Book Review

Restorative Justice: How it Works
By Marian Liebmann

Clocking in at just under 500 pages, Liebmann’s new textbook provides an impressively comprehensive overview of restorative justice. Liebmann is a practitioner and trainer, not an academic, thus the book reflects her interest in describing restorative justice in practice rather than theoretical exposition or empirical analyses of evaluation research. Still, the book does provide a chapter reviewing recent research, a chapter that explains restorative principles, and another that explores controversial issues. According to Liebmann her purpose is to explain “restorative justice in clear language” (p.17), which she achieves. It is not riveting prose, however, so it is less inspirational than, say, the illustrations provided in Howard Zehr’s seminal Changing Lenses, or illuminating than the theoretical groundwork in John Braithwaite’s Crime, Shame, and Reintegration.

While this book does aim for a wider audience than academics or students, it is not meant to serve as popular advocacy, and primarily serves as a fine reference for those who are unfamiliar with restorative justice and need a clear introduction, or for those who are familiar, but are looking for a wide-ranging reference for the variety of current practices and their implementation in a global context. Again, according to Liebmann, her purpose is to “fill the gap between the introductory texts on restorative justice and those examining the many complex issues around its implementation. So it covers a broad field and explains how restorative justice works in different contexts” (p.17).

Liebmann notes that the recent expansion of restorative justice internationally has led to a variety of practices—in which she includes mediation, victim-offender dialogue, victim-offender conferencing, family group conferencing, peacemaking circles, victim awareness work, reparative activities by offenders, and truth and reconciliation commissions. Liebmann describes its application to youth—from preschoolers through high school, as well as to adults; to a variety of crimes and conflicts—from small-scale property crimes to interpersonal violence to acts of genocide; to a variety of institutional settings—from day care centers to schools to residential treatment and community centers to prisons; and in a variety of locations—though emphasizing activities in the United Kingdom, she covers the globe including North and South America, Africa, Europe, Asia, and Australia/New Zealand.

One question I always ponder when reading a restorative justice book is whether or not I would assign it in one of my classes. This one comes very close to a yes, and I am likely to have students read selected chapters. I am also quite glad to have it on my shelf as a reference. But I found it could have been edited more closely, and if it were a shorter book, it might find a place in my classroom. I’m not sure, too, if my students would find it particularly engaging. The many case studies provided—over 200 of them—are well-written and compelling, but they are included as boxed features, separated from the narrative, and because of this, my students are likely to skim over them. I would have preferred to see many fewer case studies, as many are repetitious, and have them effectively integrated in the text. This would have enlivened the narrative while making each case an opportunity to link principle and practice or identify an issue involved in implementation.

Some readers might disagree with Liebmann’s generous inclusion of practices as
restorative justice. In her view, restorative justice “aims to restore the well-being of victims, offenders and communities damaged by crime, and to prevent further offending” (p.25). A more narrow definition might exclude, for example, mediation while she includes it, or practices that do not lead to face-to-face dialogue between victims and offenders. But with her more expansive inclusion, I found myself thrilled to discover connections between varieties of practices and intrigued by their implementation around the globe. I was riveted by her description of youth conferencing in Northern Ireland that now serves as an alternative to the punishment beatings meted out by paramilitary groups. And, perhaps, most unfamiliar to those already knowledgeable about restorative justice is her chapter on the incorporation of the arts in restorative practices from theatrical performances that convey restorative models to arts-based restorative sanctions that enable offenders to learn about and illustrate their understanding of the harm they have caused. For the many of us who have worked on restorative justice in local settings and struggled with getting referrals or persuading criminal justice professionals to take an interest, this is a reaffirming reminder of just how widespread restorative justice has become in a short amount of time.

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