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Criminal Justice Policy Review published online 26 November 2013

DOI: 10.1177/0887403413508287

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Criminal Justice Policy Review
XX(X) 1–20
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DOI: 10.1177/0887403413508287
cjp.sagepub.com


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Abstract

This article describes a restorative justice project run in three Canadian prisons. The project, *Partners in Healing*, aimed to promote restorative justice by running restorative justice committees inside and recruiting volunteers from the community to participate along with prisoners. The main goals of the project were to increase participants' awareness of restorative justice and help prisoners gain an understanding of the effects of their crime(s). An evaluation of the project solicited stories about the restorative justice committees and this article reports on some of the evaluation findings. The qualitative data offer insights into how to best design a restorative justice project in prisons. It also reveals dilemmas associated with evaluating such projects. The article concludes that projects need to be guided by a clear conceptualization of restorative justice.

Keywords

criminal justice policy, prison, program evaluation, restorative justice

In recent years, restorative justice has become a viable response to crime in many countries around the world. This response to crime, or other wrongdoing, typically involves having victims, offenders, and community members come together to find a way to restore the relationships harmed by an offense. Sometimes restorative justice takes the form of victim–offender mediation, whereby the victim and the offender meet and agree to a means of repairing the harms done. Ideally, however, restorative justice offers opportunities for the involvement of the wider community. Restorative justice programs are becoming widespread, with many focused on youth offending.

Restorative justice programs in prison are less common. Typically ad hoc and temporary (Dhami, Mantle, & Fox, 2009), they have varied widely. Some provide an

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opportunity for victims to meet the people responsible for harming them (Bagley, 2001; Devroey, 2003). Others have worked toward institutionalizing restorative justice principles and practices in the prisons themselves (Guidoni, 2003; Petrellis, 2007). Still others aim to educate prisoners about restorative justice principles in the hopes of helping enhance their potential to reintegrate successfully (Beech & Chauhan, 2013; Feasey & Williams, 2009; Helfgott, Lovell, Lawrence, & Parsonage, 1999, 2000; Jones, 2003; Lovell, Helfgott, & Lawrence, 2002). All, however, work on the premise that prisoners can gain from participating in a process quite distinct from the type of correctional programming usually offered in prisons.

This article reports on a restorative justice project run in three Canadian prisons. The project, *Partners in Healing*,¹ aimed:

to create safer communities by creating greater awareness of the impacts of crime and inviting citizen engagement through participation in restorative justice opportunities in our prisons and in the community.

The project had three specific objectives: provide increased opportunities for community engagement with the justice sector; support offenders as they prepare to be reintegrated into the community; and provide increased opportunities for victims to feel understood and heard.

These ambitious goals reflect a genuine concern among those involved with the project to promote the use of restorative justice and, in line with the principles of restorative justice, embark on a dialogue with victims. The project objectives have been operationalized in three main ways. First, staff initiated and facilitated restorative justice committees in three prisons. Second, staff recruited community volunteers to participate in the restorative justice committees. Third, the project organized and sponsored events for victims' groups and invitations for them to participate in the restorative justice committees and the *Partners in Healing* project.

This article focuses mainly on the restorative justice committees and presents the results of an evaluation of the *Partners in Healing* project.² I present narratives from participants to show how they came to understand the need to restore relationships affected by the offenses they committed. Their experiences of restorative justice reflect what Jennifer Llewellyn (2011) has called a "relational" form of justice. The article also reflects on the methodological constraints of typical evaluation research and how this evaluation used a different approach in an effort to study this restorative justice project on its own terms.

Literature Review

Much of the existing research on restorative justice in prisons comes from evaluations of projects around the world. Some of this research has applied psychometric scales to assess whether participants in restorative justice programs have changed their behavior (Petrellis, 2007) or their attitudes (Beech & Chauhan, 2013; Feasey & Williams, 2009; Petrellis, 2007). Others describe more qualitative data from interviews with participants in programs (Fortune, Thompson, Pedlar, & Yuen, 2010; Keeva & Newell, 2004; Lovell

et al., 2002). The literature ranges from quantitative assessments of outcomes to commentaries from researchers who have participated in a program in some capacity.

The diversity in approaches to research perhaps reflects the diversity of programs. Some programs have worked toward the development of restorative prisons or specialized units within the prisons (Coyle, 2001; Mirsky, 2010; Petrellis, 2007). These projects aim to change institutional practices and cultures. Other projects offer opportunities for prisoners to make amends for their offenses either through direct victim–offender mediation (Allard & Allard, 2009; Bagley, 2001; Devroey, 2003) or more indirectly through community service (Coyle, 2001; Stern, 2004). A good many projects described in the literature involve educating inmates about restorative justice or doing work to help them gain an understanding of the effects of their crime. Many also focus on developing empathy among participants (Beech & Chauhan, 2013; Bracken, 2013; Feasey & Williams, 2009; Guidoni, 2003; Hagemann, 2003; Jones, 2003; Keeva & Newell, 2004). These projects are among the most recent developments.² They also most closely resemble the *Partners in Healing* project described in this article.

