

## BOOK REVIEW

**Joan Pennell, *A restorative approach to family violence: feminist kin-making*. New York: Routledge, 2023, 150pp., ISBN: 978-1-003105-37-4 (ebk).**

The book *A restorative approach to family violence: feminist kin-making* emphasises the far-reaching advantages of applying restorative justice within the context of family violence, particularly in the framework of feminist kin-making. Family violence remains a pervasive concern, with one out of every three women encountering violence from an intimate partner (World Health Organization, 2021). This is compounded by a substantial underreporting of both intimate partner and sexual violence on a global scale (World Health Organization, 2021). Numerous victims may choose not to report the crime due to feelings of shame, guilt and self-blame. Even when reporting does take place, manoeuvring through the legal system can be a challenging experience, often leading to a feeling of being victimised again (Wemmers, Parent & Lachance Quirion, 2022). Victims frequently struggle with a sense of not being listened to and feeling dissatisfied with the conventional criminal justice process, including their interactions with those involved in it (Boateng, 2018). Over the past few years, the #MeToo movement has shed light on the profound mistrust that victims harbour towards the conventional criminal justice system, highlighting the pressing need to reconsider what constitutes justice for them. Restorative justice holds the potential to address victims' core needs for recognition and validation, especially in situations where the traditional criminal justice system proves inadequate, such as family violence.

Restorative justice considers crime a violation of relationships between victims, offenders and the community. The aim is to address the harm caused by the offence, to core values such as participation, respect, honesty, accountability, empowerment, hope, making amends, reintegration and inclusion. Restorative justice processes involve voluntary participation of victims, offenders and communities, with the assistance of facilitators to collaboratively determine the best course of action for addressing the offence, its impact and potential future consequences. Facilitators must evaluate the needs and expectations of victims and offenders, assessing their psychological, emotional and physical well-being before, during and after the process and provide or make referrals to therapeutic resources as needed, as restorative justice can be emotionally demanding.

Restorative justice in cases of family violence has garnered criticism for concerns regarding safety and power imbalances that might impede healing and equitable conversations between victims and perpetrators, potentially creating a coercive and unsafe environment. The nature of family violence can lead victims to minimise the extent of their abuse, while offenders may not fully acknowledge their responsibility. However, when power dynamics are addressed, restorative justice has the potential to foster healing for victims and families, empowering them and mending strained relationships. Recognising the complexity and intersections of violence is crucial when implementing restorative justice programmes. In many cases involving abusive or violent parents, they often remain

in the family despite the harm caused. Traditional justice mechanisms are unsatisfactory in addressing those issues. Community-centred restorative justice practices provide an opportunity for children, families and the elderly – who may have limited chances to be heard – to express themselves while considering their vulnerability and safety and holding the abusive parent or family member accountable. This book offers a detailed description of these practices, regarded as best practices, and illustrates how they can facilitate healing and rebuild relationships.

From the outset, Pennell embraces a feminist standpoint, drawing inspiration from Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of 'making kin'.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, the book emphasises mutual care as a central element intricately woven into the restorative justice framework and does it for two significant reasons. Firstly, families are cultural entities, and family violence represents a rupture within and against these familial networks and cultural ties that span generations. Secondly, families should be at the core of a transformative process aimed at addressing family violence, encompassing a broad range of relationships, including intimate partners, children, older adults and other individuals considered family members.

Pennell introduces four central narrative threads for addressing family violence. The first thread focuses on the restoration of family and cultural leadership, emphasising the crucial role of cultural units in combatting family violence. The second thread, centred around storytelling to instil hope and facilitate recovery, encourages open discussion of familial pain, fostering empathy and aiding in the healing process. The third thread involves the responsive regulation of the healing journey, providing support for the family's leadership while employing the least amount of control necessary to safeguard family members. The fourth thread involves spreading trust and promoting nonviolence, creating a collective force through alliances to prevent reverting to neglectful or excessively controlling responses to family violence. Pennell emphasises the importance of collaboration among the family, community and government sectors. She contends that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for government intervention in family violence, emphasising the necessity of listening to those affected and collectively deciding when external involvement is necessary. This approach differs from conventional crime-focused perspectives, placing greater emphasis on nurturing empathy and repairing relationships.

