with others involved in the inquiry “so that I didn't feel alone.” This gap between awareness and connection created what one could call ‘an imagined community,’ one that is envisioned but inaccessible. This imagined community contrasted with past experiences of being unseen and misunderstood, but participation itself also became difficult to communicate. Rachel explained, “obviously I can share what happened to me with other people… But I didn't know how to talk about one part of this inquiry”, even with her husband. She was “part of this inquiry, with hundreds and hundreds of other people”, yet questioned, “how do I talk about that? Openly.” Rachel's isolation within the inquiry sits within a broader experience of social and institutional disconnection described across participants. As Janice explained, as a CSA survivor, “It's the world. It's society. You don't feel looked after and you don't feel safe.” The absence of opportunities for peer connection and community could therefore leave participants aware of belonging to a wider survivor collective whilst remaining apart from it, intensifying feelings of isolation.

For Moira, the inquiry “created a need for community I didn't know I needed.” Looking back, she described wanting not only “accountability” and “recognition” and for her “voice to be heard”, but also “to maybe find other people like me from the same school”:

> “the main reason that I did the evidence was for that accountability, the, the recognition, the voice to be heard and to maybe find other people like me from the same school. […] Because it will add to the fact that I know that I'm, I wasn't making it up and I know that it happened, but it would be good in some messed up way to connect to people who it had also happened to.”

There was a desire for a particular form of interpersonal affirmation that could come from others with similar experiences. Finding others would provide connection and confirmation that she “wasn't making it up” and that “it happened.” Indeed, Moira later described the “primary main number one reason” for participating as being “to try to find other victims”. Yet this hoped-for connection did not materialise through IICSA. Rather than simply preserving her existing isolation, participation appears to have heightened Moira's awareness of a community and connection that she wanted but could not access through the inquiry. She later described how specific support groups or signposting to others with similar institutional experiences “would have been good”, but instead eventually “found my own community” independently. There was an epistemic safety and understanding within a wider community which was being sought and hoped for. The relational validation which others received was wanted, but inaccessible through IICSA.

When IICSA ended, participants described a sudden loss of a relational space and connection that had developed through participation. Despite not having the full community experience she hoped for, Rachel explained that after IICSA she “didn't know where to go,” particularly given “the impact it has on your own self” and uncertainty about whether participation had been “worth it”. She explained “I just kind

of felt like I got a bit forgotten like afterwards." The absence of continued connection destabilised the sense of belonging created in participation. For some, community and participation had helped anchor a sense of identity through shared recognition, and their disappearance created uncertainty about how to sustain that sense of self outside the inquiry.

Sharing had empowered, as noted earlier, but the loss of that space was challenging. Rachel explains,

> "it is incredibly difficult for somebody to share. And sometimes you then don't want to shut that down, you actually do want to stay with that empowered feeling of, like, you know what I do have the strength here and I can do X, Y and Z, maybe. But there wasn't anywhere to do the X, Y and Z."

The end of IICSA destabilised that sense of self which found validation through participation and community. The end of those connections was experienced as loss and grief. Indeed if community anchored and allowed the expression of the survivor self, it's loss could therefore operate as another form of silencing. As Francine said, "It's a huge thing… to be part of and suddenly not have it, having to say goodbye to everybody." Although there had been discussion about participants keeping in contact and exchanging emails, she explained that "nothing ever came of that." Meeting the challenge of contributing and finding solidarity with those who understood could be empowering and initiate new pathways of being, which were curtailed by the loss of community. Participants who could were therefore forced to find new groups.

The practicalities and red tape meant that the community that had been created at IICSA was not feasible to continue in the form it had taken. Community then, which operated in a relational way and was experienced as providing validation apart from the inquiry, was bounded by the institutional inquiry structures around it. But as survivors it was experienced as another loss.

3.4.2 Survey data

The open survey responses reinforce the sense that community was longed-for but hard to reach. Survivors have to tour through support groups, one “Asked victim support XXXX, yellowdoor [sic], the survivors trust [sic],” others spoke of the challenges support networks face with sexual abuse “so underfunded it seems it is mostly dealt with by charities scrabbling around each year to win vital funding.” Participants are looking for recognition and solidarity, but often face under-funding and isolation, pushed from one charity or support service to another. The fight for limited resources and their insufficiency can reinforce ideas of worthlessness and lack of state care which mirrors earlier harms. Additionally, given a trauma lens, viewing this dispassionately and impersonally can be even harder. It is against this background that the real and imagined offer of community in an inquiry is constructed.

3.4.3 Summary: Theme 4

Inquiries offer the possibility of community. That community is constructed as a source of relational validation which stabilised and complicated survivor identity. Community can anchor identity for people within a shared survivor identity. It connects participants with other survivors who had a mutual understanding and

openness to sharing. This provided epistemic safety, validation and empowerment, positively impacting how they saw themselves. Community can be a space free of the stigma and lack of understanding prevalent in wider society. It provides a sense of belonging and identity as survivors, and a forum for their empowered-agentic selves (Theme 2). Unlike institutional recognition, which depends on governmental response, community recognition is immediate and embodied. Community did not replace institutional validation which IICSA promised, but existed alongside it, offering horizontal affirmation.

However, solidarity was uneven and sometimes contested. Its divisions and differences are hard to navigate, apparently mirroring and impacted by wider power structures, leaving some feeling bruised and isolated. This can leave participants with unsettled identity, suspended between belonging and isolation. For others, community was desired but simply inaccessible, reinforcing loneliness. For those who found community at IICSA and received the positive benefits, its ending was often experienced as giving rise to feelings of loss, uncertainty and grief. When validation is given and then taken away, it is often experienced as a form of silencing (Theme 1), which is echoed here. Thus, although community functions as a source of interpersonal affirmation that stabilised and complicated survivor identity, collective belonging was not automatic nor neutral.

Whilst community provided the opportunity for immediate relational validation, it did not compensate for the institutional response. The procedural end to IICSA did not equate to an experiential closure for many participants. As a result a sense of belonging and empowerment generated through community coexisted with a

continuing perception of the inquiry as incomplete. Community may be seen as operating as a relational counterweight providing validation and solidarity to institutional uncertainty where questions regarding the implementation of the recommendations remained unresolved. Theme 5 explores how the failure to enact the recommendations produced a sense of moral and temporal 'unfinishedness' which is prolonging the inquiry beyond
its official end.

3.5 Theme 5: "it's not over because there's not been a resolution": Living with deferred closure

3.5.1 Interview data

Although IICSA officially ended when the recommendations were made, the general consensus was that it was unfinished for participants. Dorothy said, "It is ongoing for me because… I do have something every single day about bringing awareness to it." Her description frames participation in the inquiry, not as a discrete event, but as something enduring that extends beyond the procedural end. Similarly, Georgina stated IICSA remained "un-concluded," suggesting "it will never be concluded… because there's so much work to do." Through this language, participants position the inquiry not as a closed institutional process but as an ongoing moral project whose completion depends on societal change.

For many participants, the sense of IICSA as unfinished was tied to an ongoing sense of moral responsibility to children. Janice said forcefully, "it's not over because there's not been a resolution. Nothing's been done. It's not over because that girl sat

on the train tracks and killed herself.” By linking the lack of institutional action to a specific incident, Janice frames the lack of action, not as simply bureaucracy, but as a moral failure with human consequences. Dorothy says “nothings changed… otherwise we wouldn't have another dead kid, would we?”. The stakes of IICSA are high with risks so startling that the passing of time is framed as a moral failing.

Similarly, Francine sees IICSA as incomplete because of the wider societal significance of its recommendations. The inquiry, “could be put to bed once all those recommendations are in place... how many people are affected by CSA… a lot of people… if we get this right for survivors, then you can get this right for the broader society.” There is a desire for it to be “put to bed”, i.e. dealt with conclusively. The impetus is a moral context and obligation to victims and survivors, and society more broadly. Without the recommendations, Moira says the message is “your children aren't worth that time and effort.” IICSA might therefore look procedurally complete and finished, but it is not autotelic for participants, that is only having an end or purpose in itself. Rather, it only fulfils that purpose through meaningful change.

Participants do not experience time in a neutral way. Bureaucratic slowness has consequences and participants become painfully aware of cost of time in the face of continued accounts of abuse. The sedate pace of governmental processes is contrasted with the urgency of preventing further abuse. Claire expressed that “[IICSA is] still going… always” before reflecting on the slow institutional practices which means cases receive court dates years later. “It's challenging” when the whole system takes “so long.” She situates IICSA within a complex of bureaucratic delay which conflicts with the immediacy of harm.

Similarly, Francine said, “… I know these things don't happen as fast, but it also does need to happen really fast. There is a time pressure...” Participants frequently perceive a moral urgency to ‘completing’ IICSA. Government action is framed as the only meaningful mechanism through which the inquiry could be completed. Time is not morally neutral. Although bureaucratic time may move slowly, moral urgency moves quickly. This disparity creates an unintended sense of obligation among participants to continue advocating and prevents IICSA from being experienced as resolved until its recommendations are implemented.

Some participants framed their testimony within a greater collective effort to make change. For Colleen, the significance of her individual contribution lay in what it could achieve alongside those of others:

> “I wanted to make a difference. I wanted my, I knew mine would just be a tiny little spec within the report, you know it's a tiny little speck, but all those specs add up, don't they? And I did it because I want to make a difference. And at the moment, there has been no difference made because the recommendations haven't been taken up.”

The image of individual testimonies as tiny “specs” that collectively “add up” conveys the limited power of one contribution alongside the potential power of collective testimony. Importantly, Colleen directly links her reason for participating (“I want to make a difference”) to her assessment that “there has been no difference made because the recommendations haven't been taken up.” Just as IICSA was not a goal in and of itself, neither were individual testimonies. Participants gave their

testimony with the expectation that it would contribute to wider societal change. Without implementation, the purpose attached to that testimony remained unfulfilled, and with it the possibility of closure.

As Janice expressed,

> “It doesn't feel like a lack… of like information gathering or finding people or providing people with enough support to tell their story… they did all that, they got all that stuff. And then it might as well have been lobbed out the window.”

“Lobbed out the window” expresses the sense that the testimony, the effort both personally and in terms of numbers has been thrown away, almost purposefully. Participants assumed that by testifying there was an implicit, unstated moral contract whereby their willingness to contribute would be met by meaningful action. Without implementing the recommendations the contract is incomplete.

Many participants expressed an expectation of reciprocity between their willingness to testify and the state’s responsibility to act. Moira questions the purpose of the inquiry without action: “what's the point in doing a report and an inquiry that took a very long time and thousands of hours and thousands, I presume, survivors? And all that work…” She argues the government needs “courage and confidence and competence” to implement the recommendations despite resistance. They need to be “strong enough to say we're going to do these recommendations whether you like it or not, we need to do it because these are the right things to do.” Her emphasis on “courage” and doing the “right things” in the face of opposition frames implementation as a moral imperative. Placed in this context, survivors’ willingness to testify to painful

experience is understood as a form of moral courage which should be matched by equivalent state courage and action. Without that reciprocity, there is an asymmetry of courage, and the government inertia may be experienced as moral cowardice.

Several participants viewed the substantial financial investment in IICSA as a signal of the state's commitment to addressing abuse. However, the lack of visible change created confusion and disappointment. Colleen explained how she felt "let down":

> "Let down. Let down and as I said, I feel it mirrors, I feel it feel it mirrors survivors experiences. Erm, you know, many survivors may have spoken to somebody and not been believed, and so nothing changed. So in a way, it mirrors survivors experiences. Because here's this huge, it must have cost a huge amount of money to do this, huge amount. And there is a depth to it that is impressive. And yes, that information is at the moment being lost."

For Colleen, it was not simply the financial investment, there was a "depth to it that is impressive" yet that information was now being "lost". IICSA's cost and the scale of information gathered generated an expectation that participant experiences would be valued and acted upon. Its apparent failure to produce change therefore mirrored earlier experiences in which survivors had spoken but "nothing changed." The subsequent lack of action could consequently take on qualities of betrayal, reproducing rather than resolving participants' experiences of being unheard.

Claire commented "…what a waste of money you could have given that money to the charities that are trying to support and help people like me." To set up an

inquiry and then not act could therefore be experienced as a breach of the implicit trust on which participation rested. There was an expectation that it would help. The government could have directed that money towards support services but had instead been invested in IICSA, carrying an implicit expectation that it would produce change. For Claire, it now feels like “lip service. Because there's no change yet,” adding that “any change as a result of this inquiry” would allow her to feel “that was worth taking part in.” As mentioned above, this language suggests an inquiry without material change can be experienced as a symbolic act of care rather than a substantive and genuine one. Without this, the investment becomes simply a “waste”. As Moira expresses, “it's that omission in action, isn't it, that shows that they just don't care”. For participants, care requires action.

For some participants the feelings resembling betrayal were profound. Georgina described a transformation in what IICSA represented:

> “Because I mean, they are laughing at IICSA. I mean, it's a massive joke. It's the biggest joke in UK history. I mean, we did so much work. So much money was like, it was like a money pit. I mean it should have been a shining example of what we could do in the UK. Now it's just the biggest joke ever. It's embarrassing. I mean, I feel embarrassed to say that I engaged with IICSA now because I'm just like, I feel like I'm part of that big joke.”

The contrast between a potential “shining example” and the “biggest joke” reframes the inquiry from an opportunity for national accountability to an experience of humiliation. Importantly, Georgina does not position the inquiry alone as the object

of ridicule; through participation, she feels implicated in it: “I feel like I'm part of that big joke.” The language of ridicule (“joke”) suggests the perceived failure to act has transformed what was intended as a process of accountability and prevention of recurring harms into something experienced as morally injurious. IICSA's perceived failure therefore becomes personally and socially exposing. To be made to feel “part of that big joke” communicates a sense that the considerable work and investment of participants have not been treated with the seriousness they warranted. In this understanding, the procedural ending of IICSA mocks not only the aims of the inquiry but also the contributions of those who participated.

Participants often described being suspended between the past and a hoped-for future. Dorothy says “if we don't look at the past and what we've produced” at IICSA for lessons and “keep dragging it into the domain, it just gets all brushed under the carpet again.” Without this, “we need another inquiry because nothing was done.” The past then remains live for participants emotionally and as a resource for preventing future harm. The nature of an inquiry is to pull from the past and reach into the future. However, by not acting, the past has not been honoured and the future has not been protected, otherwise as Dorothy says, “we wouldn't have another dead kid.” Some participants experience what could be understood as liminal time, caught between the past and future, where participants cannot fully let go of the past because it is the only tool of change they have, nor embrace the future because changes to make it better have not been put in place. They are in a waiting area, holding IICSA open in the hope that the state will act and create a new space of safety in the future.

For Claire looking to the future and protecting children means recollecting the past, “I look at it [IICSA] from the perspective of a child because that's when it happened to me.” She explains that she is “always looking at it” in terms of “what would have been different, what would have affected me differently then.” The lack of closure and care which closure would indicate, are understood through the lens of a child who was failed. Within this framing, the complex weighing of costs and benefits that forms part of political decision-making has little meaning when viewed from the perspective of a child, or of participants waiting for unambiguous change. For Claire, that imperative is understood through her younger self and oriented towards future children: “the whole experience [of IICSA] was about looking for change for children, because that's what I was when it happened.” Her own sense of closure is similarly deferred until this future change occurs. Claire explains, “I think the loop is still slightly open. Closure will be when there is a proper system in place,” including safe places where children can disclose rather than doing so “40 years down the line.” This suggests that participants can hold their past and present selves concurrently whilst orienting participation towards a hoped-for future. Indeed, the nature of an inquiry, which looks to past harms in pursuit of future protections, may encourage them to do so.

These accounts illustrate how participants remain temporally positioned between past experience and future change, maintaining the inquiry as an open project rather than a completed event. If IICSA is accepted as over, then possible avenues of change it could lead to may have to be accepted as closed. By maintaining a threshold position hope can remain.

For some participants, even whilst acknowledging that IICSA won't be over until the recommendations are implemented, some see change and acknowledge that its unfinished nature is not wholly without success. "Derek" characterised social change as "not a sprint," but "a marathon." The metaphor of a marathon reframes incremental progress as part of a longer struggle, rather than requiring change to occur at a single end point.

Derek represents a different approach to time and outcomes, characterised by strategic patience and pragmatism. He is "cautiously optimistic… we've got some of the changes that we've needed." The focus is on outcomes over speed. IICSA and government action is placed within the context of a history of campaigning and activism, "I've been at this for 45 years." Hope here is not binary, dependent on either complete implementation or failure, instead one has to "chip away bit by bit." Progress can therefore be partial and recurring: "it's a step forward. It would be nice if it was a leap forward but it's not." Thus, characterising change as a "marathon" complicates notions of deferred closure suggesting some participants could tolerate IICSA's 'unfinishedness' within longer activist timeframes.

3.5.2 Survey data

Descriptive survey results, such as Figure 4: Perceptions of Whether Participant Contributions Were Honoured (see above), provide further context for the sense of living with deferred closure. The ambivalence reflected in this chart around whether contributions have been honoured complements the theme here that participants' experiences of the inquiry as unfinished.

Survey items 3 and 4 in Figure 3 ‘Comparison of Participant Hopes and Perceived Inquiry Outcomes’ (see above) also speaks to how hopes for institutional closure-type outcomes, such as justice, accountability, making children safer and making a positive difference in society were high but their perceived fulfilment low. This makes sense of how IICSA is experienced as unfinished business, because those hoped for outcomes have not emerged. Participants consider that inquiries should bring future change, and it is understandable how they feel it is unfinished if that future has not arrived. The pattern in the survey then aligns with the theme of living with deferred closure in which participants describe being unable to “let go” whilst it still has not achieved its hoped for consequences.

The qualitative accounts suggests expectations were not static measures against which the inquiry was judged, but evolved through participation. The TP took a TIA which was substantively different to traditional institutional approaches and served to enhanced hopes for institutional change, which was subsequently perceived as withheld. This connects this theme of deferred closure to that of hollowed validation and liminal selves.

As indicated earlier, in Figure 5: Perceived Government Valuation of IICSA Evidence and Recommendations, the sense that the state did not value participants’ contributions and the IICSA recommendations contributed to a sense that the inquiry remained unresolved.