The body of research is, however, limited methodologically (Dhami et al., 2009) and has produced mixed results on the effectiveness of restorative justice programs (Bitel, 2003; Guidoni, 2003; Petrellis, 2007).³ Research does consistently show that participants like the programs (Bracken, 2013; Katounas & McElrea, 2001) and that prisoners can gain empathy and understanding of the effects of their crime (Beech & Chauhan, 2013; Devroey, 2003; Feasey & Williams, 2009). Whether these programs have changed prisoners' behaviors or offending post-release has yet to be fully assessed.

The literature that reports more generally on restorative justice programs describes several common themes. Inmates tend to find some comfort in restorative justice programs—Programs often succeed in creating a welcoming space for inmates and a reprieve from the prison environment (Helfgott et al., 1999; Keeva & Newell, 2004). Participants report feeling empowered and that they have developed important relationships with others (Fortune et al., 2010). Rich descriptions of the experiences of participants in restorative justice programs in prisons are, however, few and far between.

Indeed, some commentators have noted that evaluations of and research about restorative justice have failed to adequately measure the aspects of restorative justice that make it different from our mainstream approaches. At the heart of the complaint is the idea that the success of restorative justice is not being measured on its own terms (Llewellyn, Archibald, Clairmont, & Crocker, in press; Piché & Strimelle, 2007; Presser & Van Voorhis, 2002). Helfgott et al. (1999, p. 394) conclude that the “phenomenology” of the experience of restorative justice may not be easily captured with traditional social science research methods.

Prison-based restorative justice programs exist in the context of debates about whether the goals of prisons and the goals of restorative justice can be complementary. Some commentators argue that corrections and restorative justice have reintegration of offenders as central goals (Aertson & Peters, 1998). Others see restorative justice as offering the possibility to improve the rehabilitative potential of prison (Dhami et al., 2009; Fortune et al., 2010; Lehman et al., 2013). Restorative justice can provide prisoners with the opportunity to develop relationships with people outside prisons and that

these relationships may help cement positive personal growth. On the contrary, others see the goals of prison and restorative justice as antithetical and that the core of restorative justice challenges the underlying rationale of prison (Elliott, 2002; Immarigeon, 2004): “Incarceration is the institutional manifestation of the punitive impulse that restorative justice is designed and intended to challenge” (Immarigeon, 2004, p. 15). Similarly, Guidoni (2003) argues that restorative justice advocates should not spend time working to improve prison conditions, rather they should work toward the reduced use of imprisonment.

The Partners in Healing Project

The *Partners in Healing* project aspired to improve conditions for prisoners and invited them to seek new ways of understanding their offenses and their prison experience. The project itself did not aspire to promote a reduction in the use of imprisonment. Having said that, the community-based committee overseeing the project has a mandate to promote restorative justice at a community-wide level. They have not chosen a side in the debate described above, although many of the members do advocate a reduced use of prison to respond to crime.

For *Partners in Healing*, project staff developed what they call “restorative justice committees” in three maritime prisons.⁴ Meeting twice a month for a few hours, the committees provide inmates with opportunities to learn about restorative justice and how it might help them face the effects of their offenses. They are run, by and large, in the manner of a restorative circle. The goal was to provide inmates with a safe environment in which they can communicate feelings, come to accept responsibility for what they have done, and understand the full extent of the harms resulting from their crime(s).

As a secondary goal, the restorative justice committees provide opportunities for inmates to meet surrogate victims, or those representing victim-serving groups, and members of the community at large. Bell and Trevethan (2003) use the term “surrogate victim and offender group” to describe such a group:

. . . offenders and matched or random victims who meet together in direct dialogue to discuss the crime in general terms. Citizens, victim advocates, and family members may also attend these sessions. The programs vary, but may be comprised of discussions, exercises, role-plays, letters of apology, and in rare instance, actual encounters with the victims. The groups help to address offender accountability, participant awareness, victims’ rights, and the long-term effects of crime.

