

Just Emotions: Rituals of Restorative Justice

M. Rossner, (2013)

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Over the last 25 years interest has been growing in using restorative justice (RJ) to offer a new style of justice to victims, offenders and communities. The attraction of RJ is that it has the potential to recognise and respond to the needs of both the victim and the offender with a view to remedying some of the harm done by offending. As a result RJ is gaining increased public and legislative support throughout the world.

‘Just Emotions’ focuses very specifically on restorative justice conferences which Rossner identifies as events where the offender and victim(s) are brought together in the same room, at the same time, and given the opportunity to express their emotions about a crime and the harm done. Using the skills of a facilitator, the group is helped to come to a conclusion about what the offender might do to make amends for the crime. Not all RJ conferences are effective and done badly they can make a situation worse. Using research with the Metropolitan Police in London, Rossner looks at successful and failed conferences in order to undertake a micro-level study of processes and the emotions during the event. Rossner suggests that by undertaking an in-depth analysis of the emotional and interactional dynamics within RJ conferences and by testing interaction ritual theory, it is possible to strengthen the effectiveness of conferencing.

Rossner emphasises the importance of the facilitator paying careful attention to the preparation of participants but also the physical environment in which the conference will take place. Participants need to be informed about what is going to happen, to think about what impact the crime has had upon them and how they might express their emotions in a respectful and sensitive manner. There needs to be a calm, spacious and private environment allowing participants the opportunity to leave their outside world concerns and focus on the ‘ritual’ of the conference. She stresses that the two most important components of a successful RJ ritual are the creation of balance and rhythm. Balance is not simply about numbers of participants or the dominance of contributors but requires the facilitator to manage the complex mix of perceived and real interactional dominance. Creating rhythm involves participants being helped to ‘warm up’ to each other; initially there may be awkward silences and disjointed interjections but as rhythm develops people can become emotionally entrained with each other encouraging solidarity and emotional energy payback. Threats to rhythm include the stigmatising of the offender or acts of defiance which can undermine the development of feedback and regard for turn-taking rules.

Rossner suggests that successful RJ conferences involve turning points where participants express strong and spontaneous emotions in response to each other. These emotional turning points can help the development of solidarity and reintegrative behaviour. Solidarity behaviour includes the synchronising of gesture and gaze, touching, crying and laughing together and the expression and exchange of remorse, empathy and sympathy. Reintegration comes from the supporters of the offender, in the form of encouragement, love and respect and the willingness to accept them back into a ‘community of care’. By contrast, unsuccessful conferences can leave participants feeling deflated, disengaged and emotionally withdrawn from the process. Rossner posits that a successful RJ ritual can generate sustained emotional energy for considerable time after the event and this can translate into a reduction in reoffending. A facilitator cannot promise that the conference will come to an emotional turning point or that there will be solidarity, reintegration and the release of emotional energy, however, by encouraging the development of these ingredients, the likelihood of the conference being successful will be increased.

Although the book is very detailed and technical, the focus and emphasis on the role and importance of human emotions permeates the structure and writing in the book making it a compelling read. Rossner includes photographs of participants’ faces to illustrate the expression and variety of emotions along with excerpts from conferences which helps the reader appreciate the vivid nature of the exchanges. Rossner provides a careful review of key theories around shame, legitimacy and related emotions. The exploration of the centrality of shaming and the feelings it evokes is particularly helpful to appreciate the difference between stigmatizing shaming (where the offence and offender is condemned) and reintegrative shaming (where there is rejection of the act but the offender is allowed back into the community). Rossner places emotion at the centre of the RJ process and argues that these must be understood through examining the structure and interaction within the conference, as a ritual, if it is to be transformational both in the short and longer term.

Rossner suggests that “the restorative justice movement has the potential to change the lives of all those affected by crime” (p. 144) Certainly Rossner provides the reader with a cogent micro level theory of RJ particularly in terms of the workings of an RJ conference. This book will be an interesting and valuable read for psychology and criminal justice students and for all practitioners involved in RJ. The realities are that much of the work undertaken under the banner of RJ is far less ambitious in terms of outcomes and scope to transform the victim-offender relationship. However, the claim in the Forward that it is “a remarkable and important contribution to the RJ literature, painstaking in its approach and measured in its conclusions” is not in doubt.