3.5.3 Summary: Theme 5

Participants frequently described the inquiry as formally concluded but experientially unfinished. IICSA is experienced then as an ongoing moral, emotional and relational process rather than a time-bound event. Closure was understood as the alignment of testimony and structural change. The perceived absence of government action was therefore experienced as a failure of the state's moral obligations to the participants, their testimony and children who continue to be abused. There was a sense of an unspoken moral contract binding the state beyond the procedural end of the inquiry, through which the state, having taken testimony was expected to enact the recommendations.

This sense of 'unfinishedness,' for many, extends the inquiry beyond its procedural ending into an ongoing sense of responsibility to the IICSA recommendations for the state and participants. Participants describe feeling morally tied to their past experiences, fellow survivors and the protection of children generally. The bureaucratic slowness of government was not viewed as neutral but a state failure, reflecting state values. Although some viewed change as incremental, for many the lack of action rendered the inquiry incomplete and ongoing, an open loop which requires closing.

Deferred closure impacted their experience of time. Some participants were understood to occupy a liminal space, between the past and hoped for future in which meaningful change might occur. By refusing to close IICSA then, participants could remain hopeful for the possibility of state action. Deferred closure therefore captures how institutional inaction reconfigures participants' temporal relationship to the inquiry,

preventing them moving on whilst sustaining a sense that the work initiated at IICSA remains unresolved.

This unfinishedness also connects with other themes. The hollowing of validation in Theme 1 was reinforced by the absence of closure, while the ongoing sense of responsibility often fuelled continued advocacy (Theme 2). Remaining morally and temporally tied to the inquiry also echoed the liminal identity described in Theme 3, as participants are neither fully outside the inquiry nor fully within it. The sense of deferred closure in Theme 5 maintained some participants in continued relationship to IICSA. However, for many the delays in meaningful change required them to negotiate how and when they engaged in advocacy over time, with some describing periods of withdrawal and re-engagement as they managed fluctuating emotional capacity. Theme 6 explores this cyclical activist engagement as a strategy of self-regulation within the context of prolonged state torpor.

3.6 Theme 6: “I took myself away from it… and I held on to it for a purpose”: Cyclical activist engagement as self-regulation.

3.6.1 Interview data

This theme captures some participants’ comments around how they lived and managed their activism. For many, activism did not follow a linear trajectory, instead describing periods of active engagement and periods of withdrawal as they monitored their emotional capacity.

Although some were consistent in their activism, those participants had generally been involved in activism over the long-term before IICSA, often in a professional capacity. Others, often new to sharing and activism, described their response to IICSA and activist engagement as something that had to be paced and cycled in response to fluctuating capacity which protected them from overwhelm. Cyclical engagement refers to patterned movement between periods of active activism and intentional withdrawal. This is understood as a strategy of self-care, emotional regulation and long-term sustainability. Thus, cyclicality in engagement is seen as often purposeful and dynamic and withdrawal not as disengagement or apathy but a temporary act of self-care.

Activism is emotionally demanding and requires participants to monitor their capacity. As Colleen commented, activism could be temporarily “put to one side” until they felt able to return to it again. With the inquiry recommendations understood as unimplemented and the moral responsibility to them ongoing, pacing became essential. Cyclical engagement allowed participants to live with deferred closure without collapsing into burnout, and withdrawal allowed participants to remain connected to inquiry goals without becoming overwhelmed.

Several participants described stepping back from activism after contributing to IICSA. Moira describes how testifying initially opened up a process of emotional reflection which had previously been closed off. She explained that participation “sowed the seeds” for the “start of the healing” but afterwards she “shut down again.” The imagery of seeds suggests that the healing emerged gradually over time rather than immediately. Her temporary withdrawal appears then not a rejection of activism,

but a pause within a longer process. She later describes returning to activism several years later as result of her earlier engagement, “Had I not done the… evidence, I don't think I'd have done what I've done in the last 2-3 years.” This suggests that the cyclical pattern of engagement and retreat is a form of emotional pacing and self-protection within a larger healing process, rather than simply disengagement.

Francine had a similar experience where she took a few years away from activism around the inquiry before returning. Reflecting on this time she notes, “I did feel I was floating around not doing anything for a year or two. But I probably also needed that quiet time so I was okay with it.” “Quiet time” suggests withdrawal can be restorative. Rather than representing a loss of care about the inquiry, it was constructed retrospectively as a necessary pause within a longer cycle of withdrawal and renewed engagement.

Rachel described how participation in the TP generated a surge of empowerment which led to speaking at conferences and sharing her experiences publicly. She recalled how these opportunities were “massively empowering” and it felt “amazing to be able to do that.” However, However, she also reflected, “it is hugely important, but I guess then it was, like, I sort of ran out of steam as well and I didn't really know like what to do with it.” She had got herself into “a little bit of a whirlwind of like, sharing” whilst “not appreciating obviously the impact that it actually has on yourself as a person to, sort of, share that openly.” The “whirlwind” imagery conveys how rapidly her activism had escalated, whilst “ran out of steam” reflects the emotional exhaustion that followed. Participants’ activism can be emotional labour and, as such, risks exhaustion or burnout. In this account activism is both

empowering and draining, requiring participants to balance the desire for advocacy with the need to protect their own wellbeing.

Colleen also speaks of how she had reached the limits of her capacity after receiving the IICSA report: “I didn't look at it and I didn't read through it and I didn't read the recommendation so I think I reached a limit and I just needed to put it to one side. But I'm really glad now I'm in a place when I can look at it.” However, she recalls deliberately keeping it on her bookshelf even whilst distancing herself from it. When someone suggested she should discard it, she resisted, explaining that she “knew I did not want to get rid of it and I held on to it for a purpose. And the purpose is now.” She acknowledges she “cut off from it and I'm now engaging with it again. It'll only end when all the recommendations were taken up…” The report on the bookcase may be understood as a symbolic object, representing her paused activism, temporarily archived, not discarded. Although her engagement with the inquiry had temporarily been halted, the physical presence of the report maintained a connection and preserved future possible re-engagement. Her renewed engagement also remained connected to IICSA’s unresolved status, ‘it’ll only end when all the recommendations are taken up.”

In contrast to cyclical engagement, some participants described a pattern of sustained activism. Dorothy explained that “every single day” she works to bring awareness to the IICSA recommendations, sharing excerpts from anonymised summaries and tagging the inquiry in social media posts: “I’m keeping it [IICSA] alive.” Her emphasis on the daily work suggests that activism has become integrated into her daily life and sense of self. She describes how “ICCSA’s become my life

now… ‘cause I won’t let it go,” explaining that “there's a duty, to keep banging on the door” and “there isn't a choice for me.” Rather than cycling between engagement and withdrawal, advocacy appears to have stabilised into sustained activism providing purpose and identity.

However, this stability was not without cost. When the interviewer described Dorothy’s activism as “a lot to carry”, Dorothy agreed, but responded, “What else can you do?” Her response captures an ambivalence within sustained activism: the same sense of identity and moral purpose that sustains her engagement also makes putting the burden down appear almost impossible..

The emotional costs of sustained engagement were also evident in Derek's account. Reflecting on the considerable amount of testimony he had listened to as part of his involvement, he explained that “that hurt, that really hurt, that really hurt my mind.” More broadly, he acknowledged that sustained involvement “does take from you.” His account further illustrates that continued activism can provide enduring commitment whilst still exacting an cost.

This theme attempts to capture how some participants described their engagement with IICSA or activism more generally following the public inquiry. Rather than seeing withdrawal as a failure or disengagement, time away was seen as a necessary self-preservation strategy. It reflects the emotionally draining aspect of activism requiring participants to negotiate their capacity, with re-engagement occurring when they felt ready to return. Withdrawal can be understood as an expression of agency. A cyclical engagement may sustain involvement over the long

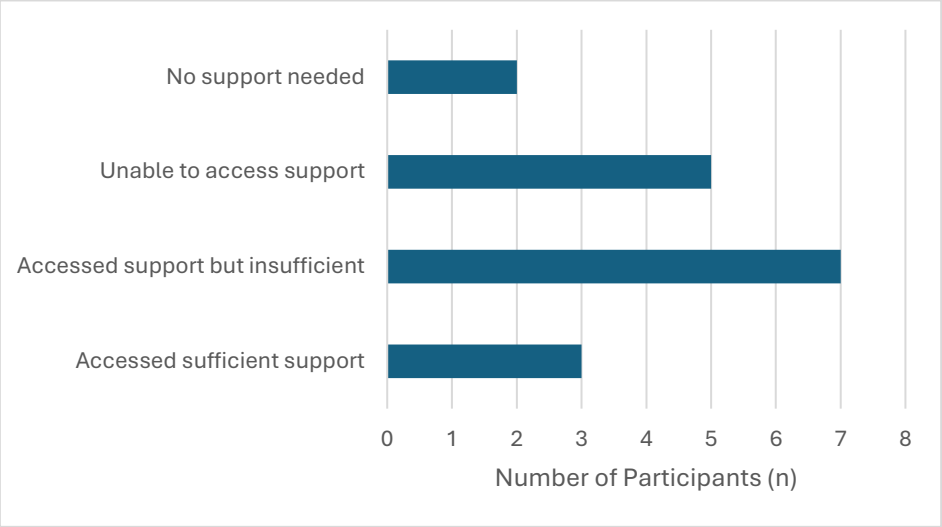
term enabling survivors to maintain commitment to the inquiry goals while managing the emotional costs of prolonged activism. For others, activism had stabilised into a more continuous pattern, providing a sustaining sense of identity and purpose, but with the moral commitment underpinning that activism making withdrawal difficult despite its emotional burden.

3.6.2 Survey data

The need to pace activism was also reflected in the survey responses concerning access to support following participation in the inquiry (Figure 12). They show how participants regulated or sought to regulate the impacts of CSA.

Figure 12

Access to and Adequacy of Support Following Participation in IICSA



Note. Participants responded to the statement: "I have engaged with support specifically related to the abuse I experienced after contributing." Response options reflected levels of access to and adequacy of support (see Appendix D).

While some participants reported not needing support, some accessed what they needed, many needed more, and some could not access it at all. These patterns and variability suggest that engagement in IICSA generated help-seeking for some. The variability in participants' ability to access support further illuminates why cyclical engagement may have become necessary and provides further context for patterns of cyclical activism. When services are inconsistent or insufficient, participants have to manage the consequences of abuse independently. In such situations, stepping back from activism which requires a lot emotional labour would function as a form of self-

care and preservation. With limited emotional resources and inconsistent support, constant activism would be understandably challenging.

Similarly, in the open survey responses, cyclical engagement may be understood within a larger struggle for institutional support. CSA often requires life-long support and services. However, inconsistent support services would potentially reduce a participant's capacity to engage in advocacy beyond managing the impact of CSA, as one participant said, "I'm tired of fighting to get my therapy needs met." Stepping back at times of overwhelm from other emotionally draining pursuits, such as activism, makes sense. Activism is just one aspect of that legacy of trauma, "It's just one part of a huge array of things I do, so I cannot separate it out." Such withdrawals then enable a far longer-term, if fluctuating, activism. Survivors are fighting not just for the recommendations, but also their own support. The struggle to get assistance from institutions resonates with the fight to get meaningful change from the state.

The life-wide impacts illustrated in Figure 11, Perceived Areas of Life Improved and Worsened Following Participation in IICSA (see above), also helps explain why participants described stepping back from activism at times and towards it at others. Contributing impacts life post-IICSA in a variety of ways with respondents showing improvements in emotional wellbeing and deterioration in other life domains. Contributing then can exacerbate aspects of trauma which will impact participants' capacity to engage in activism as they often face a variety of challenges.

3.6.3 Summary: Theme 6

This theme shows that although some participants maintain a constant activism, for many, it does not have a linear trajectory, but reflects a negotiated process of endurance. A cycle of engagement and withdrawal allows participants to sustain their involvement over time. This pattern is seen to function as a strategy of emotional regulation and self-care within an environment of institutional delay, inconsistent or absent support and ongoing moral responsibility.

This theme connects with the others developed here. Activism, started or deepened through testifying (Theme 2), often needs sustaining carefully, particularly if the inquiry is considered unfinished (Theme 5). The ebb and flow of such activism may contribute to participants' experiences of liminal identity (Theme 3), positioning them at different moments as active advocates and disengaged former participants. Stepping back in response to one's own capacity was often construed as an empowered act. Moving between engagement and withdrawal therefore reflected a form of self-directed regulation, distinct from the externally imposed silencing participants associated with earlier experiences.

This cyclical pattern was sustained by the perception that the recognition experienced during the inquiry had been hollowed out by the state's response (Theme 1) and that the inquiry remained incomplete until its recommendations were implemented (Theme 5). Alternating between engagement and withdrawal allowed participants to remain committed to the goals of their testimony while managing the emotional demands of prolonged activism and an ongoing sense of responsibility to themselves and others.

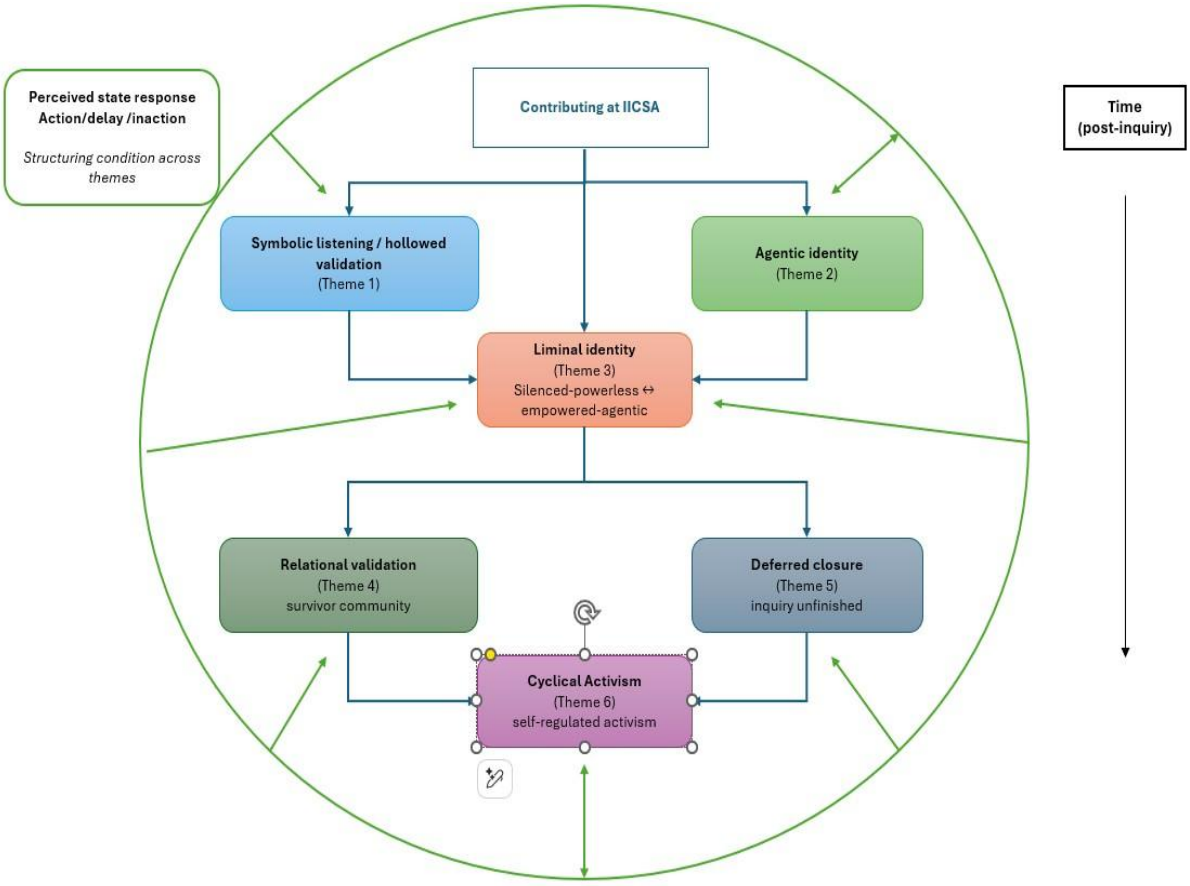
Across the themes participation is patterned as neither wholly empowering nor disappointing, but layered, morally charged and temporally extended. The next section considers how these themes work together.

3.7 Summary of Themes

The themes presented above show an understanding of how participants were interpreting and responding to their experiences of contributing to IICSA and its aftermath. Whilst each theme captures a distinct dimension of this process, they also interact to form a broader pattern shaped by perceived state responses to the inquiry's recommendations. The thematic model in Figure 13 visually represents these relationships, illustrating how recognition, identity negotiation, relational validation and activist engagement unfolded around perceived state (in)action. The model therefore provides a visual summary of the analytic connections between the themes identified.

Figure 13

Model of Survivor Responses to the Legacy of IICSA



This model shows how survivor experiences following participation in IICSA unfolded through interconnected processes of recognition, identity negotiation and activism. Participation in the inquiry generated institutional recognition and opportunity for survivors to reposition themselves as agents of change. These processes interacted to produce a liminal identity position between empowerment and renewed marginalisation. Survivors navigated this through relational validation within

survivor communities and by interpreting the inquiry as unfinished due to perceived delays or inaction in implementing the recommendations. Cyclical activist engagement emerged as a self-regulating strategy that allowed survivors to sustain advocacy while managing emotional capacity. Perceived state response forms a structuring condition across these processes impacting each. While this is generally experienced as a one-way process, the development of a agentic identity and cyclical activism also impacts the state response.

The thematic model illustrates complex and ongoing negotiations shaped by the seeming government response. These dynamics highlight that participants' experiences of IICSA and how its after-effects were neither wholly empowering nor wholly disappointing, but layered and evolving over time. The final section looks to participants' overall evaluative stance, exploring how they reflected on their participation.