The hope was that such encounters would help inmates see for themselves the effects of crime and that this would help them reflect on the effects of their own actions. Staff also anticipated that community members, including victims, could learn by hearing the stories of inmates. As described in one blog-post:

We are not doing victim offender mediation in the *Partners in Healing* project, but what we are creating is opportunities for those who have harmed to understand each other better . . .

so that those who have committed offenses can understand the impact of their actions on the community as a whole, and community members can start to understand why these harms were done. (Partners in Healing & Farnsworth, 2011)

The restorative justice committees have evolved considerably over the 2 years they have been running. Their first few meetings involved basic introductions and learning about the principles of restorative justice. Community members and inmates were learning about restorative justice alongside each other. Each committee has watched videos showing the dynamics of restorative justice encounters. They have participated in various activities aimed at opening up a dialogue about responsibility and accountability. One committee received a small grant from an inmate fund that they donated to a women's shelter. They also produced a pamphlet about restorative justice to be circulated in the prison. Two of the other committees have been working on pamphlets for distribution to community agencies serving at-risk youth. The pamphlets include personal stories, poems, and artwork all aimed at giving youth some insight into life in prison. As one participant in the circle noted, the committees are shifting from a place where principles are being taught, to a place where learning is happening.

The committees also include guests from outside the prisons. One or two community members attend the meetings, most on a regular basis. The committees have also welcomed several victims of crime. On one occasion, they heard from a woman who had participated in restorative justice as the victims of a serious crime. She now works as a professional speaker talking about her experience. On another occasion, the committees hosted two women whose brother had been murdered.

For the *Partners in Healing* project, staff defined restorative justice as engaging "everyone affected by crime or harm, including victims, offenders and community members."⁵ They also drew on the definition used by the Correctional Service of Canada: "Restorative justice is a non-adversarial, non-retributive approach to justice that emphasizes healing in victims, meaningful accountability of offenders, and the involvement of citizens in creating healthier, safer communities." These definitions capture the inclusive nature of restorative justice practices and the aspirations of the *Partners in Healing* project. In their proposal for funding, and in their initial meetings with the evaluation team, staff emphasized their desire to truly implement restorative principles, rather than play lip service to them.

To further entrench restorative values, each committee discusses a list of core values, including accountability, honesty, respect, dignity, confidentiality, open-mindedness, freedom of speech, nonjudgmental, trust, patience, kindness, curiosity, and partnership. Staff also distributed the "Five Rs of Restorative Justice"—relationships, respect, responsibility, repair, and reintegration (Title, 2011). When working with inmates, these principles were at the forefront.

The *Partners in Healing* project received funding for 3 years and was delivered by a local community-based agency. While staff received support from prison administration to run the program, the project was not part of a larger effort to implement restorative justice in Canadian prisons. While several other projects have been implemented across Canada (Bracken, 2013; Petrellis, 2007; Piché & Strimelle, 2007), only one, the

Restorative Opportunities⁶ program, has been implemented on a national level. As Guidoni (2003) states, “These projects are almost always limited in time, are often marginal to prison administration, and are the result of local initiatives and not supported by national policies” (Guidoni, 2003, p. 58). The *Partners in Healing* project certainly fits his description.

Research Methods

The data reported in this article come from an evaluation of the *Partners in Healing* project that I led in 2012 and 2013. The sources of data for the evaluation included project documents and interviews. Over 2 years, I conducted face-to-face interviews with 41 people, 16 of whom were prisoners. The other research participants included project staff, prison staff, and members of the steering committee for the project. I also attended three circles, one in each institution. Approximately 30 prisoners participated in these circles, some of whom were also interviewed one-on-one.

The interviews for the first round of research in 2012 were typical of social science research and program evaluations. I asked participants for their views about the program and invited their thoughts on its strengths and weaknesses. In the second round of research in 2013, I used a more narrative approach to collecting data from project participants, collecting stories rather than opinions. Instead of asking only typical evaluation questions (e.g., “Do you feel the project achieved its goals?”), I also asked participants to describe a positive and negative experience in the circles or working with the project.⁷ I applied this approach to one-on-one and group interviews. I based group interviews loosely on a method called “anecdote circles.”⁸ Unlike a traditional focus group, an anecdote circle solicits experiences and stories. The data that resulted were richer and revealed more about people’s experiences of the circles than had the first round of interviews.

While not a new method per se, the narrative approach adopted here provided an innovative way to ask questions differently. Those who have adopted a narrative approach argue that traditional research methods fail to account for the level of complexity associated with many social problems that programs are designed to address (Stienstra & van der Noort, 2008). Narrative provides a route into people’s experiences that traditional methods may miss. Asking for stories rather than opinions changes what people recount.

Most interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Notes and transcripts were read in an iterative way. In the first reading, I took notes and identified themes. In the second reading, I identified metaphors, shared narratives, and overlapping themes. The transcribed interviews form the basis for the narratives presented below.

