

Liz Elliott

The Centre *for* Restorative Justice: a Quick Introduction



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The Centre for Restorative Justice is an initiative by the Simon Fraser University School of Criminology.

The Centre—in partnership with individuals, the community, justice agencies, and Simon Fraser University—exists to support and promote the values, principles, and practices of restorative justice.

It provides education, innovative program models, training, evaluation, and research through a resource centre and meeting place that facilitates outreach, promotion, dialogue, and advocacy.

Restorative justice (RJ) is an old idea with a new name. Its roots can be found in Aboriginal healing traditions and the nonretaliatory responses to violence endorsed by many faith communities. Howard Zehr, one of the first people to articulate a late modern vision of RJ, most recently has defined it as “a kind of coherent value system that gives us a vision of the good—how we want to be together.”

Fundamentally, then, RJ invites everyone to live by universal core values, to “be the change,” as Gandhi famously expressed it.

Practically, it represents a return of the simple wisdom of viewing conflict as an opportunity for a community to learn and grow. RJ operates on the premise that conflict, even criminal conflict, inflicts harm and therefore individuals and communities must accept responsibility for repairing that harm. Victims, offenders, and communities actively participate in devising mutually beneficial solutions, and implementing those solutions.

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Conflicts are resolved in a way that models core values and restores harmony in the community members’ relationships, allowing people to revisit and explore universal values and continue living together in a safer, healthy environment. In this sense, RJ is about community development and how citizens can live together in a democracy peaceably, by affording the opportunities and skills to build community capacity through dialogue and social engagement.

Canada has long been at the forefront of the RJ field. We were the first nation to develop and offer a victim/offender reconciliation program (VORP), initiated by a Mennonite organization in Elmira, Ontario, in 1974.

Since the early 1990s, the Fraser Region Community Justice Initiatives Association in Langley, BC, has provided counselling and mediation in cases of violent offences—homicide, robbery, serious sexual assault—postsentence. Its pioneers are recognized as international experts in victim/offender reconciliation.

Canada has also benefitted from the teachings of its Aboriginal communities, particularly in Aboriginal holistic philosophy and circle processes, also known as circle remedies, that have been deployed and/or adapted for healing, problem-solving, conflict resolution, or sentencing purposes in the criminal justice system.

Circle remedies have also been adopted to deal with conflicts in schools and in business environments. Since RJ has evolved in Canada,

- Nova Scotia has developed a system-wide approach to RJ;
- there are several RJ projects in Canadian federal prisons; and
- hundreds of community-based

organizations have been created across the country to offer RJ services.

Over the last decade, Simon Fraser University has made significant contributions to the paradigm and practice of restorative justice. The Centre for Restorative Justice began as an idea in 1998, was launched in 1999 with the introduction of the School of Criminology's first undergraduate course in RJ, and was later formally founded and co-directed in 2002 by Dr. Liz Elliott and Dr. Robert Gordon of the University's School of Criminology, with 3-year funding support from the Correctional Service of Canada.

Currently, the Centre's Co-Directors are Dr. Liz Elliott, for RJ in communities and criminal justice, and Dr. Brenda Morrison, for RJ in communities and schools.

Over its almost 10-year span, the Centre has initiated a number of activities, such as

- education and consulting services for community groups, nonprofit organizations, and governments;
- Website information and a resource clearinghouse;
- development and hosting of local, national, and international lectures and conferences;
- the support and delivery of undergraduate, graduate, and faculty research in RJ;
- the creation and ongoing delivery of popular undergraduate and graduate RJ courses;
- the hosting of international scholars and government officials from other countries, including Switzerland, Korea, Japan, Belgium, Germany, France, England, Thailand, and Vietnam;
- participation in several Canada-European Union student exchange programs on RJ and Human Rights since 1997;
- international consulting and RJ training, for example, in Latvia and Jamaica; and

- the publication of numerous articles and books by the Centre's current and past Co-Directors and students.

Currently, the Centre for Restorative Justice is poised for the development of its next 5-year plan, which will include an increased emphasis on RJ in schools and the role of RJ in participatory democracy.

Two international conferences are in the planning stages for 2009, as are several other projects geared to education, training, and the proliferation of a restorative philosophy and processes. New course development and public education content will increase the delivery of research and theory in the psychology of RJ, with a particular emphasis on trauma and shame.

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The Centre continues to develop collaborative partnerships with other scholars, practitioners, groups, and institutions at home and abroad. The credit courses offered in the School of Criminology continue to operate at full capacity; students who have graduated and entered the field can be found in myriad organizations and institutions, leading the expression of restorative philosophy and deploying restorative practices in a variety of ways.

Study and research requests from prospective students and visitors nationally and internationally are ongoing. The Centre is also in the beginning stages of developing a Canadian network of academics teaching and researching in the area of RJ.

For more information, please visit the Centre's Website: www.sfu.ca/crj. ▲

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