Focusing mainly on research from Canada and other colonial nations with colonial legacies – Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom – the book specifically analyses the implementation of the 'Family Group Decision Making' initiative in three distinct communities (Inuit, Rural and Urban) in Newfoundland and Labrador. The 'Family Group Decision Making' showcases the effective integration of restorative justice into the criminal justice system, addressing both crime and family violence. It also highlights its applicability in Indigenous communities that have historically been underserved by the traditional judicial system.

1 See also Pennell's editorial 'Theorising restorative justice: feminist kin-making', *The International Journal of Restorative Justice*, 2023, 6(1), 3-12.

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Additionally, the book illustrates how the narrative threads can be effectively applied in these contexts with case studies involving families struggling with entrenched patterns of coercion and violence. For instance, one of the cases revolves around Sarah and George and their son Kevin. Despite George's history of violence and time in incarceration, progress was achieved through the conference programme, which provided both sides of the family with the tools and knowledge to chart new courses. In a heartfelt letter, Kevin unequivocally condemns his father's violent conduct. This touching letter had a profound impact, leaving an indelible mark not only on the immediate family and local community but also on the government agents who were present at the meeting. This encapsulates the core principle of feminist kin-making – an expansion of connections and collaborative endeavours toward a more inclusive and compassionate future.

Pennell emphasises the crucial role of cultivating trust within families and cultural networks as a foundational strategy for addressing family violence. She underscores the collaborative effort required to initiate positive transformation and establish an environment conducive to family well-being. This approach not only supports the offender's rehabilitation but also contributes to the victim's healing process. The central importance of ensuring safety in this victim-centric process highlights the vital role of the facilitator and the need for robust support systems within restorative justice. Additionally, Pennell emphasises that professionals in this field require ongoing training, supervision and emotional support to effectively engage with families affected by violence. The book not only offers valuable insights into best practices but also provides a cautionary note regarding potential pitfalls, offering a compelling illustration of how restorative justice can be seamlessly integrated into the criminal justice system. While the findings are promising, they are supported by recent research conducted by Wemmers et al. (2022) and Lachance Quirion (2022). It is imperative to acknowledge, however, that the limited sample size in these case studies may restrict the applicability of the results to a broader population. Thus, further research is warranted to validate these findings conclusively.

The integration of restorative justice in cases of family violence is often met with resistance by academic critics, policymakers and victim advocates who express concerns about victim safety. However, the ongoing debate over family violence is problematic as it perpetuates the current status quo in which restorative justice is often ignored, despite its potential benefits in meeting victims' needs. This ultimately results in a disproportionate allocation of funds towards criminal justice and a lack of investment in restorative justice programmes. Furthermore, practitioners may choose not to inform victims of their restorative justice options, which is also problematic, as restorative justice has the potential to meet victims' needs in a way the traditional system fails to achieve (Van Camp & Wemmers, 2016). To address this issue, practitioners should be proactive in providing information about restorative justice to victims, as it can be a gateway to meeting some of their needs (Van Camp & Wemmers, 2016). Recent research also supports the idea that victims should have the right to choose to engage with restorative justice, particularly in cases of family violence, where restorative justice has been shown to be beneficial due to the emotional aspect of the violence and the

relationship between the perpetrator and the victim (Lachance Quirion, 2022; Wemmers et al., 2022). Allowing victims to make their own decisions increases empowerment and promotes agency and social positive identity (Lachance Quirion, 2022). Ultimately, the decision to engage in the restorative justice process should be the victim's right to choose, and this is all made clear throughout the book.

To summarise, I highly recommend this book to anyone working in the field of criminal and restorative justice. It provides valuable insights into how restorative justice can be effectively integrated into the criminal justice system and can be beneficial for all victims. Furthermore, the book highlights the importance of continued research in this area, and it serves as an excellent starting point for anyone looking to further their understanding of the topic.

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## References

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