Findings

Coming to the Circle

Prisoners came to the circles for varying reasons. Many of them talked about coming to the circles based on what other inmates had told them. Some had participated in

restorative justice in other institutions, but most were unfamiliar with restorative justice prior to attending a committee meeting. Many told us that they had been confused about what restorative justice meant initially and some thought that the committees would help them meet the victims of their crimes. They have come to understand that facilitating victim–offender mediation lies outside the committees' mandate. Nonetheless, several inmates commented that they hoped that their participation on the restorative justice committees would help prepare them for such an encounter, if it ever became possible.

Many participants talked about being motivated to attend the committee meetings because they provided a change in pace from the regular routine and programs. One called it “a night out from the prison.” Others commented on how the meetings affected them in a positive way:

I'd say in a short time I started getting right into the program and it made me start seeing another side of myself . . . I keep learning every time I come. No matter how many times I come I keep learning new things and I really appreciate this experience. It's given me self-development.

It gives me a chance to deal with my emotions . . . I can come and socialize, sit down and deal with some of my emotions. Get some things off my chest that are bothering me. It helps me deal with things.

Many circle participants, including noninmates, commented on how much they had learned from being on the committee:

It opened my eyes to so many things . . . I mean I've learned so much from you guys in the sharing and in the conversations that we've had . . . I get to see you guys and speak to you as real people and not as offenders or criminals.

I developed a new sense of sympathy to hear their stories—to see the whole learning process. A few faces and a few stories stand out. I think I made a difference.

Several of the inmates said that they had learned that their offenses had broader effects than they had thought. They described the effects on victims, families, and communities:

I created victims by coming to jail. My family is a victim. I left a financial load on my parents with lawyer's fees. That's a victim itself. My parents worry about me. My family worries about me being in prison.

[Crime] disturbs people. It puts them in fear. There's a sense of trust that is broken.

Now I can see that it's an obvious trauma effect [for the victims]. I can see that's something I could have caused. That became more clear in the restorative justice circles.

Volunteers and staff confirmed that they have seen some of these realizations in the circles. In the words of one volunteer:

Some of them are just starting to realize that their children are victims too. That was a major breakthrough for some of them. They felt like they had no victims but they are slowly breaking down.

One inmate was very insecure about how he felt. He has changed. Become more calm. He was afraid to share. The sessions encouraged him to do other forms of relaxation. He is starting to free himself while he's here . . . [he] will have a better recovery here because if you can free yourself here you will do well on the outside.

Other participants from the community suggested they wanted to meet, face-to-face, with people who had committed serious crimes. They hoped to better understand the prisoners as human beings not simply criminals. For some, coming to the institutions was an intimidating experience. In telling a story about attending, one visitor described being struck by seeing “cages and locks everywhere”:

I remember walking down and I remember there were inmates walking around. Just the thought of walking around with them, and what could happen. You know, you see the stuff on TV. There's all the cold concrete, it was wet. A chill went down my bones. I was fearful.

This person's sense of fear changed once she entered the circle. She said she felt more comfortable as the meeting progressed and that the circle was a very welcoming place. My own experience in each of the circles confirms these observations. Many participants freely shared their emotions and their personal stories and others listened supportively. Having said that, not all the circles seemed to have the same level of interpersonal support and not all inmates seemed fully relaxed. Some participants held their bodies in fairly defensive positions. Others, many of whom did not speak, appeared timid and vulnerable.

The Circle Process

Generally, when the men enter the room, they seem comfortable, chatting with one another, informally. The atmosphere in one institution is particularly light hearted and social—the prisoners laugh and joke with one another. Everyone contributes to putting chairs out in a circle. Once the facilitator brings everyone to focus, the groups begin with a check-in. Each participant speaks in turn and tells the group what is on their mind and how they are feeling. Two of the groups use a talking piece made by one of the inmates.

I asked participants to describe what happens in the circles.

Right off the bat everyone sits down and is cordial and if someone is speaking you listen. If you don't want to listen don't be impolite right. We have rules in the circles and we're asked to follow them which is normal. If you want to speak you can speak. If you don't want to you don't have to. You're not forced into anything right? . . . When we go around, some people talk about whether they had a good week or a good couple of weeks . . . and more or less just lets everyone know what kind of mood we are in.

It's not like in a classroom situation. We don't have before us a set ruled time schedule guiding us. Anything that is brought before this group is thought up by the group. We set our pace, our own objectives. We have control.

Participants described many powerful moments in the circles. These centered mainly around guests and community members and experiences in which participants shared their feelings with each other: "It's real people, it's real situations, it's real feelings."

The visit from two crime victims epitomized this experience for one inmate.

What made a difference for me was that they were right in front of me. I was able to see what they were doing, their smallest action or reaction to what was being said. I would look at one sister while the other was talking and see her reaction. And I could see the pain in the sister that was listening to her. So I was able to look at them and see the effects of that. See the honesty of how crime really touches someone.

