

## BOOK REVIEW

Marilyn Armour and Mark Umbreit, *Violence, restorative justice and forgiveness: dyadic forgiveness and energy shifts in restorative justice dialogue*. London: Jessica Kingsley Press, 2018, 336 pp., ISBN: 978-1-785-92795-9 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-78450-795-4 (ebk).

One of the more common astonishments among restorative justice practitioners is the ‘magic’ of the process. Whether they admonish one to ‘trust the process’ or ‘let the story do the heavy lifting’, many facilitators will express an almost spiritual faith that something unique and special occurs during restorative encounters. Marilyn Armour and Mark Umbreit, who are leading restorative justice scholars and practitioners, have written a new, important book that gives us a grounded, coherent explanation of the seemingly magical transformations that often occur. Both are prominent social work professors: Armour is the director of the Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue at the University of Texas-Austin and Umbreit is the director of the Center for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking at the University of Minnesota.

Their primary task is to explore the ‘paradox of forgiveness’ (34):

- ‘... the more forgiveness remains in the background, the more likely victims will feel safe enough to travel the path of authentic forgiveness’;
- ‘Forgiveness cannot be pushed in restorative justice but neither can it be ignored’;
- ‘Forgiveness can occur but without forgiveness language’;
- ‘Forgiveness requires that to be freed from past and present pain, participants have to re-enter past and present pain’;
- ‘Forgiveness embodies the reality that negative pain can be transformed into something positive.’

These paradoxical statements may sound like new-age aphorisms, but they actually stem from a careful, close study of twenty victim-offender dialogues in cases of severe violence. The research is based on lengthy, semi-structured interviews with the twenty victims. In one of the cases, the participant was the direct victim of a shooting. In all of the other cases, the victims had lost a loved one to murder. Armour and Umbreit explore the impact of the victim-offender dialogues and their various pathways to transformation, healing, and forgiveness. For them, and unlike most research on forgiveness, the concept can best be understood as relational rather than private.

Careful coding and analysis of the interview transcripts led the authors to develop a restorative justice theory of ‘dyadic forgiveness’, which refers to

... the structure of the relationship and a bilateral process where both parties give something to the other and receive something from the other. Hence, they need each other’s presence and participation to achieve the forgiveness experience. The relationship, though created by crime, therefore, is needed

David R. Karp

paradoxically for resolution of the negatively charged energy associated with the crime. (303-304)

The book provides detailed case studies of the crimes, the victim-offender dialogues, and the victims' perspectives. These are the qualitative data that form the foundation of the theoretical model. Many stories of restorative justice exist; what is most important here is the new theorising to explain the impact of the restorative justice process. It makes sense then, in a brief summary, to outline the elements of their theory.

The theory begins with the recognition of 'emotional turbulence' or 'emotional disconnection' that may be suffered by crime victims. In either form, the intensity can result in 'emotional blockages' – 'sealing in pain and fear, and reinforcing victims' negative thinking and anger' (239). In all of the cases, the 'participants had some crisis or awareness that served to motivate them to meet with the offender and move the negatively charged energy from being blocked to have some outlet' (248).

The preparation process for a victim-offender dialogue can be lengthy and involve many individual, separate sessions by the facilitators with the victim and with the offender. These sessions fully explore the openness of the victim to meeting with the offender and their almost inevitable hesitance and ambivalence. The preparation process

mingles together the negatively charged energy from the crime and its impact and positively charged energy connected to participants' efforts to move blocked energy ... a time of pushing and pulling, a time when the anger and sense of injustice is dissonant with the hope for relief and even resolution with the offender (260-261).

As helpful as the preparation process may be, it is during the victim-offender encounter that pain transformation occurs. This is essential to their theory; change occurs through a reciprocal, dyadic process, and not in isolation. Armour and Umbreit outline a series of theoretical steps beginning with an explicit communication of the 'pain differential' between the victim (whose pain is severe) and the offender (who may have little or no experience or understanding of that pain). This communication 'transfers' the pain from victim to offender – 'symbolically, the pain becomes theirs' (267).

It is when offenders comprehend this pain that they assume responsibility for causing it. 'Offenders held themselves accountable by telling the full story about what they did, showing regret for their behavior, being truthful, and responding to participants' expectations for their future behavior' (268). In turn, accountability became a 'humanising' mechanism, enabling victims to see their offenders in a new light, eliciting more humanising interactions. 'This reciprocity, along with the sharing of stories and information, generated a channel that connected the victim and offender but also provided a passageway for the energy flow and pull of each party on the other' (272). Through this dyadic exchange, pain was transformed from negative to positive. 'They often felt joined as if they

had been on a shared journey together. Victims felt visible, acknowledged, and empowered' (273). Forgiveness follows from this interactional experience. Finally, when forgiveness occurs, it is possible to morally reinstate the offender, changing their outcast status to a reintegrated member of the moral community.

Like all qualitative studies (and many quantitative), the results are predicated on careful analysis and subjective interpretation. We cannot generalise from these results until they are tested against larger samples, measured with more objective tools, applied to a greater variety of victimisation experiences, and across a spectrum of restorative practice modalities. But Armour and Umbreit's theorising provide a basis for cumulative research and a sequential, coherent explanation for what had previously been described as inexplicable or 'magical'. Although their analysis focuses on cases that led primarily to transformed relationships and authentic forgiveness, it cannot be said that this is inevitable in restorative practice. Not all cases are so powerfully resolved. One of the major contributions of this book is the neatly detailed set of factors that led to successful resolution. They are also the same criteria that can be guideposts for best practice. A knowledge of the stages of dyadic forgiveness in restorative justice can be used to evaluate practice, refine it, and specify what methods best elicit pain transfer and transformation.

*David R. Karp\**

\* David R. Karp is a Professor of Sociology, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs (USA). Contact author: dkarp@skidmore.edu.