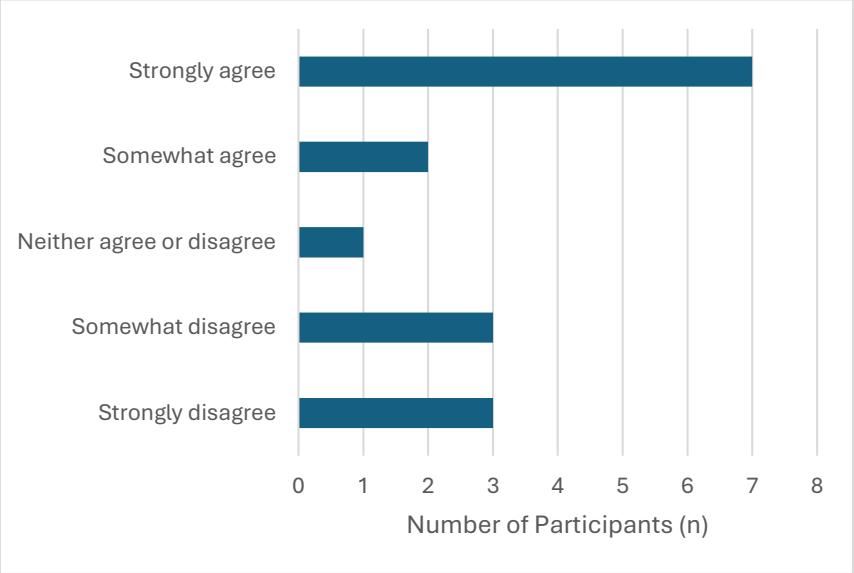
3.8 Overall evaluative stance: recommending participation

While the preceding themes explored how participants understood their experiences, it's important to consider how they ultimately evaluated their participation. Inquiries invite survivors to testify with the promise that it will contribute to learning and social change. However, the themes suggest that this is complex and participants may experience profound recognition and intense distress. To capture their overall reflections participants were asked whether they would recommend contributing to an inquiry (Figure 14). Participants responses indicate how they weighed up their experience.

Asked whether they would recommend participating in an inquiry to others gave a mixed response (Figure 14). Most agreed, a significant proportion disagreed, and some were neutral.

Figure 14

Extent to Which Participants Would Recommend Participation in a Public Inquiry



Note. Participants responded to the statement: “I would recommend participating in a public inquiry to others.” Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

The respondents then are polarised but positively leaning. Whilst many found value in it, a number would not recommend it, reflecting a complex evaluative position. The variety in responses reflects the layered and often contradictory

meanings described in the themes. This mirrors the experiences we constructed of validation being hollowed out, a liminal self pulled between empowered and silenced selves, and feeling morally significant and disappointed. Decisions about recommending engagement in inquiries appear to involve weighing personal self-affirmation, validation and public responsibility against distress, a sense of being devalued and scepticism regarding governmental responses.

Taken all together the findings indicate that participants' experiences of the inquiry and its aftermath are complex and evolving rather than uniformly positive or negative. Whilst participation often provided recognition and the opportunity to position oneself as an agent of change, the perceived absence of meaningful state action undermined that recognition for many. Survivors were understood as navigating a liminal position between empowerment and renewed marginalisation, seeking relational validation through community whilst experiencing the inquiry as unfinished. The mixed evaluative responses reflect these tensions. The discussion chapter now considers these findings around scholarship on recognition, survivor voice and institutional accountability.

3.9 Results Reflective Note

I reached a point with the results where I started to worry about whether I was writing participants' expressed experiences in ways they would not recognise. I noticed that I felt uncomfortable about that. Interpretations of 'liminality' and multiple 'selves' are not terms that everyone might feel are accessible. It runs the risk of putting me in the 'expert' position, when they are the experts in their experiences.

Interpretation is never neutral and so it inherently uses the wider power structures. The purpose of RTA is to show patterned meaning across participants and so although my concern may be for individuals, the analysis tries to makes sense across the data set, rather than a particular participant.

I took this to supervision, and we considered how important RTA's interpretative element is (Braun & Clarke, 2022), that it is necessary to take the analysis beyond a description, and how I brought these terms to the analysis, so they reflect the journey I took with the results. The concept of liminality is from my background in religious studies for example. However, language matters, especially when talking about marginalised groups and groups you do not belong to, consulting with the lived experience supervisor was important then as we can be blind to our own biases.

We also considered that this analysis is context bound, the thesis is for an academic audience, but the output can be in various formats and disseminated in different ways. We considered doing a webinar with The Survivor's Trust, and an laypersons' summary.

4. Discussion

The aim of this research was to understand how survivors make sense of the longer-term legacy of IICSA, including its recommendations and governmental responses. These findings respond to calls to examine how inquiries are experienced by participants, rather than relying solely on inquiry reports (Goodwin et al., 2025). The findings suggest participation provided meaningful opportunities for recognition and voice, enabling many to reposition themselves as agents of change. However, where recognition was not followed by state action it became undermined. As a result, participants described themselves as both empowered and marginalised, occupying a liminal position between these states, shifting between them depending on context. For many, this was sustained by community relationships, viewing the inquiry as unfinished and cyclical forms of activist engagement.

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to wider literature, before offering a critique of the study's design and methodology, implications for clinical practice and directions for future research. A section on self-reflexivity follows, before the conclusion.

4.1 Discussion of findings

4.1.1 Recognition, voice and institutional response

Public inquiries are frequently framed as mechanisms through which institutions acknowledge harm and provide survivors with opportunities to be heard. Recent discussions of public inquiries emphasise the importance of survivor testimony as an opportunity to be heard, a form of recognition and institutional

acknowledgement (Burgess, 2011; Ireton, 2023; McAlinden & Naylor, 2016; Statutory Inquiries Committee, 2024; Wyles et al., 2022). In our study, participants described sharing their experiences with IICSA as validating. Contributing to the inquiry, particularly through the TP, enabled many to feel heard and acknowledged in ways they had not experienced before. However, this recognition was widely described as hollowed out over time when not followed by visible governmental action. Recognition was therefore experienced as both meaningful and fragile, dependent on perceived explicit state action.

This dynamic can be understood through recognition theory. Honneth (1995) argues recognition is not simply acknowledgment but a moral affirmation of an individual's status as a valued member of society. Being heard in institutional contexts then carries significant implications for identity and self-worth. For CSA survivors, who often describe histories of disbelief, marginalisation and silencing, speaking and recognition within a public inquiry can be powerful. However, recognition also generates expectations. When institutional action does not follow, the recognition may become undermined, leading individuals to question whether the testimony has been valued, and their own self-worth in that process.

Building on this, procedural justice theory helps explain how recognition is experienced in practice. Perceptions of fairness depend on outcomes and whether individuals feel they have been given meaningful voice within decision-making processes (Brockner et al., 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Lind, 1992). IICSA's emphasis on survivor testimony, particularly through the TP and VSCP, appears to have initially fostered a sense of legitimacy and procedural fairness.

However, when participants perceived themselves as voiceless post-inquiry, this sense was undermined. The absence of governmental action weakened recognition, transforming perceptions of the inquiry from fair to invalidating.

This relationship can also be understood through the lens of epistemic (in)justice (Fricker, 2007). Public inquiries may offer forms of epistemic repair by recognising survivors as credible knowers of their own experiences. This was significant at IICSA because of CSA survivors' testimonial and hermeneutical epistemic marginalisation historically (Rouf & Taggart, 2021; Whittier, 2009). While participants initially experienced some epistemic repair through the inquiry's trauma-informed approach (Barker, Taggart, et al., 2023), our findings suggest such repair is difficult to sustain without visible institutional response. Where testimony did not lead to meaningful change, participants described their credibility and knowledge as implicitly questioned. Addressing epistemic injustice therefore may require listening *and* demonstrating that testimony has been heard through action.

These dynamics also resonate with the concept of institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014), further complicating the relationship between recognition and response. Participants appeared to testify within a framework of anticipated responsibility, often expressing distress, for example, that the state had not acted on recommendations to protect children, an explicit hope for many (Hilton, 2025). While shaped partly by broader expectations of inquiries, this perceived failure of meaningful response created a sense of being let down by the institution to which survivors had entrusted their experiences. Such failures may contribute to

retraumatisation (Selwyn et al., 2021; Smith & Freyd, 2014), suggesting that recognition without response may be insufficient and harmful.

This recognition and response tension aligns with critiques of public inquiries as symbolic entities. Ashforth (1990) characterises them as a “form of symbolic ritual” (p.12) through which the state demonstrates openness and care. Whilst such rituals may signal acknowledgement, they do not necessarily produce structural change. The findings highlight the tension between these symbolic functions and participants’ expectations of substantive action. They extend discussions of inquiries as spaces for survivor voices (Burgess, 2011; Ireton, 2018, 2023) by demonstrating that the durability of recognition depends on whether testimony is translated into visible institutional response.

Taken together, this literature positions public inquiries within a complex system of recognition and legitimacy. Although they may offer important opportunities for symbolic listening, epistemic repair, validation and voice, their long term impact and sustainability appears dependant on whether governments act on recommendations. There is limited research exploring how participants interpret and negotiate the longer-term legacy of such inquiries. Understanding how recognition, voice and institutional response interact over time is therefore important for assessing the enduring impact. These dynamics also shaped how participants understood themselves, with many describing a shift from private survivors to public agents of change.

4.1.2 Identity repositioning and survivor agency

While recognition through the inquiry was experienced as meaningful, it also enabled participants to reinterpret their experiences in ways that reshaped identity and agency. Many described a shift from individual survivors to public agents of change, suggesting participation facilitated a self-repositioning from a recipient of harm to a political actor.

Herman (1992/2015) helps explain this transformation. Empowerment, a core aspect of recovery, is gained through confronting danger and is often accompanied by a shift towards social action. Testifying can be understood as such an act, a conscious decision to face trauma and assert voice. Participants' accounts reflect personal recovery and the recreation of their self. This is a reorientation towards collective responsibility, as individual harm was reframed as social injustice.

This can also be understood through empowerment theory. Rappaport (1987) conceptualises empowerment as gaining control and contributing to social change. Participation in IICSA, particularly the TP and VSCP, appears to have facilitated this by positioning survivors as knowledgeable contributors. In doing so, participants became empowered and took on a sense of moral responsibility to others.

Zimmerman (1995) suggests empowerment involves shifts in self-perception, knowledge and action. Participants here described increased confidence, a sense of expertise grounded in lived experience, and engaging in behaviours aimed at bringing about change, contributing to an agentic identity.

These findings align with literature on survivor activism, where reclaiming voice in supportive contexts can catalyse social action (Aharoni Lir, 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023). Aharoni Lir (2023) suggests a ‘safe voice’ developed in supportive environments may evolve into a more assertive voice capable of challenging institutions. Participants found the TP safe and welcoming, enabling this shift. Moral motivation also appeared central. Experiences of perceived moral values violations can drive collective action (van Zomeren, 2013). Participants’ linked personal experiences of abuse with a commitment to protect others, fostered a sense of responsibility for change, echoing the idea that “the personal is political” (Rogan & Budgeon, 2018).

Arendt's (1958/1998) conception of speech as political action provides another lens for understanding these dynamics. She argues that individuals enter the public realm through speech and action, revealing themselves as agents capable of initiating change. From this perspective, testifying within a public inquiry can be understood as recounting harm and political action through which survivors assert themselves as participants in public life. Participants’ accounts of reclaiming voice and engaging in advocacy resonate with this idea of appearing publicly as agents.

Participants’ accounts also described accountability as operating across multiple levels. As Moira noted, participation connected “my accountability, my school’s accountability, and then that community accountability.” This layered responsibility reflects a broader function of public inquiries as mechanisms for tracing harm across individual, institutional and societal domains (Hayner, 2011b; McAlinden & Naylor, 2016). This is consistent with transitional justice processes, where

testimony links personal experiences to wider structures of responsibility (Hayner, 2011b; Teitel, 2000).

It also resonates with “chains of accountability” identified in the Safer Futures project (Braithwaite et al., 2025), suggesting testimony situates survivors within a broader architecture of responsibility beyond the immediate context of abuse. Inquiry participation can therefore be understood as a form of moral and political positioning, whereby survivors locate responsibility beyond individual perpetrators to institutional and societal systems.

However, this process also involved an internalisation of moral responsibility. In positioning themselves as agents of change, some survivors appeared to take on responsibility for pursuing accountability and preventing harm. Whilst this may be empowering, it raises tensions. Where responsibility is assumed by survivors, there is a risk institutional actors may, implicitly or explicitly, abdicate their responsibilities (Cohen, 2001). In such contexts, accountability may become diffused and the moral urgency of institutional response weakened, especially where political change and changing governments disrupt continuity.

Although participants positioned themselves within these chains of accountability as agents of change, the perceived failure of institutions to reciprocate this responsibility exposed the limits of this agency. Consequently, the empowerment associated with testimony became difficult to sustain, contributing to the unstable, liminal identity described in the following section. This suggests participants expected accountability of themselves and institutions, and when unmet, it destabilised the agentic identity constructed through participation.

Public inquiries may therefore function as sites of personal recovery and political activation. While participation enabled survivors to construct an agentic identity, the perceived absence of meaningful institutional action often undermined this position. As a result, agency was experienced as contingent and, for some, difficult to sustain consistently over time.

4.1.3 Liminal identity and recognition without change

While participation enabled many survivors to reposition themselves as agents of change, this sense of empowerment was often unstable when not sustained by institutional action. Participants described an ongoing tension between the validation/agency gained through testifying and renewed marginalisation in the absence of governmental response. Rather than a linear transition from victimhood to empowerment, these accounts suggest a more complex identity dynamic in which empowerment and vulnerability coexisted. This is captured in the concept of liminal identity, a position between a silenced-powerless self and an empowered-agentic self.

Drawing on Turner's (1967) concept of liminality as a state of being “betwixt and between” roles, participants occupied an in-between position in which they were neither fully silenced nor fully empowered. While liminality was originally conceptualised as temporary, Szakolczai's (2016) ‘permanent liminality’ helps explain its enduring nature in the absence of institutional resolution. Identity following participation was not linear but contingent and relational, shaped by the extent recognition was sustained through state response.

This instability can also be understood in the relational nature of action. Arendt (1958/1998) argues individuals appear as political actors through speech, but action depends on the recognition of others which makes it inherently fragile. In this context, testifying enabled survivors to enter the public sphere as credible witnesses and agents of change. However, without government recognition and response their action remained only partially realised. Liminal identity thus reflects the fragile and relational nature of action when it is not taken up within broader social and political contexts.

The fluctuating nature of this identity can further be understood through trauma and narrative frameworks. Reconstructing identity after trauma is not linear. As Herman (1992/2015) notes recovering identity requires ongoing renegotiation and is never complete. Issues that felt resolved may be reawakened. Wright (2016) suggests testifying brings the adult and child self into relation, supporting our idea of the coexistence of multiple identities rather than their replacement. Similarly, Somers (1994) conceptualises identity as continuously constructed through changing relations of time, place and power. The processual and relational nature of identity makes sense of the multiple selves we found which fluctuate depending upon the shifting relationship with the state over time.

This can be further understood through trauma and narrative frameworks that highlight how trauma is reproduced within relational and institutional contexts. Bloom's (2010) concept of trauma and parallel process suggests that unresolved trauma may be unconsciously reproduced across systems, with institutions mirroring the dynamics they seek to address. Inquiry processes then risk re-enacting earlier

experiences of powerlessness, particularly where survivors encounter indifference, delay, or lack of meaningful response. For participants harmed within institutional settings, engagement with the inquiry may involve recounting trauma and encountering its structural repetition.

From this perspective, the absence of sustained institutional change may place survivors in a position of reliving aspects of their earlier victimisation, reinforcing feelings of helplessness and marginalisation. Rather than resolving trauma, the process may become repetitive and, at times, re-traumatising. Bloom suggests systems that fail to reflect on and transform their practices are vulnerable to such processes. This is especially significant for public inquiries, positioned as mechanisms for institutional learning. When they fail to translate recognition into action, they risk reproducing the failures they seek address. Repeated inaction may therefore reactivate earlier trauma and undermine the recognition upon which survivors' emerging identities depend, echoing dynamics of institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

This re-enactment of institutional indifference can also be understood as a failure to sustain recognition. Recognition theory also helps explain this dynamic. Honneth (1995) argues that recognition is relational and its absence or withdrawal causes harm either psychologically, denying identity and value, or materially. Participants' experiences suggest that recognition conferred through the inquiry remained contingent on subsequent state action; when absent, validation and associated identity was undermined, contributing to the re-emergence of marginalised

identities. Thus, institutional inaction reactivates earlier trauma and undermines the recognition upon which survivors' emerging identities depend.

Similar dynamics have been observed in transitional justice contexts where truth telling can generate recognition without structural reform (Sandoval Villalba, 2011), leaving survivors in a prolonged transitional state in which recognition and unresolved injustice coexist. The present findings extend this by showing how such conditions are experienced at the level of identity.

The destabilisation of empowerment can also be understood through distinctions within community psychology between psychological empowerment and structural power. Psychological empowerment refers to individuals' perceived agency and control (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995). Inquiry participation appeared to foster this through recognition and voice. However, decision-making authority and recommendation implementation remained with governmental institutions. As community psychology notes, participatory processes may generate empowerment without altering underlying power relations (Prilleltensky, 2008; Rappaport, 1987). The "fall" described by participants can therefore be understood not as a loss of empowerment, but as a recognition of its limits in the absence of structural change.

This tension between psychological empowerment and structural constraint provides an important lens for understanding liminal identity here. It also helps to explain fluctuating participant engagement, as sustaining an agentic identity without institutional change required ongoing negotiation of emotional and political capacity (see later).

Liminal identity captures how empowerment generated through recognition becomes unstable when not sustained through institutional action. Rather than moving towards a stable post-inquiry identity, participants appear to shift between empowered and marginalised positions shaped by state response. Identity remained continuously negotiated around changing social and institutional contexts, suggesting the legacy of public inquiries is institutional and identity-forming. Where state recognition was experienced as unstable, many participants sought alternative sources of validation and meaning through relationships with others who shared similar experiences.

4.1.4 Relational validation and survivor community

In the context of unstable and contingent recognition from the state, participants often sought alternative sources of validation through relationships with others who shared similar experiences. This highlights the importance of relational validation, understood as the recognition and affirmation of identity through horizontal rather than hierarchical institutional relationships. Participants described connections with other survivors as meaningful and sometimes stabilising, offering a sense of being understood and believed beyond the inquiry. Community therefore functioned as a site through which participants could sustain or renegotiate their sense of self in the absence of consistent institutional recognition.