Sharing Stories

The circles provide an opportunity for participants to exchange stories. Many participants commented explicitly on how they learned from each other's stories. They learned about each other and themselves. The power of narrative came out loud and clear in what people told us about their experiences:

I find that in the circle you get to hear about other people's perspectives. You get to unwind and rewind and learn different perspectives that you have not heard anywhere. You see people being straight, being honest with themselves, being straight with themselves.

I have learned so much since starting with this group just hearing people share their stories and seeing the effect it has on other people . . .

It's a good place to learn other people's perspectives on things and learn through other people's experiences.

Everybody's got a story . . . There are certain inmates in the yard that I might look at and think, you know, look at this fucking idiot or whatever. But then when they come [to the restorative justice committee] and they share their stories then I'm like, well no wonder he's the way he is. Look at the way grew up. You never . . . really take the time to sit and think. You don't know what he's been through. You don't know what I've been through . . . You get a new light.

Sharing stories allowed them some new insight into their own lives.

Many inmates described the circles as places where people felt comfortable being honest and they generally described a high level of trust. They viewed trust as key to a fully functioning circle. The creation of a trusting space is possible partly because inmates attend voluntarily and no one evaluates their progress. Many stories described

prisoners' comfort about sharing their feelings and the personal work they were doing to help them through the ordeal of being imprisoned.

Most inmates felt that other participants were honest in the meetings. The realities of the prison do, however, come into play. Prison culture limits to some extent, the level of trust that can be built:

There's still strangers there and a lot of people talk and that. Trust is there to a certain point.

You got guys coming to the group who are worried about their image or who is in the group.

[You] can't talk about another person. Me coming in here and talking to you about another person is ratting even if it doesn't affect anything, If I tell you "hey there's this guy on my range who has cigarettes right now," that's ratting even though you don't care and aren't telling anyone.

There's a lot of fake people in this place that come in here and they'll try to tell a story just to act hard.

A few guys went [to committee meetings] to try and meet weaker people so they could hold something over their head and there's always one or two of those but usually you can tell who they are.

Sharing was also limited in one circle because of the interpersonal dynamics:

The thing is we don't really have, its not like a group yet. It's like a free for all. There's no trust in that group eh. Anybody comes and anybody goes you know there's no trust in that group yet . . . guys were there for the wrong reasons and we are in a prison as well so guys don't want to jump up and start saying well this is me and then they have to go out and be in the population and who's to say that buddy is not going around and saying to his friends this is what this guy said you know.

Inmates do expect that stories they tell in the circle will remain in the circle. Ironically, confidence that confidentiality will be maintained is enhanced by the "con code" where "rats" are seen as almost as bad as sex offenders. Inmates were reluctant to provide specific examples of incidents from the circle. Despite their openness about their emotions, some hesitated to tell specific stories or use precise examples. I was not, of course, looking for names but even telling me a specific story about an inmate who disrupted the circle could be interpreted as "ratting." In some ways then, this code may help prevent breaches of confidentiality that could seriously undermine the ability of committees to work effectively.⁹ The form of trust that results may not be ideal. It may, however, be functional because the consequences for inmates of having their vulnerabilities shared with the wider population can be quite damaging.

Bringing Down Walls

Despite living in close quarters, prisoners generally avoid sharing stories or emotions with each other. The culture does not support deep friendships or open relationships.

Some inmates pointed out that sharing emotions and certain kinds of stories can be seen as a weakness in prison—"people put up a front" or a "façade." The meetings of the restorative justice committees allowed the façades to fade and the fronts to come down.

I am sharing. I'm letting the walls down.

Over the years of being inside, I've put up fences and I'm slowly tearing the fences down. I'm getting to the point now that I'm going to tear them all down and get through this.

Another inmate described how he felt having conversations without the walls. He felt struck by the conversations he had with several inmates after having watched a documentary about restorative justice:

Like we're down there actually having an intelligent conversation about this documentary. [It] just made us feel . . . it kinda almost made me laugh a little bit because I was like wow, is this actually really happening? Are we actually really doing this?

He contrasted the conversations in the committee meetings with others he had had with the same inmates in the past. Similarly, several participants commented on the importance of the informal chatter between inmates before and after meetings or during various activities.

The voluntary nature of the program helps bring the walls down. Inmates commented on the fact that they were not attending meetings to prove anything to anyone and that they are not being judged:

You're not like evaluated and judged and stuff like with the other programs and it's not seen by your parole officer and your case management team. It's something you're doing for yourself. Like no one on my case management team even knows I come to this so it's not a judgment whether you're passing or failing or doing good. It's just something you're doing to help yourself.

It's not something else that CSC [Correctional Service Canada] is throwing at them.

