Restorative Justice and Peacemaking: Introduction

The theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the restorative justice and peacemaking movement within criminology and criminal justice draws from many sources including Native American, Aboriginal, the wisdom traditions of major world religions, and more contemporary feminist perspectives. As was the case in ancient times, the defining characteristics of peacemaking and restorative justice include such themes as compassion, kindness, reconciliation, and transformation. Such a movement is by its nature, one of activism. In that sense, while perhaps more experiential than academic, it embodies putting theory into practice. The five articles included in this special issue illustrate the eclectic potential of applying peacemaking and restorative justice principles to justice issues in personal, social and criminal justice contexts.

“Police Officers as Peace Officers” by Michael Bush and Kimberly Dodson examine how the focus of policing has changed over time from one of law enforcement, social service and police-community relations to an increasing orientation of policing as primarily crime-fighters. They explore how incorporating a peacemaking approach could help law enforcement professionals move toward a more compassionate perspective by improving their interpersonal and critical thinking skills as well as provide a more dynamic police-community relations context for police practice.

In “Unlocking the Legal System from Vengeance, Harm, and Punitive Justice”, John Wozniak explores Sylvia Clute’s book, Beyond Vengeance, Beyond Duality: A Call for a Compassionate Revolution. He examines her assessment of two forms of justice—punitive based upon duality and unitive justice based upon oneness. His discussion illustrates ways societal institutions can be transformed through a more unitive, peacemaking approach that provides an alternative to punitive philosophies which rely on duality and vengeance.

Jennifer Mongold and Brad Edward’s article, “Re-integrative Shaming”, examines the impact of re-integrative shaming principles based upon the work of John Braithwaite and others in restorative justice victim/offender mediations in East Tennessee.

In “Restorative Student Judicial Circles”, Kevin Derajtys and Lana McDowell describe ways to improve and strengthen traditional student judicial boards in a university setting. They advocate a more inclusive approach based upon restorative justice principles when intervening in incidents of student misconduct in higher education settings.

Vanessa Woodward and John Fuller discuss an innovative application of peacemaking as a student assignment in an undergraduate criminal justice ethics class. In “Individual Operationalization of Peacemaking”, students were given an experiential assignment that involved attempting to demonstrate how a compassionate response could incrementally help end human suffering in a personal context.

Whether looking at the broader implications of how we can define and implement justice in a more compassionate way or how we can encourage students to experience the power of peacemaking on a more personal level, doing good is at the heart of the restorative justice/peacemaking process. Police officers becoming more aware of their potential to also be peace officers, students coming to understand that the possibilities of mercy and reconciliation can exist in a judicial setting when misconduct occurs, and victims and offenders in a community realizing shame and remorse can also be re-integrative and restorative, all represent the transformative possibilities of something good occurring from bad circumstances and actions.

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