This form of horizontal recognition resonates with Honneth's (1995) emphasis on intersubjective recognition in sustaining identity and self-worth. As institutional recognition may counter epistemic injustice, relational recognition can do likewise. Community can also foster belonging (Van Kessel et al., 2026), counteracting the

isolation and stigma associated with CSA. Thus, belonging may be empowering, shifting validation from state recognition to horizontal relationships (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1987), and cathartic, providing an alternative to stigmatised identities (Muldoon et al., 2024).

Beyond individual validation, community also shapes collective identity. Social identity theory suggests group membership provides a framework through which individuals understand themselves and their experiences (Tajfel et al., 1979). This is reflected in Koudenburg et al.'s (2024) concept of "shared reality," where identity is reinforced through interaction and a sense of "we-ness." Participants' accounts suggest connection with others enabled mutual validation of meaning, supporting the development of individual and collective identity. This collective identification was often linked to a shared moral purpose around advocacy and efforts to ensure institutional change (Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; van Zomeren, 2013), making community and the emerging agentic identity mutually reinforcing.

However, these experiences of connection were not always stable or sustained. Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas* captures the intensity of shared experience in liminal settings such as the inquiry, but also its fragility. Participants described finding and missing community, suggesting that relational validation was not consistently available.

This unevenness or fractured nature can be further understood through the lens of shame. Drawing on Sedgwick (2003), Taggart & Wright (Forthcoming) suggest that failures of recognition within a group, especially among those with early

experiences of shame, may trigger a “chain reaction of shame” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 64). Shame as a relational response to disrupted recognition, arising when connection is unmet or refused, is contagious and individuating, producing heightened sensitivity to further experiences of exclusion/misrecognition. Moments of perceived invalidation within survivor communities may therefore reverberate beyond the immediate interaction contributing to fractured or difficult relationships.

This perspective extends and complicates Honneth's (1995) account of recognition. While Honneth positions recognition as foundational to identity, justice and self-worth, Sedgwick highlights how its absence generates harm and ongoing emotional reactivity that shape relational dynamics. Community then is a site of validation and one in which vulnerabilities associated with prior misrecognition may be reactivated.

These dynamic are further illuminated by Hillman et al.'s (2022) social verification theory, which suggests reduced belongingness produces chronic invalidation by threatening the need to have one’s subjective and social realities recognised. This is salient where individuals are brought together around abuse and institutional recognition, given many participants’ early experiences by denial or disbelief. In such settings, the verification of shared realities can foster belonging and validation.

However, perceived inconsistency with the group may evoke a heightened threat of non-belonging. When this cannot be avoided, individuals may try to restore alignment; if unsuccessful, distancing from the group may become the only means of

alleviating distress. This helps explain experiences of fragmentation and ‘splitting’ within survivor communities. In this way, the absence of validation may reactivate earlier misrecognition, rendering community potentially supportive and emotionally complex.

Community was also sometimes experienced as partial or imagined rather than fully realised. This resonates with Anderson's (1983/2016) notion of “imagined communities,” as well as Wenger's (1998) argument that belonging can be constituted through imagination. For some then, awareness of other survivors generated a meaningful connection even without sustained relationships. At the same time, Bauman (2001) suggests social conditions often produce a longing for community that is difficult to fulfil. Trauma literature similarly highlights the importance and difficulty of rebuilding trust and connection after abuse (Herman, 1992/2015). Together, these perspectives help explain accounts of finding and missing community, positioning relational validation as partial, fragile and, sometimes, aspirational.

While community offered an important source of support, validation and identity affirmation, it did not resolve participants’ sense that the inquiry remained unfinished, pointing to the temporal dimensions of justice explored next.

4.1.5 Deferred closure and temporal justice

Participants’ accounts suggest that, although the inquiry had formally concluded, it remained experientially unfinished. Many described feeling the process could not be considered complete until its recommendations were meaningfully implemented, reflecting a temporal understanding of justice in which recognition is

assessed over time rather than at a single moment. Closure was then not a procedural or psychological endpoint but dependent on alignment between testimony and structural change. In the absence of visible progress, the inquiry became an ongoing process, extending beyond its formal conclusion. Closure was therefore located not within the individual but in institutional action over time.

This perspective nuances existing discussions of expectations within public inquiries. Ireton (2023) argues that inquiries are characterised by competing and often irreconcilable expectations arising from different stakeholder positions. While this highlights the difficulty of satisfying diverse interests, the present findings suggest expectations are multiple and temporally fluid. Participants' accounts show expectations evolved over the course of the inquiry and its aftermath, shaped by participation and subsequent institutional response. Expectations were therefore not fixed positions, but dynamic and relational processes that shifted over time. This complicates existing accounts by suggesting tensions may arise between different stakeholders and individuals as expectations are reconfigured in response to events. Managing expectations then is not a one-time negotiation, but an ongoing process unfolding across time, contingent on institutional action.

This temporal framing of justice resonates with transitional justice literature, which emphasises that acknowledgement unfolds over extended periods and may remain incomplete without structural reform (Hayner, 2011a; Teitel, 2000). Participants' accounts suggest misalignment between survivor and state temporalities: while survivors expressed urgency grounded in moral responsibility to themselves, others and future children, institutional responses were experienced as

slow, bureaucratic and insufficient. This reflects a tension between competing temporalities: a survivor-centred one oriented towards urgency, recognition and prevention, and an institutional one shaped by procedural, legal and administrative rhythms where delays and failures to implement recommendations can perpetuate harm, magnifying the gap between survivor expectations and institutional response. Similar tensions are evident in research on lived-experience consultants within IICSA, where survivor-led priorities and epistemology conflicted with the slower, procedural epistemologies of legal-administrative systems (Taggart et al., 2025). Such disjunctures echo broader critiques of institutional learning following crises, where delays in implementing recommendations can perpetuate harm (Boin et al., 2008; Elliott & Macpherson, 2010).

The experience of waiting is not neutral but reflects underlying power relations (Schwartz, 1974). Bourdieu (2000) suggests being kept waiting asserts that one's time and social value are lesser, reinforcing power and social inequalities. Participants' frustration and distress can therefore be understood as responses to inaction and the temporal dynamics through which that inaction was experienced. The implication that state time is more valuable than survivors' is painful given prior experiences of marginalisation. Therefore, deferred closure represents a form of ongoing injustice, where recognition is granted but not realised through action.

The question of what constitutes "resolution" is complex. While participants identified implementation of recommendations as central, these were often broadly framed and open-ended. Their value lay in their implementation and what they represented: recognition of harm and a commitment to preventing recurrence. This

aligns with international reparations frameworks, which identify guarantees of non-repetition as a key dimension of justice, alongside acknowledgment and accountability (United Nations, 2005). Closure then is difficult to achieve, as it may depend on policy change and wider social and moral transformations that can remain incomplete.

A further barrier to change is what Lemkin called the ability to “live in a twilight between knowing and not knowing” (Power, 2002, p. 35). While originally applied to genocide, this dynamic may also apply to CSA. IICSA brought knowledge of CSA to the surface, yet there is a concurrent societal drive to ‘not know’ producing a pendulum between recognition and forgetting (Rouf & Taggart, 2021). Deferred closure may therefore reflect bureaucratic delay and a broader difficulty in responding to known injustice, leaving the inquiry experientially unfinished even where formal responses exist.

Procedural justice theory further illuminates this dynamic. Lind and Tyler (1988) argue that fair procedures signal inclusion and social standing, shaping individuals’ perceptions of their relationship to authority. While IICSA initially provided such signals through recognition and voice, the perceived absence of subsequent action may have undermined them, weakening participants’ sense of being valued members of society. As Tyler and Lind (1992) suggest, institutional behaviour shapes individuals’ perceived relationship with society; delays in action therefore risk eroding trust in the inquiry and the state itself.

This dynamic can be further understood through trauma-informed frameworks, which emphasise the role of social and institutional response in shaping the impact of harm. Herman (2023) drawing on London (2011), conceptualises this through the idea of a ‘moral community’ bound by reciprocity and mutual responsibility. Following harm, this community is expected to recognise the survivor’s suffering, provide support, and hold perpetrators to account, thereby restoring survivor belonging. Where such responses are absent, this mutuality breaks down, and survivors may experience isolation, abandonment, and disruption to their sense of belonging. Herman (2023, p. 50) suggests this could lead to a ‘profound sense of dishonor, a disgraced identity,’ which here may be compounded by state inaction. This aligns with Smith & Freyd's (2014) concept of institutional betrayal, whereby institutional failures to respond adequately exacerbates trauma and undermines trust. Delays or inaction following inquiry participation, then, may undermine procedural justice and reactivate or extend trauma through repeated experiences of institutional failure.

These dynamics also reflect Bloom's (2010) parallel process, whereby institutional responses risk reproducing the relational conditions of the original harm. The absence of meaningful action may re-enact earlier experiences of powerlessness, positioning participants again around unresponsive or indifferent institutions. For survivors abused within institutional contexts, this repetition may be salient, suggesting that without substantive change, inquiries risk not resolving harm and reproducing it.

Temporal dynamics further intersect with identity and trauma. Herman (1992/2015) emphasises that recovery is ongoing rather than a fixed endpoint, while

Wright (2016) notes that testimony brings past and present selves into dialogue. For survivors, time may not be experienced linearly, e.g. traumatic past experiences can exist in multiple temporalities, past, present and future. Participants' accounts suggest the inquiry held past harm and future hopes in tension, making it difficult to move beyond the process while outcomes remained unresolved. In this sense, participants occupied a temporal liminality between a past in which they were unheard and a future in which meaningful change had yet to be realised.

This disruption of temporality can be further understood through phenomenological accounts of trauma. Ratcliffe et al. (2014) argue trauma alters the experience of time itself, affecting perceptions of temporal passage and the relationship between past, present and future. Individuals may lose a sense of "moving forward," with the future experienced as lacking structure, openness or continuity. This is closely tied to disruptions in interpersonal trust, which make the future difficult to imagine as different from the present and prevents the past from being reinterpreted in relation to the present or future.

In the present study, then, this provides a temporal lens for understanding participants' difficulties in making sense of their engagement with the inquiry. Testifying may bring past experiences into the present without providing the conditions for their integration, particularly where outcomes remain uncertain. Similarly, perceived inaction may be difficult to situate within a coherent narrative of progress, instead reinforcing a sense of temporal stasis or disruption. Participants' accounts therefore suggest deferred closure and a significant disturbance in temporal orientation, in which past harms, present experiences and anticipated futures remain

entangled and difficult to resolve. This highlights how temporal disjuncture between survivors and institutions may delay resolution and exacerbate disruptions in how time is experienced.

This temporal liminality resonates with transitional justice literature, where individuals may feel “out of sync” with societal timelines or “lost in transition” when justice processes remain incomplete (Mueller-Hirth, 2017; Pedersen & Højer, 2008). The persistence of this in-between or ‘fixed liminality’ (Mueller-Hirth, 2017) state reflects the coexistence of multiple temporalities shaped by unequal power relations (Mueller-Hirth & Oyola, 2018). Survivors may therefore have a different temporality to the government. The refusal to accept that the inquiry is over can be understood not as an inability to move on, but an act of resistance to bureaucratic time and a means of sustaining the possibility of future justice.

Deferred closure is also closely tied to questions of accountability. Public inquiries are intended to establish accountability within complex systems (Bovens, 2007), yet participants perceived substantive and procedural failures in the absence of action. Changing governmental identity over time also aggravates clear accountability as power within the state shifts between political parties and individuals. As the Statutory Inquiries Committee (2024) notes, the lack of formal mechanisms to monitor implementation places an ongoing burden on survivors to sustain pressure for change. Participants’ accounts suggest they experienced this as morally necessary and emotionally demanding, contributing to the sustained and cyclical patterns of activism explored below.

This sense of deferred closure positions the inquiry as an ongoing process rather than a completed event. The absence of timely institutional response is not experienced as a neutral delay, but a meaningful and often distressing phase in its own right.

It is important therefore to situate these findings within their temporal context. This study captures experiences at a point when state response to IICSA remained incomplete. While future implementation could alter participants' evaluations of the inquiry, this does not diminish the significance of the present analysis. Rather, it highlights the importance of attending to the lived experience of the interim period, characterised by uncertainty, delay and unresolved expectations. The temporal gap then between testimony and action emerges as a consequential phase of the inquiry process itself, shaping experiences of recognition, justice and closure. This reinforces the need to understand public inquiries not as discrete events, but as unfolding processes whose meaning develops over time.

Within this context of ongoing uncertainty and deferred closure, participants' engagement did not end with the inquiry but continued over time, often taking cyclical forms as they navigated sustained involvement.

4.1.6 Cyclical activism and sustained engagement

In this context, participants described patterns of engagement that reflected this ongoing and unresolved process as often taking cyclical form. This can be understood as a response to the tension between individual psychological empowerment and structural power. While participation fostered agency and moral

responsibility, meaningful decision-making authority still rested with government. Activism then functioned as an attempt to bridge this gap. However, sustaining such engagement without meaningful institutional response was emotionally demanding. Periods of withdrawal therefore reflected not disengagement, but a necessary form of self-regulation. Cyclical activism can thus be understood as an adaptive strategy for maintaining agency over time where structural change remained uncertain.

Jasper's (2011) cultural constructionist approach highlights the role of emotions in sustaining activism, particularly through "moral shocks," experiences that reveal injustice and compel action. Here, testifying and perceived government inaction can be understood as such shocks: the former initiating engagement, the latter reactivating it over time. Rather than transforming participants' values, these moments appear to sharpen and sustain existing moral commitments, helping explain the cyclical activist engagement observed. While such commitments sustain engagement, they also increase the affective demands, highlighting the emotional labour of maintaining activism long-term.

Cyclical activist engagement can also be understood through activism research, which highlights tensions between its empowering and overwhelming dimensions. Activism has been associated with post-traumatic growth, increasing self-efficacy and purpose (Edstrom & Dolan, 2019; Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020, 2021), as well as, emotional costs, including retraumatisation and burnout (Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). Chen & Gorski (2015) and Strauss Swanson & Szymanski (2020) suggest participants often leave, take breaks or set limits. Our participants' accounts reflect this duality, suggesting movement in

and out of activism represents an ongoing negotiation between its benefits and psychological costs.

The emotional demands of activism can also be understood through Hochschild's (1983/2012) concept of emotional labour, whereby individuals regulate emotions inline with social expectations. For participants, advocacy often involved recounting traumatic experiences and supporting others, requiring sustained emotional management. Stepping back here can then be understood as a necessary boundary-setting rather loss of commitment. More broadly, survivor activism may involve ongoing identity negotiation, as individuals balance advocacy with other aspects of self. This reflects concerns that sustained engagement may fix individuals within a survivor identity, making disengagement important for longer-term wellbeing.

Structural constraints further shape these dynamics. Craddock (2020) notes, activism requires resources, including time, energy and financial stability, that are not equally available. Participants here described navigating activism alongside ongoing health, emotional and social demands, often with limited support. Cyclical engagement may therefore reflect structural inequalities, with individuals negotiating roles as activists challenging the state and survivors looking for support from it.

The cyclical nature of engagement also resonates with trauma theory, which emphasises that recovery is not linear but ongoing and context-dependent (Herman, 1992/2015). Movement in and out of activism can therefore be understood as aligned with the recursive nature of trauma, where empowerment and vulnerability may reemerge over time. Cyclical engagement therefore reflects a form of sustainable

activism that accommodates fluctuating capacity while maintaining commitment without overwhelming psychological cost.

Cyclical activist engagement can be understood as an adaptive response to the conditions created by the inquiry's aftermath. Participants' movement in and out of engagement reflects an ongoing negotiation between moral responsibility, emotional capacity and structural constraint. Without meaningful institutional action, responsibility for change was experienced as shifting onto survivors, requiring continued engagement while necessitating periods of withdrawal for many. Thus, cyclical activism reflects and sustains the broader dynamics identified across the themes, positioning the inquiry as an ongoing and unfinished process. This highlights how, with no institutional resolution, the work of the inquiry is effectively carried forward by those who contributed to it.

While participants' accounts suggest a cyclical pattern of engagement over time, this study was not designed to examine whether this reflects a developmental process, or how such patterns may evolve longitudinally. Understanding whether these cycles shift, stabilise or resolve over time would be an important direction for future research.

4.1.7 Integrative model

Taken together, the findings can be understood through the conceptual model developed in this study (see Figure 13), which positions state (in)action as a central force shaping survivor experience over time. Initial recognition through participation enabled agency, but without institutional action became destabilised, producing

liminal identity positions and a sense of deferred closure. Many survivors sought relational validation through community and sustained engagement through cyclical activism.

This model extends existing understandings of public inquiries by showing how their impact unfolds relationally and temporally, rather than being confined to participation. It aligns with processual and relational accounts of recognition and justice which develop over time around institutional response (Honneth, 1995; Teitel, 2000), and identity as something relational and continuously negotiated within shifting social contexts (Somers, 1994; Turner, 1967). While also highlighting how state inaction can erode trust and institutional legitimacy over time, transforming initial recognition into a site of injustice (Bourdieu, 2000; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Emotional processes further sustain engagement, with moral shocks initiating and reactivating activism, contributing to the cyclical patterns of engagement (Jasper, 2011). Survivor experience then is best understood as an ongoing, relational and temporally mediated process.

4.1.7 Summary

These findings highlight the complex and evolving ways survivors experience public inquiries over time. While participation initially provided recognition and opportunities for agency, the absence of institutional action undermined these gains, producing a sense of hollowed validation and a liminal identity between empowerment and marginalisation. Participants sought relational validation through community, and experienced the inquiry as unfinished.

Time is not experienced neutrally, but is morally and psychologically impacted by state action. Survivor experiences are shaped by participation and the interaction of competing temporalities, where the urgency of survivor expectations is often misaligned with slower institutional responses, resulting in deferred closure, unstable recognition, and ongoing identity negotiation. Activism emerged as a continuation of testimony and a response to governmental inaction, requiring, for some, cyclical engagement to remain sustainable.

