

## **Book Review**

**Joanna Shapland, Gwen Robinson and Angela Sorsby. (2011) Restorative Justice In Practice – Evaluating What Works for victims and offenders. London. Routledge ISBN 978- 1- 84392- 845- 4**

In 2001 a team of researchers based at Sheffield University were appointed to conduct an independent evaluation of the work of three Restorative Justice Schemes in the UK in order to test the evidence with offending behaviour. The Home office at that time provided funding to a number of schemes under the auspices of the Crime Reduction Programme (CRP). The CRP was a major initiative on the part of the then incoming Labour Government which was seeking to establish evidence-based practice in a variety of ways and was awarding unprecedented levels of funding to projects. The three schemes which the government decided to support were CONNECT, The Justice Research Consortium (JRC) and REMEDI. The focus of this excellent book is the resulting work of these three schemes, and the independent evaluation that Sheffield University carried out. It examines and analyses the findings in the context of the national and international field and also makes links with the desistance literature when commenting on the ‘potency’ of the models and schemes.

The three schemes worked with adult offenders. Restorative Justice (RJ) was offered pre and post sentence and across a wide range of offences including lesser and also quite serious offences. These schemes offered the full range of models of Restorative Justice namely conferencing, direct and indirect mediation. Conferencing and direct mediation involves face to face meeting with a facilitator (and supporters in the case of conferencing) and indirect mediation involves a shuttling of information between the victim and the offender via a mediator.

Spanning some seven years the evaluation incorporated the collection and analysis of a range of qualitative and quantitative data from a variety of sources. Their findings have proved invaluable to policy makers and practitioners have been one of the drivers leading the current government to officially adopt and promote Restorative justice in the criminal justice system. The researchers analysed the way schemes were set up and the design of the databases set up to collate information. They also looked at the aims of each scheme which were primarily about conflict resolution and giving victims a voice. Only the JRC scheme included reducing reoffending as an aim. The researchers interviewed those involved at the end of first year and at the end of the funding period. They carried out both one to one and group interviews with staff involved in the

different projects. They observed a total 285 restorative justice events and used observation schedules informed by previous RJ evaluations in South Australia and England. The interview schedules included subjective and objective measures, gathering and rating qualitative and quantitative information. They analysed the outcome agreements – these are non-binding ‘contracts’ that those in the conference commit to at the end of meeting. They also viewed and analysed available data and records about all the individual RJ events. They interviewed victims and offenders before and after their conferences or meetings. Finally, reconviction data was obtained for offenders who took part in RJ and for a control group of offenders. For RJC a control group was available whilst control groups were created for other two schemes.

The first section of the book looks at contemporary national and international RJ schemes. These interesting project summaries put the current evaluation of the three schemes into context. This section considers the overall results both of previous schemes and the current three schemes and is well observed and analysed. The theoretical base regarding RJ is referred to at this stage and one of the constant themes to emerge from evaluations is that face to face contact is the model of RJ most likely to get best results for both victim and offenders. This explains the current drive in the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) in the UK to value face to face conferencing above other forms of restorative justice. Conferencing promotes ‘future’ work by fostering desistance-type narratives by focusing on ‘how we can repair the harm that was caused’.

This first section also considers accountability, regulation and risk and, critically, addresses organisation and practitioner angst. It becomes clear that there has been immeasurable effort and work done to address why and how RJ works despite it looking so risky. The book quotes Gehm (1998) who asks ‘why victims would put themselves into such a risky situation?’ And acknowledges it is a risk. The answers are convincing and remarkable. Moreover there are international safeguards and standards set down by the Council of Europe and UNESCO and, in addition, the UK has standards and a reputable accreditation scheme for practitioners. In essence, this chapter highlights what schemes and facilitators need to do to ensure that positive dialogues can take place safely between the harmer and harmed. The book throughout is able to convey the need to observe procedural measures and principles in order to prepare an environment which can contain emotional and challenging exchanges around harm caused and the potential for repair.

The second section looks at that actual experience of restorative justice and is both illuminating and reassuring. Most participants had not heard of it – offenders thought it was for victims and victims assumed it was for offenders. This chapter is massively enhanced by three excellent case studies and some readers might like to start with these as they are so helpful. The authors speak of looking ‘through a different lens.’ They are referring to the idea that RJ helps participants to view the events through different glasses – from the other’s perspective. This section reiterates the importance of preparation to facilitate good RJ. The evaluation conveys an array of potential outcomes such as the capacity for a stereotypical view of the other to change as they become,

through the interaction, an individual and a person. The evaluation highlights the importance of procedural fairness for all participants and the focus on the benefits to victims becomes more tangible and obvious, for example, opportunities for communication and ventilation, emotional and symbolic reparation and closure. The book highlights best practise in conferencing for example, an emphasis on non-verbal encouragement by the facilitators and a related discouragement over-dominance or talkativeness. They comment that it requires considerable training to enable facilitators to 'hold back' and to use encouraging, non-directive prompts. 'What is key to good practice is a non-directive model backed by rigorous training and feedback.'

The final section of the book looks back at the experience of restorative justice from the perspective of victims and offenders and at its effects on reoffending and value for money. The book mines the deep seams of data and observations and the reader is easily able to follow the implications of the research and quite frankly to marvel at what can be achieved if and when restorative justice is carried out well. The feedback is overwhelmingly positive; 85 % of victims thought it helpful and most would recommend it. Offenders likewise found it helpful and constructive whilst themes of empowering healing and fairness permeate all the responses.

The book looks at why restorative justice works and suggests that it's not the emotions evoked by shaming so much as the opportunity to put hopes of resolution and desistance into practice. The focus of the conferences on the future was very empowering for offenders and helped them to work towards being someone better.

The schemes all underestimated the task of locating RJ cases. The environmental scoping was incorrect and had to expand to include the range of instances in which restorative approaches were suitable. Moreover the research showed that's lots of concern about RJ was found to be false; for example the concern that it will only be appropriate in cases of minor offending and the further concern that will be unsafe. The book shows how schemes created safety when there were, for instance, power imbalances such as when young offenders meet several adult victims. The evaluation summarises the issues that emerge in terms of the need to prepare well, the importance of facilitators being non-judgmental and neutral and the centrality of evaluating and monitoring all the time and remaining as transparent as possible.

There is finally an exploration of the merits of direct and indirect RJ. A balanced discussion is offered which stresses that there are real advantages in face to face interaction but, where the choice is of indirect restorative practices or none at all, it's possibly best to go with indirect.

This is an excellent read if you are interested in developing RJ or are interested in training as facilitators. It's a great resource and was well worth the wait!

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