We can see the metaphor of the walls in some of the comments made by other, noninmates who have participated in the circles:

I don't know what everybody in the circle has done as their crime and I don't care. I get to see you guys, and speak to you as human beings and with all that aside and just get to know you guys in here as the guys that you are, the fathers you are, the brothers you are, whatever it might be. I thank you again for being here and I respect all of you being here and sharing what you share and trying to make the changes you feel that you need to make in your lives to be able to be successful in the community.

What has struck me in the group is the honesty. The honesty from the men sharing. And the honesty in their taking responsibility and the accountability for what they've done to themselves, their families, the victims and their families.

Of course, when the walls come down, emotions can run high. We heard of some instances where circles deteriorated. Too many people were talking at once and arguments broke out:

We were talking about something and two guys disagreed. Actually there was three of them involved. And they were all kinda saying similar things when they were saying their piece but [they were] misinterpreting [each other] as well. So it was going back and forth and I was thinking that I've never seen this dynamic before. And at the end they were shaking hands and just reassuring [each other] that . . . "I wasn't disrespecting you in any way." So they have that [disagreement] in the circle but then everything's worked out.

It seems that most times the facilitator can manage the groups and bring them back around.

Sometimes it was heated, but I'm a strong believer or letting people be themselves . . . I really appreciate this guy might have had a bad day and he might flip out and he comes right back down and this person accepts the fact that the man had a little trip and he says that's cool. What was beautiful for me to see was some guy . . . and he has a little moment, and let him have his moment and he comes back down and the person that he just flipped out on deals with him genuinely.

The problem is that some participants have less patience or tolerance for these kinds of incidents. For example, the person quoted above feels that sometimes, arguments or heated discussion can be productive incidents. Another agreed,

One of the things the group is always worried about is that sometimes someone will take the opportunity to use the group for something personal; as a soap box opportunity or whatever. Yet more often than not with the way that the guys are in the group, even though he is trying to make it personal, we as a group always find a way to bring that in to us it as a group lesson, or a way for more than one person to help him. So that's a good example. If someone will take that opportunity soapbox it we will find a way to pull that back in.

One person linked these dynamics to accountability:

Just being in a circle and being held accountable, they are having the opportunity to see the impacts of their behavior in a smaller way but in a very real was. And then dealing with some of the more difficult participants. It's again learning how people impact each other.

But others felt annoyed and alienated when the arguments broke out. Given the potential negative effects of these disruptions, the facilitator should address such behaviors with the group. The circle process lends itself to having a discussion about how much of these kinds of behaviors are welcome while still allowing members of the group to respect each other. On a regular basis, the facilitator and the group needed to check in on the rules and expectations in each group.

Developing Relationships

Many inmates described the circles, and restorative justice more generally, as being about relationships. They often used the word “community” to describe the relationships being fostered in the circle: “we are building our own community.” But they also understood restorative justice to be about healing relationships. They described the circles as being about trust, respect, and openness. It may therefore not matter whether they are meeting a victim or making cards for their families. The activities do not define the experience.

The relationships in the circle lie in stark contrast to those that exist outside it, in the institution, and in the community of inmates and staff. The relationships fostered in this space make it restorative and the prisoners seem to have an innate awareness that they are restoring relationships:

Someone you might never have paid attention to before, you find out that the person is dealing with the same problems. When you meet him outside in the yard you can actually say hello.

. . . we got to talking about other things like holding the door for somebody and it’s something that I’ve ignored in here because you don’t want to get into anyone’s business, you just want to do your own things and it just kind of broadens, being more open minded so that if you see someone who is down in the dumps . . . like one night I seen a guy sitting out on the deck and he looked kind of down and I had just made a pizza so I got a piece of pizza and took it out to him. And it’s not much but even something like that makes you feel like you are giving back . . . It’s helping me heal better and maybe helping him too . . . It motivates me when I do something for someone else.

I just love this type of community. It’s more real. Like I’m sick of walking around the yard and having superficial conversations like “hey, what’s going on with you?” “I’m good” and I’m not really good though. You know what I mean? And in here people actually listen.

In several instances, the committee provided opportunities for inmates to show that they care about other people. They can come to see other people’s needs and by doing so, they may be in a better position to understand the needs of the victim(s) of their crime(s) and the community they harmed. The circles provide participants with, as one supporter of the project said, a “sense of belonging”—something that is necessary if they are going to succeed on the outside. The ability to belong to a community is critical to their reintegration.

Many inmates commented on the fact that participation in the circles helped them understand how many relationships they had harmed with their offenses. True to the way the justice system defines crime, many inmates had focused only on the direct victims of their crime. The circles helped them understand the broader effects and the scope of victimization.