These findings suggest the impact of inquiries unfolds over time and depends on the relationship between recognition, survivor agency and institutional response. Their legacy is therefore shaped by their findings and whether outcomes are enacted in practice.

4.2 Overall contribution of the study

This study advances scholarship on survivor participation in public inquiries by showing that recognition alone is insufficient to sustain recognition and empowerment without institutional action. Although participation provided opportunities for voice, recognition and agency, if government action is not perceived as meaningful, these gains are undermined. The findings therefore suggest recognition is dependent on subsequent state action. They also highlight how some survivors navigate their relationship with inquiries through community and cyclical forms of activism.

4.3 Methodological critique

4.3.1 Epistemological positioning and justification of methodology development critique

The pragmatic epistemological position adopted enabled a flexible and problem-focused approach, integrating different knowledge forms. It allowed participants' accounts to be understood as reflecting real institutional processes and as socially constructed experiences. However, this flexibility also presents limitations. Pragmatism's combination of realist and constructivist traditions can create tension when balancing accounts as representing a shared reality with a contextual and subjective nature (Morgan, 2014).

The emphasis on practical usefulness may also risk privileging clarity, potentially smoothing over ambiguity or contradiction in participant accounts. This is relevant researching survivors of CSA where experiences are often complex and difficult to articulate. While the mixed methodological approach was appropriate, recruitment challenges meant qualitative insights were prioritised in the interpretive analysis, reflecting the study's focus on lived experience.

Overall, the epistemological flexibility was considered a strength. The mixed methodology captured the diversity of experiences while identifying shared processes, giving depth and contextual breadth to support a more comprehensive understanding. It also allowed for adaptation in the proposed methodology after low survey responses so as to still provide useful and rich data.

4.3.2 Design critique

The mixed methods design offered a flexible and comprehensive approach to a complex research question, enabling breadth (through the survey) and depth (through interviews). However, several limitations emerged. Although initially designed as explanatory-sequential, recruitment challenges necessitated a shift to a convergent parallel design. This reduced the extent the quantitative findings could meaningfully inform the qualitative approach, limiting the developmental potential of sequential designs (Greene et al., 1989). Consequently, quantitative and qualitative data integration was more limited than intended, and the anticipated benefits of triangulation and complementarity only partially realised (Fetters et al., 2013).

In practice, the qualitative component became analytically central, reflecting the study's focus on lived experience, but creating a methodological and epistemological imbalance. This raises questions about whether the study functioned as fully mixed methods or primarily qualitative research supplemented by quantitative data.

Furthermore, recruitment challenges may have impacted the representativeness and diversity of the sample, particularly within the survey, limiting generalisability. While co-production elements strengthened the sensitivity and relevance of the research design, involvement remained consultative rather than fully collaborative. This meant traditional researcher-participant power dynamics were not entirely mitigated.

Overall, while the design was appropriate and responsive to the research context, these limitations highlight the challenges of implementing mixed methods research in practice, particularly with sensitive populations, and the need to balance methodological ambition with feasibility.

Nevertheless, the design remains a strength, enabling breadth and depth in exploring a complex and sensitive topic. The combination of survey data and semi-structured interviews allowed identification of broader patterns whilst maintaining a focus on lived experience. The qualitative component ensured participant voices remained central, which was important given the topic and previous experiences of silencing. The inclusion of co-production elements enhanced the study's sensitivity and relevance.

4.3.3 Procedure critique

The use of voluntary sampling through survivor organisations and social media was appropriate for accessing a hard-to-reach population, particularly given the topic's sensitivity. However, this approach likely introduced self-selection bias, with participants more engaged in survivor networks or advocacy more likely to take part. This may have resulted in an overrepresentation of individuals with stronger views or ongoing engagement with IICSA. Recruitment challenges also necessitated a shift from an explanatory-sequential to a concurrent design. While a pragmatic and necessary adaptation, it reduced opportunities for iterative development between phases.

Despite this, the procedure was a key strength of the study in its accessibility and sensitivity to participants. Recruitment through survivor networks facilitated access to a hard-to-reach population, while anonymous online surveys enabled safe and self-paced participation. The option of follow-up interviews supported depth of engagement and survivor voice, and online interviews increased accessibility and convenience. The trauma-informed approach, including clear consent processes and appropriate compensation, helped create an ethical and supportive research environment.

4.3.4 Measures critique

The survey was designed to be concise and accessible, reflecting the topic's sensitivity, and minimising participant burden. The inclusion of closed and open-ended questions allowed structured and exploratory responses. However, although current validated measures were not considered appropriate, the use of study-specific items limits reliability and comparability. While informed by existing literature and lived experience input, their psychometric properties are unknown.

The small sample size (n=15) further constrained the quantitative component, limiting analysis to descriptive statistics and reducing the ability to identify meaningful patterns. While data cleaning procedures strengthened validity, the removal of responses and strict inclusion criteria further reduced the dataset.

Nevertheless, the survey measures were carefully designed to balance structure and flexibility. Likert scales enabled the clear assessment of attitudes and perceptions, while free-text responses allowed participants to elaborate. The

development of survey items was informed by existing literature and lived experience input, enhancing relevance and sensitivity. The inclusion of data quality checks and clear exclusion criteria further strengthened the dataset's validity.

4.3.5 Analysis critique

The use of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2019) was appropriate to the study's experiential aims, enabling a rich and nuanced interpretation of participants' accounts. Its iterative and reflexive approach, supported by supervision and reflexive journaling, enhanced the analyses' transparency and credibility by acknowledging the researcher's active role in knowledge production. However, this also places interpretive authority with the researcher, meaning themes reflect a particular analytic perspective rather than a singular "true" account. While this is consistent with the epistemological position of the study, it may limit the reproducibility.

As the analysis was conducted primarily by a single researcher, the themes represent a situated interpretation, which means alternative readings are possible. Although reflexive approaches do not seek consensus, regular supervision provided opportunities for critical reflection, discussion of emerging interpretations, and the exploration of alternative perspectives. While this did not constitute independent coding or consensus validation, it contributed to the depth and rigour of the analysis. Nonetheless, collaborative analysis or participant feedback may have offered further opportunities to refine, extend or strengthen the interpretation, particularly in a study concerned with voice and representation.

Although the study adopted a mixed methods design, quantitative and qualitative data were analysed largely separately and integrated at the interpretive stage. This limited the depth of integration and reduced the extent the different data strands could meaningfully inform one another. The qualitative analysis then became more central, with quantitative data providing contextual support rather than an equal analytic contribution. Nevertheless, the integration of qualitative and quantitative findings at the interpretive stage supported a more comprehensive understanding of the research question.

While RTA was appropriate for exploring participants' experiences, alternative approaches such as grounded theory may have supported more formal theory development, particularly given the emergence of unanticipated themes such as survivor community. However, this would have required a more iterative and theoretically driven sampling strategy than was feasible. RTA therefore remained better aligned with the study's aims of understanding meaning and experience. Overall, the analytic approach allowed for depth and conceptual development.

4.3.6 Participants critique

The study achieved a sample broadly reflective of the TP, particularly in gender and age distribution, which supports a degree of contextual validity. However, the small sample size, particularly in the survey (n=15), limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the quantitative data. Certain groups were underrepresented or absent, most notably ethnic minority participants and men, which is a significant limitation given known barriers to disclosure and participation. This lack of diversity restricts the extent to which the findings can speak to the full range of survivor experiences.

Additionally, the overrepresentation of TP participants, relative to other strands of IICSA, may have shaped the findings towards particular types of engagement. While qualitative samples are necessarily small, the population's heterogeneity and the complexity of the topic inevitably limit the range of experiences captured within the study.

A further limitation concerns the scope of the model developed from the findings. The model reflects patterns identified within the participants' accounts in this study and so should not be understood as representative of all those who participated in IICSA. Those who chose to participate in this research may differ from those who did not, including in the significance they attribute to their inquiry participation and subsequent engagement with activism. Rather than providing a universally applicable account of survivor responses within or beyond IICSA, the model provides a contextually situated conceptualisation of patterns evident within this sample. Nevertheless, the model offers a framework for understanding the varied and complex ways in which survivors may experience and respond to the legacy of IICSA.

Further, the qualitative sample size was appropriate for the study's aims, enabling in-depth exploration of experiences and generating rich, detailed data. The inclusion of participants across different years and forms of engagement with IICSA enhanced the breadth of perspectives. The study then prioritises depth and insight over generalisability, consistent with its qualitative emphasis.

Taken together, the study's methodological strengths and limitations shape the scope and contribution of the findings. While offering rich insight into survivor

experience, these methodological considerations highlight important constraints around representation, voice and data integration. The following section explores the study's practical, theoretical and research implications.

4.4 Implications of the study

Building on the findings and methodological considerations, this study has implications for practice, theory and future research. It highlights the complex and evolving nature of survivor engagement with public inquiries, particularly around recognition, institutional response and longer-term impact. Practically, the findings emphasise the need for meaningful institutional action; theoretically, they contribute to dynamic understandings of recognition and identity; and for research, they highlight the need for more inclusive and integrated approaches. These implications are explored below.

4.4.1 Practical implications

4.4.1.1 Implications for public inquiries

The findings make an important contribution to understanding the longer-term impact of survivor participation in public inquiries. They demonstrate that the value of participation cannot be understood solely through the opportunity to give testimony or through survivors' experiences at the point of participation. Rather, the meaning and impact of participation continue to develop in response to what happens afterwards. Public inquiries have the potential to provide recognition, validation and opportunities for healing. However, these benefits appear to be conditional on survivors perceiving their testimony to have been meaningfully received and acted on. If survivors are

invited to share but substantive institutional action fails to follow, any recognition or validation achieved through testimony may be undermined. Hearing without meaningful response risks becoming another experience of invalidation and harm. The longer-term impact of participation is therefore shaped by both the experience of giving testimony and how institutions subsequently respond to that testimony.

Thus, the findings have important implications for the design and delivery of public inquiries. Public inquiries should incorporate clearer mechanisms for monitoring, accountability and implementation of recommendations, ensuring that survivor contributions are visibly acted upon over time. Such mechanisms are important not only for institutional accountability, but for sustaining the recognition afforded through participation and reducing the risk of distress, re-silencing and loss of trust.

One approach would be the adoption of transparent ‘you said/we did’ frameworks, explicitly linking survivor testimony and recommendations to subsequent institutional actions. Such mechanisms could enhance accountability by demonstrating how survivor input informs decision-making, and by providing ongoing progress updates. Inquiries might also benefit from independent oversight or follow-up bodies to track implementation, addressing the well-documented gap between inquiry recommendations and governmental action (Ireton, 2023; JUSTICE, 2020). Greater transparency in how survivor contributions are collated and acted upon may help sustain recognition beyond the point of testimony, reducing the risk that participation is experienced as symbolic rather than substantive.

A further contribution concerns the temporality of inquiry participation. The formal conclusion of an inquiry does not necessarily constitute its end for survivors. Participants' accounts demonstrate how the meaning of participation can remain unresolved while recommendations await implementation, with survivors continuing to monitor, advocate and wait for evidence that their contributions have produced change. Misalignment between institutional timelines and survivors' experiences of when an inquiry is ‘over’ may therefore prolong uncertainty and transfer responsibility for maintaining momentum onto survivors themselves. Public inquiries should consequently consider their responsibilities to participants as extending beyond the formal publication of their findings and adopt more temporally responsive approaches to sustain recognition and support resolution.

Additionally, participant support should extend beyond the point of testimony. Given the longer-term emotional and relational impacts identified, ongoing engagement and support structures may be necessary to prevent harm and maintain trust. This may include clearer and sustained communication and transparency around timelines, progress updates, and opportunities for continued involvement, as reflected in the Truth, Acknowledgment and Accountability Report (Mahon et al., 2021). Leaving monitoring to survivors places an unfair burden on individuals already often struggling to find support, whilst failures in recommendation implementation risk damaging the credibility of inquiries and contributing to further harm for survivors.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that recognition within inquiries is not solely institutional but relational. Connections with other survivors provided validation, belonging and forms of understanding that were difficult to access elsewhere,

although participants' accounts also demonstrate that survivor communities are not inherently safe or cohesive. Trauma-informed inquiry practice should therefore consider not only the conditions under which testimony is given, but also the relational consequences of participation. Where appropriate, inquiries could facilitate access to survivor networks or peer support beyond their formal conclusion, whilst recognising that such communities are heterogeneous and may themselves contain tensions, exclusions and inequalities.

4.4.1.2 Implications for clinical practice

The findings have important implications for clinical practice. Clinicians should be attentive to how recognition may be experienced as unstable or undermined over time. Initial experiences of being heard and validated may be followed by a perceived withdrawal of recognition, impacting self-worth and institutional trust. Therapeutic work may therefore involve helping survivors process past trauma and also ongoing relational and institutional dynamics.

This highlights the importance of understanding testimony as traumatic memory processing and a socially situated act through which identity, recognition and moral standing are negotiated. While therapeutic approaches often emphasise narrative reconstruction as a means of integrating traumatic experiences (M. White, 2007), the present findings suggest testimony’s value extends beyond internal psychological reorganisation to its function in securing acknowledgment and positioning the self within a broader social context (Cresswell, 2005; Felman & Laub, 1992; Oliver, 2015). Clinicians may therefore need to attend to narrative content and

how it is received, validated and sustained within wider relational and institutional contexts.

The concept of liminal identity challenges linear models of recovery, highlighting that survivors may move between empowerment and vulnerability depending on external conditions. Clinicians should adopt flexible and non-linear approaches, supporting clients in navigating these shifts. This may involve recognising fluctuation as expected, pacing work accordingly, and supporting the integration of vulnerable and agentic aspects of self. Approaches such as narrative therapy (M. White, 2007) and parts-based models (Schwartz, 1995) may be useful in helping individuals integrate multiple and sometimes conflicting aspects of self. Rather than aiming for a singular endpoint, therapeutic work may focus on flexibility and continuity across these shifting experiences.

The findings also suggest that participation in inquiries may have longer-term emotional consequences, particularly where institutional responses are delayed or absent. Therapeutic support may need to extend beyond the point of testimony, addressing disappointment, frustration and unresolved expectations. In this context, distress may be linked to internal processes and broader temporal and institutional dynamics, requiring support in managing uncertainty and deferred closure.

Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of relational validation. Peer support and survivor communities may provide important complementary spaces for recognition and connection, although these require careful facilitation given their potential complexities. Activism emerged as a meaningful and morally grounded

response, supporting empowerment, identity and connection. Clinicians should therefore avoid pathologising patterns of engagement and disengagement, such as interpreting withdrawal as avoidance or resistance. Instead, withdrawal may be understood as adaptive forms of self-regulation within the context of fluctuating emotional and relational demands. Therapeutic work may involve supporting sustainable forms of engagement, while recognising withdrawal as a meaningful and protective response.

4.4.2 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to theoretical understandings of recognition, identity and justice by demonstrating their dynamic and temporally unfolding nature. While existing literature emphasises voice and acknowledgement within institutional processes, the findings show that recognition is not a stable outcome, but remains contingent on ongoing institutional response. The concept of ‘hollowed recognition’ extends recognition theory by illustrating how validation can be undermined over time in the absence of action, highlighting the importance of sustained alignment between testimony and institutional change.

The study also advances understandings of identity following trauma by conceptualising a liminal survivor identity, in which empowerment and marginalisation coexist and fluctuate in response to social and institutional conditions. This challenges linear models of recovery and supports relational and processual accounts of identity (Somers, 1994; Turner, 1967), positioning identity as continuously negotiated around recognition and power. It also problematises common categorical distinctions such as ‘victim’, ‘survivor’ and ‘thriver’, which have been critiqued for

implying fixed or progressive identity positions (e.g. Fohering, 2018). Rather than distinct/sequential stages, individuals may move between, or simultaneously occupy, these positions supporting a more pluralistic understanding of post-trauma identity.

In addition, the findings contribute to temporal understandings of justice by demonstrating how the absence of institutional action reconfigures experience of time. The concept of deferred closure highlights how justice unfolds across extended temporal processes, rather than a single moment, aligning with and extending transitional justice literature (Teitel, 2000). This foregrounds the importance of considering the temporal dimensions of recognition, especially delay and uncertainty.

Finally, the conceptualisation of cyclical activism contributes to social movement and empowerment literature by reframing patterns of engagement and withdrawal as adaptive responses to structural constraint. Cyclical engagement reflects an ongoing negotiation between agency and structural limitation, not necessarily reduced commitment.

Overall, the study offers an integrated understanding of how recognition, identity, temporality and agency interact within institutional contexts, supporting a reconceptualisation of public inquiries as processual, relational and temporally extended phenomena, rather than discrete events with fixed outcomes.

4.4.3 Future research

The findings have important implications for future research. First, they highlight the need for inclusive sampling strategies to ensure that underrepresented

groups are better represented. This is essential to avoid reproducing existing inequalities in whose experiences are recognised.

Second, the study highlights the value of longitudinal and process-oriented research designs. As participants' experiences were shown to evolve over time in response to institutional action, future research could track survivor experiences across inquiry and post-inquiry stages. It remains unclear whether the cyclical engagement identified here reflects developmental processes, repeated responses to ongoing institutional conditions, or more stable patterns shaped by trauma and temporal disruption. Longitudinal approaches would support a more comprehensive understanding of how recognition, identity and engagement develop over time.

Third, the findings indicate the importance of further research into the longer-term impact of public inquiries, which remains underexplored. Future studies could build on the conceptual model developed here to examine how recognition, identity, temporality and activism interact across different inquiry contexts, including comparative or cross-national studies.

Finally, future research could further explore the role of testimony in therapeutic and institutional settings, particularly its social and relational functions beyond narrative processing and trauma integration. Examining how testimony is received, validated and sustained over time may offer important insights for clinical practice and inquiry design.

Alongside these implications, it is important to reflect on the researcher's role in shaping the study. The following section reflects on my positioning and its influence on the research process, interpretation and findings.

4.5 Self-reflexivity

As the primary researcher I recognise that my position shaped the research at all stages, from formulating the research question to interpretating the findings. While I do not share participants' lived experience, my role as researcher required careful attention to representation, interpretation and responsibility, and having indirect proximity through family to the topic shaped my motivations. The pragmatic epistemological framework and reflexive qualitative approach acknowledge that knowledge is co-constructed rather than discovered. Thus, personal context and my interest in recognition, justice and survivor voice undoubtedly influenced the study's focus and the aspects of the participants' account emphasised in the analysis.

