

Book review

Joanna Shapland, Gwen Robinson and Angela Sorsby (2011) *Restorative Justice in Practice – Evaluating what works for victims and offenders*, Willan, Routledge
ISBN: 978-1-84392-845-4 (pbk., p.228, £25.99)

In the growing literature on restorative justice this book is somewhat unique in presenting the results of wide research on the implementation, running and results of three restorative justice schemes in the UK. The research was undertaken between 2001 and 2008 and saw the three schemes through from the beginning until the end of pilots including an evaluation of reoffending over period of more than two years. The research is not only unique because it follows and evaluates restorative justice in practice during such a long time, but also it is rare to examine restorative justice programs for adult offenders, and especially its use in serious cases. Using partly the method of action research, some of the findings and results were regularly fed back to practitioners, so cooperation between scheme managers, practitioners and researchers was lively and gave the possibility to influence ongoing work.

All of the three schemes have been financed by the Home Office, however they differ in size, geographic area, methods (using conferencing, direct, or indirect mediation) and aims. The book points out that evaluation of any pilot has to focus on the aims determined by the funder and the schemes themselves. The Home Office funded the restorative justice programs to achieve two main aims: to reduce reoffending and to strengthen the needs and rights of victims whilst developing a practice which better represents the interest of the parties involved in criminal justice processes. Among the three schemes evaluated, the Justice Research Consortium (JRC) focused first of all on research (randomised controlled trials) as a main aim, but – in the sphere of restorative justice - emphasised also the need for reducing reoffending and providing benefits for victims. CONNECT – the RJ scheme which was created by NACRO and the former Inner London Probation Service – has added to the latter two the aims of increasing the responsibility by the offender, enabling the victim to receive reparation and/or an apology from the offender and achieve a greater sense of satisfaction about the criminal justice process. REMEDI, the third scheme studied in the research, as a charitable organisation in Yorkshire had existed before the present Home Office funding, was the subject of much discussion regarding its main aim, and it has also changed from time to time reflecting funders' expectations. It is interesting to see in the book how these aims had or hadn't been achieved, and what were the main reasons for that.

The design of the book is simple but complete. After presenting briefly the context and main methods of the research, adding a few words about the theoretical and practical development of restorative justice and about the three schemes evaluated, it starts in the past by reviewing the aims, histories and results of restorative justice guiding the reader through snapshots of earlier restorative justice schemes and programs for adult or young offenders in different common law countries. As different possible aims have been collected from these earlier

experiences, at the end of the chapter we read about the specific aims of the three schemes evaluated in this research. Having arrived at the present, the author's discuss the practical aspects of setting up the schemes, both physically (from how the premises were chosen and how this influenced the connection with criminal justice agencies, to recruiting staff, issues of financing and so on) and methodologically (the way of obtaining the cases and creating a consistent case flow and the possible stumbling-blocks related to this, the need for PR, institutional and professional contacts, training needs and the professional background of practitioners etc.). The reader shouldn't expect this part of the book to act as a basic guide to 'Setting up RJ schemes for Dummies', but will get many examples of experiences and questions which need to be thought through before starting to work in the field of restorative justice. There is also good advice from the researchers based on the findings of this evaluation. This information should be extremely useful for any policy-makers, practitioners or managers just starting, or bidding for, restorative justice schemes or other work in this field which is more and more part of Probation Service's work in Europe.

The next chapter is more theoretical and deals with the intrinsic dangers of restorative justice and the need for standards and regulation in this field. It reflects on issues of net-widening, the power-imbalance between parties involved, questions of confidentiality and the relationship between restorative justice and the traditional criminal justice system.

As the main focus of the book is to show what works for victims and offenders, the next two thirds of the book concentrate mainly on this topic. The research included preliminary interviews with offenders and victims about their feelings and expectations with regard to restorative justice, and asked for feedback shortly after their restorative justice event. This was followed by a longer interview a few months after. Most of the restorative justice events (mainly conferences) were also observed by the researchers. Gathering all this information in more than a hundred cases is also unique and a presentation of findings follows the chronology. Having the possibility to see why the parties wanted to participate in the events and with which feelings they have entered the (mostly) unknown is very interesting, as is learning how their feelings have changed and what they think about the other party, the facilitator, the outcome and about the method itself. The picture is completed by five case studies presented in the 6th chapter, which give the reader a feeling of becoming an observer of the process and which help to explain the whole context for those readers who have never experienced restorative justice before. The results show that the aim of addressing the needs of victims has been entirely achieved, and offenders' satisfaction was also high, but from the book you gain a more complex picture.

It is quite rare to find evaluation of cost effectiveness of restorative justice programs taking into consideration the costs of possible future convictions prevented by using restorative justice methods. While in this view the three schemes have been proven to be cost effective, the effects on reoffending seem to be minimal, having statistically significant decrease only in the frequency of reconviction.

Whilst the results shared here address a gap in the restorative justice literature, the book can also be quite useful for researchers more generally, as the design of the research, the method used and the way it is presented are a good example. The authors besides this suggest further issues with regard to which more research and analysis are needed. The text is comprehensive for a non-native English speaker too; tables, notes, index and a fair list of references all help the understanding.

The authors conclude: ‘we would never claim that one restorative justice process or event will always be a life-changing moment’ – and it can be said about this book as well. It is new, unique, may change views, give ideas for a new start, create understanding and communicate facts and experiences which have been never heard before. The main difference is that you – whether a policy maker, practitioner, manager or researcher - don’t have to be involved in a criminal act to experience it...

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