Keys to Success

The *Partners in Healing* project succeeded in establishing successful restorative justice committees for several reasons:

- The organization running the program is well known and the key staff person had an established relationship with prison staff. She also worked part-time with a restorative justice project run by the Correctional Service of Canada. She therefore had credibility with prison staff that greatly enhanced her ability to overcome administrative and bureaucratic barriers to coming into the prison in the first place.
- A key person working in each prison championed the project. These champions helped ensure that the project was viable by being available to organize passes for prisoners and meet guests at the prison entrance.
- Parole officers or other members of the prisoners' case management team were not informed about whether an inmate was participating in the committee. Participation was not included in any inmate's file. This factor was critical for inmates. It also helped protect the circles from having participants attending who were looking only to improve their chances of being paroled or receiving some other form of institutional benefits.
- While the committee meetings were designed to put restorative justice principles into practice, they remained flexible and responsive to the needs and interests of committee members.
- The inclusion of members of the community was a critical feature of the committee for many of the participants. In the words of one inmate:

I find actually that their role is that they bring in flavor. They were honest and sincere and they spoke from the heart and I appreciated that they were so open to restorative justice [and] to show that they are trying to give. I got knowledge by hearing what they had to say.

Several volunteers were quite struck by their experiences in the circles and they described having learned a lot about the experiences of inmates. One said that she came to understand that offenders have regret and that often their life circumstances have led them into trouble. Volunteers also learned about inmates' experiences inside prison, noting the difficulties that inmates face in their relationships with others in the institutional environment of a prison.

Interestingly, the committees were set up so that inmates and community members would learn about restorative justice together: As one key informant described it,

Part of what was so important about what we chose to do is bring everyone in at the same level. The expectation was that they would have the same dialogue about restorative justice as the guys that were in there so it was not important that they knew exactly about it before they went. They would be learning alongside of the inmates.

Dilemmas

Recruitment of Inmate Participants

During the first round of evaluation it became apparent that one of the committees was dysfunctional. Several participants spent a lot of time blaming the system for their situation. Prison politics intruded on the circle and the facilitator questioned the motives of some of the participants. It appears that some members stopped coming because they felt that the meetings had strayed away from their original purpose and had become a waste of time.

As one key informant described the situation,

It's the self-selection thing and the politics of the institution and each institution has its own culture and the con code there [in one of the institutions] is very strong. So, if you're a "solid" that means you did not sexually assault anyone. The people that she [the facilitator] got there are not people who had significant personal impact on other people. At least half of that group did not commit crimes that have the same level of social stigma so most of the guys in that circle are not in the same place as the others. If I killed someone I am forced to look at the fact that I took someone else's life so I think their level of desire to make amends is significantly more and I think the people at [the other institution] came with alternate agendas.

People who discussed the particular group dynamics resulting from this approach were of two minds. On one hand, in the words of one key informant, "being a restorative justice program I don't want to [remove him] because kicking someone out does not seem very restorative to me." On the other hand, another person we interviewed suggested that without mechanisms, such as one-on-one preparation of committee participants, there should be selection criteria to ensure that a few people cannot undermine the potential for the committee to be effective and function well. Another key informant said she "struggled about what we could have done differently . . . Who would do the selecting?"

Several months after the first round of evaluation, staff decided that the circle at this institution should be closed and that only inmates deemed ready for the experience should be invited to participate. They then ran screening interviews with potential participants, many of whom had attended the initial group. Based on these interviews, staff chose a group of inmates who were ready to accept responsibility for what they had done and to learn more about the effects of their crimes. Since then, the circle has been functioning well.

The principles of restorative justice suggest that participation should be voluntary, but it does not follow that anyone who wants to participate should be able to. Indeed, participation in restorative justice presumes some preparation—Individuals not ready for the process can undermine it or create harms for other participants. Ideally, a similar project should include one-on-one preparation time with inmates to ensure that they are ready to participate. For example, an inmate who has not taken responsibility

for their crime may not be well suited to this project. If preparation time or one-on-one work is not possible, project staff should screen potential participants to avoid the dilemmas faced in the *Partners in Healing* project. As one project supporter stated, “we need to be less shy about saying ‘it’s just not your time right now.’”

Evaluating the Partners in Healing Project

At first blush, the meetings do not always look like “restorative justice” circles. As noted earlier, sometimes the groups do crafts or writing workshops. These meetings differ from the more typical encounters between victims, offenders, and community members. As the evaluator, the activities led me to wonder whether the project was actually doing restorative justice or simply offering inmates an opportunity to socialize and share some of their feelings about being imprisoned.