Throughout, I sought to remain reflexively aware of how my assumptions and values shaped the development of the themes. Ongoing supervision and reflective notetaking helped. However, I recognise the analysis presents one situated interpretation, rather than an a definitive account. Efforts were made to approach participants' experiences with sensitivity, whilst acknowledging the inherent power dynamics within the research process. In a study concerned with voice and recognition, representing participants' experiences carries particular ethical responsibility.

Incorporating lived experience perspectives within the study design supported a more grounded and ethically responsive approach, although this could not fully remove power imbalances. My role in selecting, interpreting and presenting data inevitably shaped the analysis. Reflexivity cannot resolve these tensions, but ongoing critical engagement with them throughout aimed to produce a more thoughtful and transparent study.

Engaging with participants' accounts also had an emotional impact on me. At times, I experienced distress and frustration especially around perceived institutional inaction. Recognising these responses was important, as they had the potential to shape my engagement with the data and thematic emphasis. Reflexive awareness of these reactions enabled me to remain attentive and sensitive to participants' accounts whilst critically reflecting on how my own responses may have influenced the analysis. This process prompted ongoing reflection on the balance between empathetic engagement and analytic distance.

This research has also prompted reflection on my own position around to institutional accountability and responsibility. As an NHS employee, I am subject to, and involved in enacting, state decisions. This dual role made me consider how issues identified in this study (e.g. recognition, institutional response and accountability) extend beyond inquiries to other institutional settings, including healthcare.

It raised questions for me about the role of professionals within institutional systems, and the extent to which I may challenge and reproduce existing practices.

This reinforced the importance of considering how systems respond to service user experiences over time, and the consequences when recognition is not followed by meaningful action. Overall, this reflexive process deepened my understanding of the ethical and practical responsibilities involved in research and professional practice.

4.6 Conclusion

This study explored survivor experiences of participating in the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), focusing on the longer-term impact of recognition, institutional response and the legacy of testimony. It is the first study to examine the longer term impacts of public inquiry participation. The findings show that while participation offered meaningful opportunities for voice, validation and identity repositioning, these gains were often contingent and undermined in the absence of sustained governmental action. Recognition was not a fixed outcome, but could be hollowed out over time, reshaping participants' sense of self and their relationship to the inquiry and the state.

The study advances understanding by conceptualising survivor experiences as processual and relational, rather than linear or resolved. The notion of a liminal identity captures how participants occupied an ongoing position between empowerment and marginalisation, while deferred closure highlights how institutional inaction reconfigures temporal experience, extending the inquiry beyond its formal endpoint. In this context, cyclical activism emerged as an adaptive response, enabling sustained engagement while managing the emotional demands of prolonged uncertainty. Together, these findings offer a more nuanced understanding of inquiries

as sites of recognition and ongoing processes shaped by institutional response over time. The study also highlights the role of survivor communities in providing relational validation, although these were often complex and contested.

Importantly, this study demonstrates that the impact of public inquiries cannot be understood at their formal conclusion. Their meaning continues to unfold as participants negotiate the gap between testimony and action. This challenges the framing of inquiries as discrete events, instead positioning them as temporally extended processes with consequences shaped by state responsiveness. These findings also point to the need for inquiry processes that extend beyond testimony to include visible mechanisms of accountability and follow-through.

While situated within a specific temporal and methodological context, this study provides valuable insight into an underexplored aspect of public inquiries: the lived experience of their aftermath. It underscores the importance of sustained institutional accountability and attention to the longer-term implications of survivor participation. Ultimately, giving voice is only the beginning; it is the response to that voice over time that determines whether recognition is realised or undermined. Thus, inquiry processes may function as sites of both potential repair and repetition of earlier dynamics of powerlessness or indifference, depending on how governments respond.

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Appendix A: Quality Assessment of Included Studies (Meta-Ethnography)

Table A1

Quality Assessment of Studies Included in the Meta-Ethnography Using the CASP Checklist

Note. Full table with scoring for each criterion, total and notes for each study

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	Total	
Barker et al. (2023)	2	2	2	2	1	0	0	2	2	2	15	• Research aims clearly stated. • Qualitative methodology was appropriate. • Explanation for research design given. • Recruitment and data collection discussed and justified. • Sample demographics (age, gender and ethnicity) provided and compared to the general population of Truth Project participants. • Some detail on relationship between researchers and participants, but implications not fully explored. Reflexive audit trail made. • Ethical issues not explicitly stated.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• Detailed explanation of analysis; two authors analysed with a third cross-checking coding. • Themes clear in findings section and well-supported; discussed in relation to research questions.
Brett (2022)	2	2	1	1	1	0	0	1	2	2	12	• Clear research aims. • Qualitative methodology was appropriate. • Research design was appropriate, but no reasoning given. • Reasoning for recruitment strategy not fully discussed. No demographic information provided. • Minimal information given about data collection; it is unclear how interviews were conducted. • No discussion of researcher-participant relationship, nor ethical issues. • Only brief description of analysis process. • Findings are clear, with discussion.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• Discussion of contribution and implications of findings.
Byrne (2004)	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	17	• Clear statement of research aims. • Qualitative research was appropriate. • Research design was appropriate, but not fully justified in reasoning. • Recruitment strategy was appropriate and demographic information provided on age, education and politics. • Data collection (semi-structured interviews) was explained in detail; a translator was used; initial interview translated and piloted; discussion with translator post-interview to ensure understanding. • Researcher bias was not discussed; however, impact of interviews was; as well as adjustments made after pilot interviews.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• Impact of interviews on researcher and interpreter was discussed; but broader ethical issues were not. • Data analysis clearly explained; second coder used to determine intercoder agreement. • Clear statement of findings. • Implications of and recommendations from the findings made.
Chapman (2007)	2	2	1	1	2	0	0	0	2	2	12	• Clear research aims. • Qualitative research was appropriate; it was combined with quantitative methods. • Research design was appropriate but reasoning not explicated. • Recruitment strategy was appropriate and discussed; did not state overall numbers in focus group nor how representative the sample was. • Data collection (semi-structured focus groups and hearing transcripts) was detailed and justified.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• Researchers-participant relationship was not addressed, nor were ethical issues. • Data analysis for the focus groups was not described. • Clear statement of findings and value for future truth commissions given. • Implications of research were discussed
Clark (2012)	2	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	2	2	11	• Clear research aims. • Qualitative research was appropriate. • Research design was appropriate but reasoning not explicit. • Recruitment was difficult but this was explained; small sample (n=4) and no demographic information given. • Reasoning around data collection (semi-structured interviews) was given, however, there was a geographic bias.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• Researcher-participant relationship was not addressed, nor were ethical issues. • Data analysis methodology was not reported. • Clear statement of findings and value for future truth commissions given.
Faku-Juqula (2014)	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	17	• Aim clearly stated. • Qualitative research was appropriate and reflected on, as well as philosophical perspectives. • Research design was discussed and appropriate. Interview agenda given. • Recruitment through snowball sampling was appropriate and author acknowledged sample was not representative (small and only from two areas of SA). Only recruited those with minor psychological effects from their experiences. Gender and age range given.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• Researcher reflected on their own position and motivations using Finlay's typology of reflexivity, and engaged in collaborate exercises. • Ethical issues discussed and ethical approval gained from Brunel University. Considered anonymity, consent, debriefing material and support • In-depth description of data analysis provided; data was used to support findings. • There is a clear statement of findings. • Recommendations for implications for social work were made and possible areas of research, but does not go far in terms of future commissions and lessons learnt, nor beyond the social work field.
Guthrey (2016a)	2	2	2	2	1	0	1	2	2	2	16	• Clear research aims. • Qualitative research was appropriate. • Research design was appropriate and reasoned.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• Recruitment strategy was explained and appropriate reflecting approximately 10% of those who gave testimony in each commission; also noted age range and gender. • Data collection was partially explained (semi-structured interviews), an interpreter was used. • Researcher-participant relationship was not addressed. • Ethical issues are partially mentioned around anonymity. • Details of data analysis given; contradictory data taken into account; data provided to support claims. • Findings are explicit and placed with discussion of counter evidence. • Findings were linked to broader themes.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
Guthrey (2016b)	1	2	2	2	1	0	1	0	2	2	15	• Research aims were not clearly stated as research arose out of a different research questions for dissertation research. • Qualitative research was appropriate for the topic. • Research design was appropriate and reasoned. • Recruitment strategy was explained and appropriate reflecting approximately 10% of those who gave testimony in each commission; also noted age range and gender. • Data collection was partially explained (semi-structured interviews), an interpreter was used. • Relationship between researchers and participants was not addressed. • Ethics were partially mentioned with regard to consideration of the risk of re-traumatisation. • Details of data analysis were not given. • Findings were clearly stated and limitations considered.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• Implications of findings for the field were discussed.
Ifaloye et al. (2022)	1	2	1	1	1	0	0	1	2	2	11	• Research aims could have been more explicit in the introduction. • Qualitative research was appropriate. • Research design (case study design) could have been explicated more clearly. • Recruitment strategy was only briefly addressed (purposively sampling) and reasoning not given. No demographic information provided. • Data collection details on semi-structured interviews was given. • Researcher-participant relationship was not addressed, nor were ethical issues. • The data analysis technique (textual analysis) was not explained. • Clear statement of findings made. • Links to wider contribution and field made.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
Lundy (2020)	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	16	• Clear aims were stated in the introduction. • Qualitative research was appropriate. • The research design was appropriate but not fully discussed. • The recruitment strategy was detailed in the method section and appropriate. It reflects a broad cross-section of survivors. • Data collection was partially explained; no details as to how interviews were conducted were given; however, questions were derived from 5 focus groups with over 75 participants. Gender, and age range and mean given. • The format/research instrument was designed with survivors, but specific relationship between researcher and participants not discussed. • Consent was considered, however other ethical issues were not explored.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• Method of data analysis was not detailed; but contradictory data was explicated and supported. • Clear statement of findings was made. • Discussion of implications for the field was made.
Hamber & Lundy (2020)	2	2	1	1	2	0	0	1	2	2	13	• Clear aims were stated in the introduction. • Qualitative research was appropriate. • The research design was appropriate but not fully discussed. • The recruitment strategy was detailed in the method section and appropriate. However, there was no discussion around why some people may not have chosen to have taken part. • It was clearly stated how data was collected and how interviews were conducted. • There is no reflection on the role of the researcher, bias or influence. • Ethical issues are not discussed.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• There is not an in-depth description of the analysis process. It is not clear how the themes were derived from the data. Contradictory evidence is not discussed. • A clear statement of findings was made. • The contribution of the findings to existing knowledge is made.
Moran & Salter (2022)	2	2	1	2	2	0	2	1	2	2	16	• Aim clearly stated. • Qualitative research was appropriate. • Research design was appropriate although reasoning was not given. • Recruitment strategy explicated, and they were recruited from all Australian states except one. Age range and gender provided. • Data collection methods were made clear. • Relationship between researcher and participants was not discussed.

Study	CASP Checklist for Qualitative Studies Criteria Scoring*											Notes
												• Ethical issues were considered and ethics approval sought Ethics around confidentiality was especially thought-through. • Data analysis briefly mentioned, but an in-depth description was not included. Contradictory data was considered. • A clear statement of findings was made in the discussion, with a consideration of all the evidence. • Findings were related to the broader literature on shame and therapeutic politics.

Note. A three-point scale was given to each criterion indicating whether it was not met (0), partially met (1) or fully met (2) and a total given, with a possible total of 20. This total informed the weight given to each study in the meta-ethnography.

**Note:* Criteria for the CASP qualitative studies checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018):

1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?
10. How valuable is the research?

Appendix B: Summary of Included Studies and Second-Order Interpretations (Meta-Ethnography)

Table B1

Key Characteristics and Concepts (Second-order Interpretations) of Studies Included in the Meta-Ethnography

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
Byrne (2004) CASP: 17	• 'great importance on the opportunity to tell their story publicly' (p.243) • Frustrations with TRC bureaucracy – access, responsiveness ('left hanging' (p.245)) and fairness – perpetrators given preferential treatment • Emotional and physical toll – recalling painful events was difficult, 'evoking and cueing of original suffering' (p,246) • Unmet expectations – miscommunications/lack of clarity about TRC's mandate, expectations of assistance, compensation, community cleansing ceremonies, of hearing the truth, a lack of consultation about amnesty, hope perpetrators remorseful; hope bones would be returned) • 'disappointment' (p.250) – lack of effective communication, around timings, expectations, dis/advantages of participating and education around terminology e.g. amnesty, reconciliation, 'careless extrapolation of western terms (e.g. amnesty, reconciliation, etc.) to the varying cultural contexts' (p.251),

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Lack of sufficiently trained staff with attention to gender and age – limited amount/accuracy of testimony. 'Shame, embarrassment and not wanting to burden the person taking the statement with sometimes brutal details' (p.253) impacted the process • Lack of psychosocial support • Poor reparation process – 'unappreciated and less important and less respected than perpetrators.' (p.254)
Chapman (2007) CASP: 12	• The TRC conceptualised forgiveness and reconciliation as between individuals, but unclear who should be forgiven – individual perpetrators, those devised abuse, political leaders who created policies, or the regime and institutions that authorised and legitimated the abuse • Some victims could not forgive because they did not see any major changes in those organisations/institutions. • The TRC failed to promote intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation because it tried to reduce societal-level dynamics to whether individual victims could forgive their abusers • The majority of victims did not make statements of forgiveness • Experience of testifying may have had a negative impact on victim's attitude to forgiveness

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Several African languages do not distinguish forgiveness and reconciliation – after, those who testified struggled to understand the relationship between forgiveness, justice and reconciliation • Victims were critical of commissioners' tendency to too often interpret them as forgiving
Clark (2012) CASP: 11	• 'let down' (p.194) by process – increased with time, as expectations about reparations and changes in their lives were unmet • Felt important that stories were heard to be part of history, and a national acknowledgement of suffering • Some regretted testifying - mass media reinterpreted their testimony • Healing is a personal individual process • 'nothing inherently victim centric about TRCs' (p.195) – victims have different and complex needs – prioritising these is fundamental for whether testifying is healing • Process was 'inevitably extremely painful and traumatic for some' (p.195) • Not enough psychological support to meet victim's needs. • Reparation needs were not met – reparations were delayed and reduced • Victims felt 'forgotten about' (p.196)

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Local communities and victims were rarely consulted about their needs, concerns and ideas – limited the truth that emerged. Need a 'bottom-up dimension' (p.198) • Victims wanted answers to questions which they did not get but 'truth is not only an issue of quantity but also quality' (p.198) • TRC overlooked the stories of 'ordinary victims' (p.198) • Aims of TRC did not align with victim aims • Truth must not simply be accepted, but must permeate society enough to bring about change
Faku-Juqula (2014) CASP: 17	• Survivors disillusioned by unfulfilled promises – testifying would materially change their lives for the better and ensure abuses would not happen again, and it would make them feel acknowledged and endorsed and better about themselves • Instead felt 'bare and vulnerable… bereft of energy, emotionally and physically… retraumatised' (p.201). • Felt a lack of follow-up support - commission – inappropriate for providing support, not made to deal with long-term psychosocial challenges – need long-term interventions • Years later – suffer with 'bottled-up emotions and still-vivid memories of the atrocities' (p.202) • When testifying some felt they could not share properly – it was too difficult, so felt unheard – 'unfinished business' (p.202)

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• the pain of testifying was worth it if it was made public, but concerned that their stories had not been recorded • Media was invalidating for some because it was ill-researched and validating for others because they felt listened to • Disillusioned by unfulfilled promises to find and bury the dead - failure of TRC to uncover and assist victims was a significant barrier to heal and have closure – has considerable cultural value, and some consider family misfortunes linked to failure to bury their dead. It is a 'denial of a basic rights and adds another layer of betrayal' (p.257) • Felt confused about unconditional expectations to forgive, 'as if they had no choice in the matter' (p.207). 'they were told to do it, like children.' (p.210). Victims were torn between a religious impetus for unconditional forgiveness and their personal reluctance to. The suffering of those that forgave did not decrease, and putting pressure on participants to do so made them 'feel guilty, thereby perpetuating their suffering'' (p.208) • For some, not prosecuting perpetrators felt like a 'great betrayal of trust' (p.210), they felt aggrieved that their abusers had been 'let off the hook' (p.249) – layers of betrayal by TRC has eroded a sense of hope for the future • Initial feelings of relief, freedom and renewed hope and dignity dissipated leaving an 'on-going sense of anxiety' (p.211) – 'locked in a past conflict' (p.239) – 'frozen grief' (p.242f).

