

RESTORATIVE CIRCLES

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

by Kanat Bolazar

Criminal “justice” that focuses on prison sentences is a punitive, isolationist, adversarial, and individualistic system. People who take responsibility may be punished more, and those who are innocent may be forced to admit guilt in exchange for a lesser punishment. If someone goes to prison without actually admitting guilt or regret, this may leave all parties involved disempowered. Prisons are criminogenic; time spent in prison increases the likelihood of future criminal activity instead of decreasing it.

Restorative Justice (RJ) aims to restore a community after an action damages the community. RJ is less interested in labels, punishment, and winning the blame game. But that doesn't mean people are automatically forgiven. RJ requires that everyone take responsibility for their actions and unintended consequences. RJ empowers the people and communities affected through direct engagement in the process, so that the dignity of each individual and the collective trust in community are restored.

As mentioned in the article on RJ in the previous issue of the *PNL*, Syracuse as well as many other cities use RJ circles as a voluntary and alternative first step to the US criminal justice system in city schools and the community. In RJ circles, people talk one at a time, going around in the circle for as many rounds as needed. This is often done by passing a “talking piece” so that only one person talks at a time.

Restorative Circles

The “Restorative Circles” (RC) approach is a community-oriented process for addressing conflict between people which reveals underlying unmet needs and concerns that triggered the conflict in order to restore community. It was created by Dominic Barter in the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1990s.

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Unlike RJ circles, RC tries to verify comprehension, does not require specific communication styles (such as not making any “you ...” statements), and facilitators (called hosts) never exercise authority over the participants.

Circles

RCs have three sets of meetings:

- Pre-Circles: Host meets with each affected person invited to the circle to briefly introduce RC to everyone and to understand the act and its effects.
- Circle: All parties and the host meet for mutual understanding, to take responsibility for their actions, agree on reconciliatory actions, and schedule post-circle(s) to evaluate progress and closure.
- Post-Circles: Evaluate completion of agreed-upon reconciliation actions, see if they produced the desired effects, and ascertain other needs that may have arisen.

During the circle, an RC host asks very specifically worded meta-questions; they are not there to rephrase and pass judgment. All content and solution ideas come from the group.

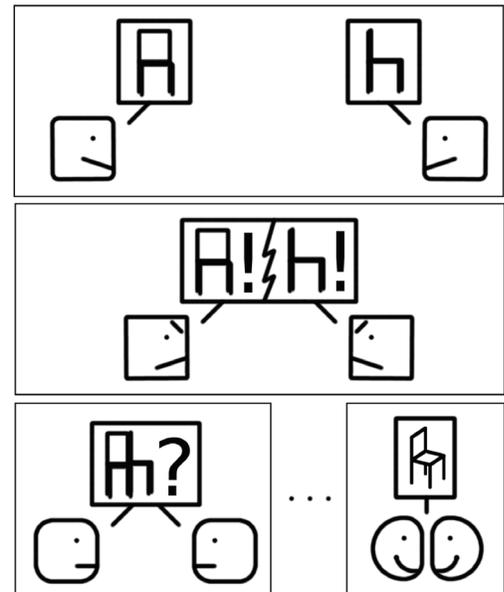
The RC host uses three questions to check for “reflective listening”:

1. What did you hear him/her/they say?
2. Is that it?
3. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Reflective listening encourages empathy, while discouraging and ideally reducing misunderstanding, defensiveness, trying to win, and reactionary attacks.

The three goals of RC circles are achieved by specific questions:

- Mutual Understanding: What would you like known, and by whom, about how you are right now in relation to the event and its consequences?
- Taking Responsibility: What would you like known, and by whom, about what you were looking for at the moment you chose to act?



Conflicting perspectives, with non-violent communication, may help us reconstruct a multi-dimensional reality. Needs that appear conflicting might be satisfied creatively. Image: Kanat Bolazar.

- Action Agreements: What would you like to see happen next? (What would you like to offer? What would you like to request?)

These carefully worded questions work for any affected party and acknowledge that people's emotional experience may change during the circle.

A big restorative circle may involve many community members and outside parties, take a few hours, have action agreements that will take months of work by many people, with a post-circle scheduled for next year. A small restorative circle may take 15 minutes between two parties and a host, with a three-minute action item for one party and a post-circle that convenes in 20 minutes.

Coming Soon!

RC is currently practiced in Rochester and many other places around the world, but not in Syracuse. The Bread & Roses Collective House, Inc. has been evaluating this approach and plans to have an RC training session in Syracuse in January 2020. This will likely take the form of a three-hour theory session and a three-hour practice session, on the same day or on two consecutive days. If you are interested in such a training session, please contact the author now. ☺