For help assessing whether the project constituted “restorative justice,” I turned to the notion of restorative justice as relational justice. Developed by Jennifer Llewellyn (2011), this approach assumes that people are constituted in and through their relationships with others. Accordingly, injustice harms relationships. Justice should strive to restore relationships to equality and dignity. Restored relationships are key to the conceptualization of restorative justice (Llewellyn, 2011).¹⁰ Llewellyn argues that relational theory¹¹ distinguishes restorative justice from other approaches. Restorative justice programs should therefore emphasize relationships and their restoration to a state of equality of relationships. This equality is marked by mutual respect, concern, and dignity.

One of the advantages of this approach, for the purposes of evaluating this project is that it provides a highly conceptual definition of restorative justice. Other definitions tend to focus on the practices used in restorative justice and/or the types of people included. By drawing instead on a relational approach, we can assess the restorativeness of a program by looking at the underlying goals of an activity rather than by looking at the activity itself.

The *Partners in Healing* circles have achieved relational justice because prisoners gain understanding of how they are constituted through relations with others, how their crimes have harmed those relationships, and how the relationships in the circle can be different. Many prisoners said explicitly that the meetings had helped them see the broader effects of their crime(s). For example, one described how he had lived in a small community and that he had never before thought about the effects on the community and on his neighbors on the night that he was arrested at his home. The crime was a major one and the police presence would have been upsetting to many people accustomed to a quiet village lifestyle.

As an evaluator, trying to assess whether the *Partners in Healing* project was successfully implementing the principles of restorative justice led to a dilemma. The methods typically associated with program evaluation did not lend themselves to the collection of data that could shed light on whether the justice being done was “relational.” The decision to take a narrative approach in the second round of evaluation was critical in finding data that provided a more in-depth insight into the experiences of participants in the program. It allowed me to report in a more satisfying way on whether the

program was effectively doing restorative justice. It also allowed me to look more at the experiences of participants to make this assessment rather than relying on their opinions.

Conclusion

This article has described the *Partners in Healing* project run in three Canadian prisons. Some of the lessons learned provide advice for those thinking of embarking on a similar project. The findings of an evaluation of the project revealed that similar project must have a high level of institutional support. They should also work toward increasing prisoners' contact with community members. A policy on the recruitment of inmates is also critical to ensure that those who choose to participate have accepted responsibility for their crime and are ready to come to terms with the effects of their actions.

In terms of evaluating such projects, the experience with *Partners in Healing* suggests that evaluators need some conceptual framework from which to draw. It may not be enough to rely solely on an assessment of outcomes, such as changed behaviors or attitudes. These outcomes overlook the critical component of restorative justice as a process of restoring relationships. Prison inevitably destroys relationships and effectively diminishes inmates' ability to think of themselves in relations with others, or as relational beings. Having restorative justice programs in prisons can, by allowing inmates the opportunity to restore relationships, help, alleviate some of the pains of imprisonment.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank the staff at the John Howard Society of Southeastern New Brunswick for their assistance with this research and to the participants in the circle who invited me to participate. The author owe thanks also to Jennifer Llewellyn and Robert Crocker for their feedback on the research. Jody Wasserman and Chloe Gagnon provided research assistance. The Correctional Service of Canada, Restorative Justice Division funded the project described in this paper, including the costs of evaluation the project.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This was a paid evaluation of a program that received project funding from Correctional Service Canada. Forms approved.

Notes

1. The *Partners in Healing* project was run by the John Howard Society of Southeastern New Brunswick (Canada). The Society offers services and support to offenders in and out of

- prison. The John Howard Society received funding from Correctional Services Canada to run the project.
2. Others have provided more thorough reviews describing various projects in greater detail (see Braithwaite & Liebmann, 1999; Dhimi, Mantle, & Fox, 2009; Van Ness, 2005).
 3. Success has been measured by outcomes such as reduced recidivism and reduced conflict within the prison.
 4. The institutions included Westmorland (minimum security), Dorchester (medium security), and Springhill (medium security).
 5. This quote appeared in a presentation given to various groups by project staff.
 6. See the Restorative Opportunities program run by the Correctional Service of Canada (www.csc-scc.gc.ca/restorative-justice/003005-1000-eng.shtml).
 7. The anecdote circles run inside the prisons also applied practices used in restorative justice circles. As the facilitator, I posed questions and participants spoke in turn, using a talking piece.
 8. Anecdote circles were developed by Cognitive Edge, a consulting company that focuses on the use of narrative and stories in the development of organization of change (see <http://cognitive-edge.com/library/methods/>).
 9. Confidentiality is not a requirement of restorative justice. Rather, the hope is that restorative justice creates a safe space for sharing and that the information shared will be treated with respect and not used in a way that would harm others.
 10. Professor Llewellyn is a member of the evaluation team.
 11. Relational theory presupposes that our sense of self is constituted in and through or relationships with others.

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