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Hoped process would translate to societal change - shifted from hope for themselves to their grandchildren – that they will have a better quality of life • For some testifying gave 'catharsis' (p.214) • TRC was not victim-centred - testifying had only 'limited healing or closure' (p.281) • The TRC was less effective because it did not take into account challenges in literacy, access to information, resources and poverty • Reductions in reparations 'made victims feel their stories meant very little…. Their experiences of atrocities were diminished… felt degraded and exploited… the experience resonated with the degrading and dehumanising treatment they had received at the hands of the apartheid regime' (p.218) – 'felt abused all over again' (p.220) – 'This deepened the mistrust that victims already harboured' (p.221) • 'disappointment, disillusionment, frustration, confusion and even anger at the failure to deliver.' (p.229) • 'overlooked' in the TRC process (p.232) – perpetrators privileged over victims • The TRC 'assumed an unproblematic link between 'voice', 'dignity' and being heard' (p.237) – did not translate for survivors

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• In victim's views – healing involves telling their story, being acknowledged and validated, making sense of their sorrow, coming to terms with it and being able to follow a process of proper mourning
Guthrey (2016a) CASP: 16	• 'Deep level of disappointment' (p.314) with testifying and process, unfulfilled promises – little changed in day-to-day life. No benefits, no action from government • Expectation of reciprocity from government/commission, testimony given in exchange of a 'result' (p.313) – 'psychological contract,' (p.313), created an obligation - expected a benefit and sense of being respected • By violating the psychological contract the process generates 'anger, mistrust and betrayal… [and] cements lingering grievances' (p.314). • Victims contributed to macro-level political goals through testifying, but did not receive personal benefits – 'a sense of being instrumentalized' (p.314) • 'Commissive' promises of 'future intent' (p.314) may have been told individually or more subtly by the very creation of a truth commission • Range of negative responses to giving testimony – 'feeling hurt, let down and used' • Broken promises jeopardise reconciliation and restoration of dignity – primary aims of truth commissions

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Power inequalities reinforced • For some the 'retraumatization or stigmatization' with no benefit in exchange –a sense of anger, mistrust and betrayal – 'negative consequences for recovery at the individual and societal level.' (p.315) • Participants did receive 'various intangible benefits from giving public testimony such as catharsis, social acknowledgement and empowerment.' (p.315) • Victims needs overlooked. Victim-centred outcomes need to be central to truth commissions
Guthrey (2016b) CASP: 15	• Negative impact on victims when public truth telling diverged from sociocultural beliefs and local norms • Public dissemination of sensitive information – worry/distress, retraumatisation and social stimigmatisation, particularly for women who suffered sexual violence or in cultures where it is 'better to forget' (p.21) • Did not consider most culturally appropriate way to communicate victims' testimony – victims 'to become a victim twice' (p.19) • Should communicate risks of testifying, the commissions' work, and how testimony will be used and disseminate

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Victims' testimony – limited and worry increased when not paired with appropriate commission staff to take their testimony in terms of age and gender • Not providing compensation commissions risked 'humiliating victims a second time' (p.20) • Most vulnerable victims should be given the option of testifying privately. • Truth commissions must be adapted to their context, otherwise victims feel 'objectified' (p.21)
Hamber & Lundy (2020) CASP: 13	• Participants were initially hopeful (and ambivalent) about the process but this turned to 'disappointment' (p.754) • Testifying was 'stressful and traumatic' with the 'court-like setting compounding anxiety' (p.755) • The environment was inappropriate and intimidating (p.755) • Participants were not able to exercise their autonomy and did not feel like they were full participants (p.755) • They felt they were the subject of the inquiry rather than the ones being listened to (p.756) • The experience of participating did provide acknowledgement, vindication and validation for many victims (p.758) • Participants were 're-traumatised and re-victimised' which compounded the original trauma and potentially caused psychological harm (p.756)

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Some felt that it was inquisitorial and adversarial (p.756-7) and regretted contributing (p.756) • The process restricted their voice (p.757) • The impact of giving testimony became more evident over time and that it became evident testifying had damaged their integrity (p.757-8) • Public access to testimonies was 'often disempowering' (p.758) • It was 'far from therapeutic for some' (p.758) • Whether it was ultimately valuable was often contingent on Inquiry outcomes and symbolic and material redress. • Apologies were worthless without commitment to further justice measures and needs (p.758) • Victims 'remain disappointed' but are equally engaged in persistent lobbying through a bottom-up collaborative initiative to influence the legislation being passed to implement redress' after HIAI (p.760) • If the effectiveness of a victim-centred process is measured by its ability to address victims' needs, then the inquiry cannot be 'unequivocally' considered victim-centred (p.760) • The flaws in general transitional justice mechanisms which fail to make processes genuinely victim-centred were replicated here

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
Lundy (2020) CASP: 16	• Testifying can 'prove [as] retraumatizing as therapeutic… leaving many with a traumatic sense of abandonment' (p.265) – 'bruising experience for many' (p.277) with potential for 'retraumatization and revictimization' (p.277) • Often require 'yes/no' answers adding to survivors' 'disappointment… their voices were not listened to, and they struggled to be heard' (p.266) • Many did not understand process and had 'little control' (p.266) – critical to provide sufficient information – manage expectations to ensure participants understand process and make informed choices • Public and open nature of inquiries increases discomfort – not conducive to sharing • More victim support needed • Formal legalistic process – 'taxing… adversarial' (p.267f) – felt on trial and not treated compassionately • Testifying orally – 'emotional and stressful' (p.269) – 'an impact on their sense of self-worth and their perception of the inquiry's tone toward them' (p.269) • Ill-timed disclosure of personal and sensitive material often only a couple of hours prior to testifying – 'destabilizing effect' (p.270). Without prior knowledge or control over the content and timing of disclosures – 'disempowered – sometimes traumatized' (p.270)

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Provided evidence to alleged perpetrators early but not victims – 'two-tier system' (p.272) adding to victim distress – already felt underprepared – 'Inequalities between the treatment of complainants and alleged perpetrators' (p.272) seen in many procedures – alleged perpetrators in certain circumstances could give statements in absentia or have spokesperson, but survivors could not – victims reliant on memory – alleged perpetrators given evidence in advance and could prepare • Survivor voices seemed 'weak compared to those of well-prepared, resourced and legally represented institutions' (p.277) – 'more favourable treatment for alleged perpetrators' • Survivors 'overwhelmed' (p.273f) – 'lack confidence' public speaking (p.274) – why recommendations they thought appropriate unanswered during inquiry • Survivors felt 'rage, concern and frustration' about the subsequent lack of prosecutions • Compensation – important justice need, but recommendations not meet this need • Inquiry model has positives – provides 'acknowledgement, vindication and validation for survivors… satisfy[ing] their perceived sense of duty to testify and bear witness in order to provide an authoritative record' (p.276) – can raise awareness of the extent of abuse, giving a type of public accountability – may initiate individual/collective apologies

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Inadequate in terms of being victim-centred – survivors should be involved in development and implementation of justice responses and settlement negotiations. • Inquiry's aim – discover systemic failings and institutional responsibility – something not fully understood by survivors, nor in alignment with what they wanted. • Public inquiry limitations outweigh their benefits – their limited processes cannot address survivor justice needs
	•
Brett (2022) CASP: 12	• Survivors felt 'taken advantage of… to provide a 'stamp' to the peace process' (p.489) because of lack of budget for follow-up or support • Interpersonal reconciliation, 'postconflict social repair' (p.490) achieved through victim-perpetrator dialogue – transformed relationships and perceptions of each other – but limited space for this • 'Victim-centred approach' (p.491) – gave space for agency, dispute and resistance – created accountability mechanisms – survivors legitimate political actors • Majority of victims – participating 'empowering' (p.491) when recognition mutual – allowed to move forward

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• 'Empowerment/agency and disempowerment/instrumentalization both occurred disjunctively' (p.491) • Wider context, political and financial needs and power relations reduced positive impact – failed to transform power relations, conflict's structural drivers, empower subordinate groups or change wider social relations • Some participants felt revictimized and politicised – returned home to accusations of betrayal and threats
Ifaloye et al., (2022) CASP: 11	• Process and outcome for victims – 'mainly inadequate' (p.49) – few victims participated and outcomes were not made widely available - victims felt then that it could not reveal the truth • Large numbers of victims did not receive the expected help from the commission • Their testimony was listened to, but the process ended there – 'did not translate into compensation, lustration or institutional reform' (p.51) • Had a fair hearing, but the government did not do it's part • Not victim-centred – victim protection not prioritised – many perpetrators still in powerful positions and survivors feared for their safety – some were discouraged from participating • Many found testifying and sharing their experiences and grievances publicly therapeutic and it 'met the psychological needs of a number of victims' (p.53)

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• It did not meet the victim's needs because victims did not receive the expected help, and the government did not implement the commission's recommendations • A measure of accountability should be established prior to commission commencement
Moran & Salter (2022) CASP: 16	• The 'dignified treatment of survivors… meticulous planning and thoughtfulness' (p.974) ensured they felt comfortable and safe – commission's 'respectful and humane treatment' was a 'pleasant surprise' (p.974) - 'process of dignification' (p.982) – a distinctly different experience of an institution with 'dignifying practices and processes' (p.981) from the institutional, social and personal betrayal connected with abuse – commission aimed to provide 'the felt experience of dignity, which operated counter to the shaming affects and messages associated with child sexual abuse' (p.975) • 5 key factors: 1. individualised support and continuity of care ('survivors and their families *felt* the commitment of the Commission to their honour and dignity in a lasting fashion' (p.975) – tried 'to create safe and supportive conditions' (p.975)) 2. dignifying environments through the settings and processes – including waiting rooms, attentive staff and quality of food and drinks, transforming related services e.g. providing taxi services with trauma-informed training

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	3. ‘being heard and feeling valued’ (p.977) – interactions between survivors and Commissioners, communicated a powerful feeling of being accepted and valued – a contrast between ‘the felt experience of being a person of value – with something important to say about the subject of their abuse – with their routinised and ingrained experience of themselves as devalued and humiliated.’ (p.977) – significantly Commission was interested ‘not only in what happened to them, but also in hearing about the impact across their lives’ (p.977) – felt ‘relief’ (p.977) 4. ‘Status as a transitive property’ (p.977) – commissioners’ and commission’s high status was transferred to victims and their testimony – contrasted with earlier experiences of being minimised or dismissed – a ‘personal impact’ in being ‘believed and accepted’ in the commission context (p.978) – disrupted experiences of chronic shame 5. ‘flexibility and community control of the process’ (p.978) – inquiries can become ‘transitional space’ (Salter quoted, p.978) between public acknowledgement and private pain – commission’s responsiveness and willingness to adapt to survivors’ and communities’ and their feedback ‘disrupted power relations’ (p.978f) between the elevated commissioners and disadvantaged survivors, creating a ‘partnership’ (p.979) • ‘lasting effects of dignity’ (p.979) – changes in shame and ability to discuss their trauma lasted

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Shifts in 'self-worth, pride, hope and their sense of themselves as valued and valuable members of the community' (p.980) – survivors felt they had contributed significantly to social change, for a better future for victims and the community – a 'sense of agency' (p.980) • Importance of 'recognition' (p.980) as a condition of public participation and a sense of justice – being recognised, understood and valued as a survivor was reparative. • Provided an experience of dignity with a variety of phenomenological notes – the psychological, providing consistent care and active interest; the embodied experience as a person of worth within settings which reflected dignity and respect; and the social – being heard and being acknowledged by high status individuals • Commission had a strong community and bipartisan buy-in, with large financial support
Barker et al. (2023) **CASP: 17**	• A trauma-informed approach (TIA) was well-received by majority of participants and helped engagement – majority reported positive experiences from participation • Some found process retraumatising - talking about the abuse had 'an inevitable element of reexperiencing that is difficult but manageable' (p.8) – for a small number the mental health impacts were long lasting

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Being believed was an important positive aspect of their experience – linked to longer term healing – conveys epistemic worth (they have capacity as knowers) – communicating belief may be part of the dignifying process which ameliorates shame • TIA is centred on victim needs through establishing trust, offering choice and control, and participants feeling empowered • Participation confers meaningful benefits – promoting healing for survivors of abuse – validates victim testimony – places dignity centrally as an 'antidote to shame' (p.8) • The processes are 'forms of therapeutic politics that can lead to personal healing and social change.' (p.9) • Risks should be communicated prior to participation • Victims suffered from epistemic inequality, which is linked to other social and economic inequalities – giving testimony offers epistemic justice to repair earlier injustices • Inquiry provided testimonial justice by addressing 'credibility deficits' that often accompanied experiences of being abused as a child, either by not being believed, or their abuser's denials • Hermeneutical justice is provided by the public nature of the inquiry enabling the development of destigmatised ways of speaking about non-recent CSA and decreasing senses of isolation in their abuse

Study, title & CASP appraisal score (in date order)	Key characteristics, ideas, metaphors, themes and quotes
	• Key to participant's experiences were environmental factors – room furnishings, refreshments and space usage, and staff interpersonal qualities – survivor involvement in designing the TIAs was crucial for creating welcoming environments and training for staff • Training of non-clinical staff in TIA was helpful • For those who re-experienced post-traumatic symptoms after participating, longer-term support would be helpful • Services which were non-TIA informed were notably different – communicating to victims that external agencies may respond differently is important • Particularly meaningful for participants to realise they were not alone in their experiences. • Complex demands on survivors – emotional labour, re-traumatisation risk and continuing to remind the public and public bodies of the abuse. • Wider changes in epistemic justice across public life need to be made

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

1. When you heard about the TP/IICSA, why did you decide to contribute?

2. How was it contributing? Trauma informed; cathartic; distressing

3. How did you feel after you had contributed? Has that changed over time, when you look back?

4. Did contributing impact your life? Positively/negatively?

5. Did you hope there would be more support after contributing? What sort of support? Who from?

6. Were you happy with the recommendations that IICSA made?

7. What do you think of the government response to the recommendations? How does that leave you feeling?

8. When did the public inquiry finish for you? When the public inquiry finished, when you gave evidence, when the inquiry made it's recommendations or is it still ongoing until the recommendations are implemented?

9. If the recommendations were never implemented or only some were, what would that mean to you?

10. Were your expectations for the public inquiry and the TP met? Had you hoped for reparations or justice, a change in the conversation around CSA (personally/societally), personal change?

11. Has the experience left you with any longer term impacts, positive or negative?

12. I think that's everything I had to ask you, is there anything you'd like add though, or follow up that I haven't asked?

Appendix D: Survey including Participant Information Sheet accessed through Qualtrix



Information & Consent

Participant Information Sheet

Project title: Five Years On – Sexual Abuse Survivors' Reflections on their Involvement with the Independent Inquiry into Childhood Sexual Abuse (IICSA) and It's Legacy

Invitation:

My name is Naomi Hilton and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist in the Department of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research project is part of the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology Programme at the University of Essex. This study will take place between August 2024 and July 2026. Research has shown that public inquiries can have a range of impacts on participants. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) had over 7300 survivors/victims engage in it. Over 6200 shared at the Truth Project which tried to provide participants with as positive an experience as possible. Participant testimony was considered by the Inquiry in making conclusions and recommendations. Some years on from giving testimony, after IICSA has made recommendations and the government has given a response, this project

seeks to understand the longer term impacts of having given evidence, of survivor and victim responses to IICSA's legacy, it's recommendations and the responses to those recommendations. It is interested in the expectations around giving testimony and whether they have been met. This information is useful to for understanding the longer term impacts of public inquiries and inform future inquiries in their practice.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You were sent a flyer outlining this research project and you have opened this survey as you decided you would like to take part in this study. You engaged in IICSA and contributed to it.
You were recruited through a survivor organization or network. The current study aims to survey at least 365 participants.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part in this research study. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to provide written consent. You can withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no negative consequences if you do decide to withdraw and you do not have to give a reason.

Should you wish to no longer be included in the study, please contact Naomi Hilton at (nh21892@essex.ac.uk) asking to withdraw your contributions to the research study.

Please note there are certain points beyond which it will be impossible to withdraw from the research – for instance, when papers reporting the analysis of the data have been published. Therefore, please contact Naomi within a month of participation if you wish to withdraw your data.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will complete the attached survey, which you can do at your own time and convenience. Completing the survey should take no longer than 10 minutes. At the end of the survey you can opt to be contacted for a follow-

up interview to explore your answers and thoughts further. This is entirely optional. If you are interviewed you can choose to receive a £20 Amazon gift voucher to compensate you for your time.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I hope that no harm will be caused to you by taking part in this study. However, the survey may focus on some emotive topics that could be upsetting for you.

If you do become upset during the course of the survey, we can take a break and you can also withdraw your involvement from the research at any time.

Please see below details of organisations and helplines should you need additional support following the interview.

National Helplines:

Helplines that provide confidential support for people who are distressed

Samaritans
Phone: 116 123 (free 24-hour helpline)
Website: www.samaritans.org.uk

The National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC) – is a UK wide support line who adults who have suffered abuse in childhood, which offers support and signposting to other services.

Helpline: 0808 801 0331 (Monday – Thursday 10am-9pm, Friday 10am-6pm)
Email: support@napac.org.uk
Website: www.napac.org.uk

Rape Crisis England and Wales – offers telephone support for people aged 16+who have been affected by sexual assault, rape, sexual

harassment or childhood sexual abuse.

Freephone: 0808 500 2222 (Available 24/7 every day of the year)
Online chat via the website: https://247sexualabusesupport.org.uk/#live-chat
Website: www.rapecrisis.org.uk

The Survivors Trust - provides support, advice and signposting to survivors of sexual violence, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse.

Helpline: 08088 010818 Text: 07860022956
LiveChat: Select the link within the below designated times for the live chat service:
https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/live-chat-service
Live Chat service times are: Monday-Thursday 6pm-8pm Sunday 5pm-8pm
Email: info@thesurvivorstrust.org
Website: https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/ which contains signposting and resources.
The website has a page which can help you to find support within your local area https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/find-support

If at any stage during the research process you would feel you would benefit from additional support or counselling. The primary researcher will support you find services within your local area.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Participating in this research will provide you with an opportunity to share your experiences of having given testimony at the public inquiry. It could enable you to reflect on some of your experiences. However, I cannot guarantee any specific benefits to taking part. Sharing your experiences will help to provide insights into the impact of testifying at public inquiries and could help inform how best to support participants and how to organise and structure public inquiries in the future.

What information will be collected?

Some basic demographic information will be collected and background information will be collected with regard to your testimony. Any personally identifiable information will be anonymised for example a pseudonym will be given to each participant.

Will my information be kept confidential?

Yes, all the information you provide during the course of the research study will be kept confidential. However, if you share information which suggests that you or another person may be at current risk of harm, then I am legally obliged to share this information with an appropriate authority such as social services or the police. I would always try to inform you first before I share information with other organisations.

All personally identifiable information will be anonymised, any names of people or places will be removed from the data and only the primary researcher will have access to this information. Your responses may be put into a research data repository at University of Essex but will be fully anonymised.

All data that is collected from you will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. All information will be stored kept securely on systems at the University of Essex and on a password protected device. Your data will be kept for a period of ten years after the study, once ten years has passed your information will be erased from computers and any paper files will be destroyed. Any personal contact details held will be erased at the end of the study.

What is the legal basis for using the data and who is the Data Controller?

The GDPR states that consent must be freely-given, specific, informed and unambiguous. This will be given by you signing the consent form should you wish to take part in the current study. The data controller for

this study is the University of Essex and the University's Information Assurance Manager can be contacted on (dpo@essex.ac.uk).

What should I do if I want to take part?

Should you wish to take part in the study you should submit your survey on Qualtrics. If you wish to take part in a further step and be interviewed to expand on your answers please submit your contact information at the end of the survey. This is entirely optional and not obligatory.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this study will be used as a part of doctoral thesis deposited at the University of Essex. The researcher will intend to publish the results of the study within a journal article this means that the results will be available in the public domain. They may also be used in a conference paper or presentation or a public statement. However, all results will be anonymised. A copy of the findings of the research will be made available to you should you to wish to have a copy.

Who has reviewed the study?

The University of Essex Ethics Committee (ETH2324-1492) has reviewed and given ethical approval for this research project.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the principal investigator of the project, Naomi Hilton, using the contact details below. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, Antonella Trotta atrott@essex.ac.uk. If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University of Essex Research Integrity Manager, Mantalena Sotiriadou (email: ms21994@essex.ac.uk). Please include the ERAMS reference which can be found at the foot of this page.

Name of the Researcher/Research Team Members

Principle investigator: Naomi Hilton, Trainee Clinical Psychologist
nh21892@essex.ac.uk

Research Supervisor: Dr Danny Taggart, Lecturer School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex dtaggart@essex.ac.uk

Supervisor: Lucy Duckworth, The Survivor's Trust
lucy.duckworth@thesurvivorstrust.org

Click Survey participant information sheet to download your pdf information sheet

By consenting to take part you agree to the following:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these questions answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. I understand that any data collected up to the point of my withdrawal will be destroyed.

3. I understand that whilst the researcher aims to minimise the risk of becoming upset, due focus of the research and the sensitive nature of the topics that may be discussed, I could find some questions upsetting. I can confirm that I been provided with support helplines available in the participant information sheet should I need them throughout my involvement in the study.

4. I am aware that the researcher has a duty of care to inform the responsible authorities should they be concerned that myself or someone else is at current risk of harm.

5. I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained.

6. I understand that my fully anonymised data will be used for doctoral thesis, research conferences and published in a research journal.

7. I understand that the anonymised data collected about me will be used to support other research in the future, and may be shared anonymously with other researchers.

8. I give permission for the anonymised data generated from my survey to be deposited in a research data repository so that they will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals.

9. I agree to take part in the above study.

I consent to the above:

- ◯ No
- ◯ Yes

Default Question Block

Looking back, I am glad I participated in IICSA/the Truth Project

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ If you would like to expand on your answer please do:

Overall my expectations of contributing to IICSA/Truth Project have been met:

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Somewhat agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Somewhat disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] If you would like to expand on your answer please do:

When I contributed to the Truth Project/IICSA I hoped it would (tick all that apply)

- [ ] Contribute to children being safer
- [ ] Improve the conversation around child sexual abuse
- [ ] Provide further opportunities for justice for survivors
- [ ] Offer further opportunities for perpetrators to be held to account
- [ ] Give me the chance to be heard
- [ ] Provide some healing/closure
- [ ] Give me the opportunity to contribute to change
- [ ] Give me confidence to speak more about my experiences to those I am close to
- [ ] Help others to heal or come forward
- [ ] I had no expectations
- [ ] Other(s) please specify

I think IICSA/the Truth Project has (tick all that apply)

- ☐ Made children safer
- ☐ Improved the conversation around child sexual abuse
- ☐ Offered justice
- ☐ Increased accountability for perpetrators
- ☐ Helped me feel heard
- ☐ Given me some healing/closure
- ☐ Made a positive difference in society
- ☐ Enabled me to be more open about the abuse I experienced
- ☐ Encouraged other survivors to heal or come forward
- ☐ It has made no difference
- ☐ Other(s) (please specify) [ ]

Looking back, contributing to IICSA/the Truth Project was (tick all that apply):

- ☐ Cathartic/healing
- ☐ Helpful
- ☐ Empowering
- ☐ Gave me confidence
- ☐ Improved my life
- ☐ Pointless
- ☐ Distressing in the moment
- ☐ Disempowering
- ☐ Re-traumatising
- ☐ I still relive the negative experiences of contributing
- ☐ Further comments: [ ]

In retrospect, it was benefical to have shared my experiences at IICSA/the Truth Project:

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Further comments:

Areas of my life that have improved as a result of contributing to IICSA (tick all that apply):

- ☐ Work
- ☐ Relationships
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Emotionally
- ☐ Physical health
- ☐ Mental health
- ☐ Spiritually
- ☐ Financially
- ☐ None
- ☐ Futher comments:

Areas of my life that have got worse since contributing to IICSA/the Truth Project (tick all that apply):

- [ ] Work
- [ ] Relationships
- [ ] Family
- [ ] Emotionally
- [ ] Physical health
- [ ] Mental health
- [ ] Spiritually
- [ ] Financially
- [ ] None
- [ ] Further comments: _____

I believe my contribution to IICSA/the Truth Project has been honoured:

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Somewhat agree
- [ ] Neither agree nor disagree
- [ ] Somewhat disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Please give a reason: _____

I feel that governments have valued the evidence and recommendations from IICSA:

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Please give a reason

I have engaged with support specifically related to the abuse I experienced after contributing:

- ☐ I have not needed to
- ☐ I tried to get some support but was not able to access it
- ☐ I accessed some support but I still need more
- ☐ I was able to access all the support I needed
- ☐ Please expand on what support you tried to access and whether you were successful:

The hardest parts of contributing to IICSA/the Truth Project was (please tick all that apply to you):

- ☐ Sharing
- ☐ The feelings that came up afterwards
- ☐ Talking to others about it
- ☐ The government response
- ☐ Other(s) (please specify): [ ]

I would recommend participating in a public inquiry to others:

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Please give reason(s): [ ]

Looking back, if I could change anything about IICSA/the Truth Project I would change:

[ ]

If I could change the way IICSA and/or its recommendations were

recieved, I would change:

Any other comments:

I would like to opt in to being contacted for a follow-up interview. Those who are selected for interview will be eligible for a £20 voucher.

☐ Name:

☐ Contact email:

Demographics

I contributed to IICSA/the Truth Project in (if you're not sure, put your best guess):

- [ ] 2015
- [ ] 2016
- [ ] 2017
- [ ] 2018
- [ ] 2019
- [ ] 2020
- [ ] 2021
- [ ] Prefer not to say

I contributed at the:

- [ ] Public hearings
- [ ] The Truth Project
- [ ] The Victim and Survivor Consultative Panel (VSCP)
- [ ] The Victim and Support Forum

Age (when I contributed to IICSA/the Truth Project):

- ○ 18-19
- ○ 20-29
- ○ 30-39
- ○ 40-49
- ○ 50-59
- ○ 60-69
- ○ 70-79
- ○ 80 and over
- ○ Prefer not to say

Gender:

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Other
- ○ Prefer not to say

Ethnicity:

- ◯ Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Bangladeshi
- ◯ Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Chinese
- ◯ Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Indian
- ◯ Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Pakistani
- ◯ Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Other Asian
- ◯ Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African: African
- ◯ Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African: Caribbean
- ◯ Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African: Other Black
- ◯ Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: White and Asian
- ◯ Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: White and Black African
- ◯ Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean
- ◯ Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: Other Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups
- ◯ White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British
- ◯ White: Irish
- ◯ White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- ◯ White: Roma
- ◯ White: Other White
- ◯ Other ethnic group: Arab
- ◯ Other ethnic group: Any other ethnic group
- ◯ Prefer not to say

Powered by Qualtrics

Appendix E: Recruitment Poster

Volunteers Needed

Three Years On – Your Reflections on Contributing to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA)



01

The Research Project

My name is Naomi Hilton and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Essex. I am conducting research with Lucy Duckworth and Danny Taggart into the reflections of those who shared their accounts of the sexual abuse they encountered at IICSA, particularly on the longer-term impact of testifying, and participants' thoughts about the final recommendations & subsequent government response to them.

What it involves



02

PART 1
An online survey that will take approx. 15-20 mins exploring what it was like to be involved with IICSA, and the impact this had personally and for the wider society.

PART 2 (Optional)
An interview conducted in person or remotely exploring these issues further.



03

Can I take part?

You are welcome to take part if:

✓ You gave testimony at IICSA either through the public hearings, forum or the Truth Project, whether that was in person or not

Supervised by:

Dr Danny Taggart
and Lucy Duckworth of
The Survivor's Trust

Ethical approval:

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Essex Ethics Committee.
Ethics reference: ETH2324-1492

Interested...

To take part in the survey please scan the QR code

or follow the link below
https://essex.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3V3a8ftpcctEGua

Have questions? - please get in touch:
nh21892@essex.ac.uk

Appendix F: Interview Participant Information Sheet

University of Essex

Participant Information Sheet – Interview Participants

Project title

Five Years On – Sexual Abuse Survivors' Reflections on their Involvement with the Independent Inquiry into Childhood Sexual Abuse (IICSA) and It's Legacy

Invitation paragraph

My name is Naomi Hilton and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist in the Department of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research project is part of the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology Programme at the University of Essex. This study will take place between August 2024 and July 2026.

Research has shown that public inquiries can have a range of impacts on participants. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) had over 7300 survivors/victims engage in it. Over 6200 shared at the Truth Project which tried to provide participants with as positive an experience as possible. Participant testimony was considered by the Inquiry I making conclusions and recommendations. Some years on from giving testimony, after IICSA has made recommendations and the government has given a response, this project seeks to understand the longer term impacts of having given evidence, of survivor and victim responses to IICSA's legacy, it's recommendations and the responses to those recommendations. It is interested in the expectations around giving testimony and whether they have been met. This information is useful to for understanding the longer term impacts of public inquiries and inform future inquiries in their practice.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You were sent a flyer outlining this research project and you contacted the primary researcher as you decided you would like to take part in this study. You completed a survey and opted to be contacted for a follow-up interview. You engaged in IICSA and gave testimony at it.

You were recruited through a survivor organization or network. The current study aims to interview around fifteen participants.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part in this research study. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to provide written consent. You can withdraw from the study at any time,

there will be no negative consequences if you do decide to withdraw and you do not have to give a reason. Should you wish to no longer be included in the study, please contact Naomi Hilton at (nh21892@essex.ac.uk) asking to withdraw your contributions to the research study.

Please note there are certain points beyond which it will be impossible to withdraw from the research – for instance, when papers reporting the analysis of the data have been published. Therefore, please contact Naomi *within a month* of participation if you wish to withdraw your data.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take participate in the research study you will be sent a copy of this information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. You will then be invited to attend an interviews. The interview will be a follow-up conversation to the survey you completed. You may be asked about your experiences giving testimony at IICSA and its legacy, the impact it had on your life, your expectations for IICSA and whether they were met. **You will not be asked to share details about incidents of sexual abuse and you can tell the researcher if you do not wish to answer any of the questions.**

The interviews will take place either face to face in a room at University of Essex or by video conferencing using Microsoft Teams or Zoom depending on your preference. Each interview will last between fifty to seventy five minutes and will be recorded. You will be interviewed by the primary researcher, Naomi Hilton (Trainee Clinical Psychologist).

If you would like to receive a £20 gift Amazon voucher to reimburse you for your contribution you will need to share your name and email which will be passed to the University of Essex finance office to facilitate this. You will be sent the voucher via email. This is entirely optional and you can still be interviewed even if you do not wish to receive this. If you withdraw after the interview you are still eligible for payment.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I hope that no harm will be caused to you by taking part in this study. However, the interview may focus on some emotive topics that could be upsetting for you.

If you do become upset during the course of the interview, we can take a break and you can also withdraw your involvement from the research at any time.

Please see below details of organisations and helplines should you need additional support following the interview.

National Helplines:

Helplines that provide confidential support for people who are distressed
Samaritans Phone: 116 123 (free 24-hour helpline)
Website: www.samaritans.org.uk

The National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC) – is a UK wide support line who adults who have suffered abuse in childhood, which offers support and signposting to other services.

Helpline: 0808 801 0331 (Monday – Thursday 10am-9pm, Friday 10am-6pm)
Email: support@napac.org.uk

Website: www.napac.org.uk
Rape Crisis England and Wales – offers telephone support for people aged 16+who have been affected by sexual assault, rape, sexual harassment or childhood sexual abuse.

Freephone: 0808 500 2222 (Available 24/7 every day of the year)
Online chat via the website: https://247sexualabusesupport.org.uk/#live-chat
Website: www.rapecrisis.org.uk

The Survivors Trust - provides support, advice and signposting to survivors of sexual violence, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse.

Helpline: 08088 010818
Text: 07860022956
LiveChat: Select the link within the below designated times for the live chat service:
https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/live-chat-service

Live Chat service times are:
Monday-Thursday 6pm-8pm
Sunday 5pm-8pm

Email: info@thesurvivorstrust.org
Website: https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/ which contains signposting and resources.
The website has a page which can help you to find support within your local area
https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/find-support

If at any stage during the research process you would feel you would benefit from additional support or counselling. The primary researcher will support you find services within your local area.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Participating in this research will provide you with an opportunity to share your experiences of having given testimony at the public inquiry. It could enable you to reflect on some of your experiences. However, I cannot guarantee any specific benefits to taking part. Sharing your experiences will help to provide insights into the impact of testifying at public inquiries and could help inform how best to support participants and how to organise and structure public inquiries in the future.

What information will be collected?

Some basic demographic information will be collected and background information will be collected during the interview with regard to your testimony. **You will not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable to.** Each interview session will be audio recorded on a Dictaphone or Microsoft Teams. Any personally identifiable information will be anonymised for example a pseudonym will be given to each participant.

Will my information be kept confidential?
Yes, all the information you provide during the course of the research study will be kept confidential. However, if you share information which suggests that you or another person may be at current risk of harm, then I am legally obliged to share this information with an appropriate authority such as social services or the police. I would always try to inform you first before I share information with other organisations.

All personally identifiable information will be anonymised, any names of people or places will be removed from the transcripts and only the primary researcher will have access to this information. Therefore, no one will be able to identify you in publication. Once the interviews have been transcribed the audio recording will be deleted. Your responses may be put into a research data repository at University of Essex but will be fully anonymised.

All data that is collected from you will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. All information will be stored kept securely on systems at the University of Essex and on a password protected device. Your data will be kept for a period of ten years after the study, once ten years has passed your information will be erased from computers and any paper files will be destroyed. Your personal contact details will be erased at the end of the study.

What is the legal basis for using the data and who is the Data Controller?

The GDPR states that consent must be freely-given, specific, informed and unambiguous. This will be given by you signing the consent form should you wish to take part in the current study. The data controller for this study is the University of Essex and the University's Information Assurance Manager can be contacted on (dpo@essex.ac.uk).

What should I do if I want to take part?

Should you wish to take part in the study you can contact the primary researcher Naomi Hilton (Trainee Clinical Psychologist) via nh21892@essex.ac.uk .

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this study will be used as a part of doctoral thesis deposited at the University of Essex. The researcher will intend to publish the results of the study within a journal article this means that the results will be available in the public domain. They may also be used in a conference paper or presentation or a public statement. However, all results will be anonymised. A copy of the findings of the research will be made available to you should you to wish to have a copy.

Who has reviewed the study?

The University of Essex Ethics Committee (ETH2324-1492) has reviewed and given ethical approval for this research project.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the principal investigator of the project, Naomi Hilton, using the contact details below. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, Antonella Trotta atrott@essex.ac.uk. If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University of Essex Research Integrity Manager, Mantalena Sotiriadou (email: ms21994@essex.ac.uk). Please include the ERAMS reference which can be found at the foot of this page.

Name of the Researcher/Research Team Members

Principle investigator:
Naomi Hilton, Trainee Clinical Psychologist
Nh21892@essex.ac.uk

Research Supervisor:
Dr Danny Taggart, Lecturer School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex:
dtaggart@essex.ac.uk

Supervisor:
Lucy Duckworth, The Survivor's Trust
lucy.duckworth@thesurvivorstrust.org

Appendix G: Interview Consent Form

University of Essex

Consent Form

Title of the Project:	Five Years On – Sexual Abuse Survivors' Reflections on their Involvement with the Independent Inquiry into Childhood Sexual Abuse (IICSA) and It's Legacy
Research Team:	Naomi Hilton (Trainee Clinical Psychologist), Dr Danny Taggart (Clinical Psychologist) and Lucy Duckworth (The Survivor's Trust)

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these questions answered satisfactorily. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. I understand that any data collected up to the point of my withdrawal will be destroyed. ☐

3. I understand that whilst the researcher aims to minimise the risk of becoming upset, due focus of the research and the sensitive nature of the topics that may be discussed, I could find some of the interview upsetting. I can confirm that I been provided with support helplines available in the participant information sheet should I need them throughout my involvement in the study. ☐

4. I am aware that the researcher has a duty of care to inform the responsible authorities should they be concerned that myself or someone else is at current risk of harm. ☐

5. I am aware that the interviews will be recorded on a Dictaphone or Microsoft Teams and the recording will be deleted once the data has been transcribed. ☐

6. I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained. ☐

7. I understand that my first name and email address will be shared with the Finance Officer at the University of Essex in order to receive and confirm receipt of a £20 Amazon Voucher. ☐

8. I understand that my fully anonymised data will be used for doctoral thesis, research conferences and could be published in a research journal. ☐

9. I agree that my anonymised information can be quoted in research outputs. ☐

10. I understand that the data collected about me will be used to support other research in the future, and may be shared anonymously with other researchers. ☐

11. I give permission for the anonymised transcripts generated from my interview that I provide to be deposited in a research data repository so that they will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals. ☐

12. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

Participant Name	Date	Participant Signature
_____	_____	_____

Researcher Name	Date	Researcher Signature
_____	_____	

Appendix H: Table of Participant Contributions to Each Theme

Table 12

Participant contributions to each theme

Participants	Theme 1: Symbolic listening	Theme 2: Self as an agent of change	Theme 3: Liminal identity	Theme 4: Community as relational validation	Theme 5: Living with deferred closure	Theme 6: Cyclical activist engagement
Claire	X	X	X		X	X
Colleen	X		X		X	X
Derek		X			X	X
Dorothy	X	X	X	X	X	X
Francine	X	X		X	X	X
Georgina	X			X	X	
Janice	X	X		X	X	
Moira	X	X	X	X	X	X
Rosemary	X	X	X	X		
Rachel	X	X	X	X		X

Note. Theme titles are abbreviated here.