Evaluating for Restorative Results

Discussion Paper

Just Outcomes

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Introduction

"Whether restorative justice is 'successful,' or not, is a complex question. To answer this question, one must think carefully about what it is one is studying, about what one wishes to achieve, and whether or how it might be measured, about what might serve as indicators of success, and then about ways to collect data" (Llewellyn, 2013).

Most restorative justice providers would agree that evaluating their work is a good idea. Programs and practitioners want to know if what they are doing is "working," and often want to show their funders, referral agents and/or potential participants the supporting evidence. However, programs have not always had the time or opportunity to determine the measurable outcomes they seek, much less what outcomes they want to demonstrate (e.g. increased community connectedness, saving the courts money, increasing victim satisfaction, all of the above, none of the above). Without this planning, sometimes a guessing game ensues of what to evaluate and how to measure it. In addition, the word "evaluation" often evokes feelings of uncertainty, criticism, or fear of failure. Programs will naturally shy away from the task of evaluation if the perceived purpose is to demonstrate where they may not be measuring up to a theoretical ideal. Some rightly fear that where evaluation highlights gaps and opportunities for growth, there is a lack of funding and capacity to make the necessary changes. With these real-world concerns, sometimes evaluation doesn't feel like such a good idea after all.

The purpose of this paper is to invite restorative justice practitioners to think about and undertake the effort of evaluation creatively, within the context of collaboration, learning and support. To that end, we will explore the following topics:

1. Why is evaluation useful, and why should we do this as a community?
2. Why is there such strong resistance to evaluation?
3. What can evaluation look like if viewed through a restorative lens?

Why Evaluate?

Most programs and individuals within the field of restorative justice are driven by a sense of purpose and desire to make a difference. Advocates and practitioners are often drawn to the potential of restorative justice to assist victims to have their needs met, to offer those who offend support and resources, to involve community members in justice issues and to support the health of individuals and communities. In addition, funders of restorative justice programs may wish to see evidence that the program is "effective" by (for example) reducing recidivism or court costs. All of these potential outcomes are noble pursuits, and programs often struggle to understand if and how they are achieving these outcomes for both clients and referral sources. However, instead of measuring the difference we are making in our communities and among those we serve, it is not uncommon for us as restorative justice providers to rely on academic studies and/or institutional statistics to prove that restorative justice is generally effective (a common example is "Restorative Justice: The Evidence" by Sherman and Strang, written in 2007). While there is value in pointing to these studies, many programs may still be in the dark as to whether their specific program is achieving desired outcomes, and whether participants are actually experiencing the benefits that programs often claim to deliver. Accordingly, the question "why evaluate?" may be answered simply: to support programs' confidence that they are successfully achieving their outcome goals for helping victims, offenders, and communities, while simultaneously learning how (or if) they might improve their services.

Understanding Resistance to Evaluation

While we may recognize that evaluation is a worthwhile undertaking, restorative justice advocates often sense that traditional approaches to evaluation are fraught with inequitable relationships between "experts" and "subjects." Dr. Rachel Cunliffe, in her decades of experience working with communities towards effective evaluation, notes that people may in fact experience evaluation as hurtful or scary because it is associated with assessing, rating, judging, critiquing, comparing and ranking. In addition, she points out, these judgements often come from those external to the field, and who therefore often do not understand the intent or needs behind the work. The relationship between the evaluator and the ones being evaluated is soured by an unproductive power dynamic, leaving those who often know most about their program in relatively helpless or inert positions. The information about the program "flows" into the evaluator, who in turn crafts this information into recommendations and plans to be followed, and often with significant budget or other resource implications.

Many have also experienced evaluation as privileging quantitative data that minimizes the stories of a program and place. The statement "you cannot measure everything" points to a feeling that traditional evaluation may ignore the value of care and relationships between programs and their communities. The value of the work itself is minimized due to a primary focus on outcomes. This can be frustrating and demoralizing for administrators and practitioners that have invested significant commitment and time to transformative work.

Given these perspectives and experiences, some may react by avoiding evaluation altogether, or dismissing the results as irrelevant. Yet the overall priority of learning about programs in order to affirm efficacy and improve service are worthwhile and essential goals. The questions, then, become:

- How might we challenge the traditional evaluation paradigm?
- What might effective evaluation look like if it were more aligned with restorative justice values and principles?

A Restorative Approach to Evaluation

Much has been written on the distinctions and connections between innovative approaches to evaluation, such as developmental evaluation, cluster evaluation, participatory evaluation, collaborative evaluation and other terms. This paper will not engage with all of these distinctions. What we do wish to emphasize is that the traditional approach of external evaluators making judgements about a program is no longer the only "frame" from which to view evaluation. Instead, there are a variety of more inclusive, vibrant and even restorative approaches to evaluation that we wish to emphasize, in order to set a foundation of the "*Evaluating for Restorative Results in BC*" project.

For some time now, innovators have been developing new and engaging ways to envision evaluation practices. One example is Developmental Evaluation. According to the Collaboration Primer,

> *"Developmental evaluation is an evaluation strategy that supports ongoing innovation and growth by providing real-time feedback in dynamic environments. In developmental evaluation, the goal is to actively shape the course of development by providing key insights to facilitate learning and inform decision making (Collaboration Primer, 2006)."*

Michael Patton (2011) provides a variety of comparisons between traditional and developmental evaluation, a few of which are adapted in the table below:

	Traditional Evaluations	Developmental Evaluations
Evaluation Design	Evaluator is expert and designs based on rigorous evaluation strategies and methodologies.	Evaluation is co-created between evaluator and those engaged with change process.
Ideal Evaluator Stance	Position the evaluator outside to assure credible independence and objectivity.	Evaluator acts as facilitator and learning coach. Credibility relies on mutually respectful relationships. Evaluator may be internal to the program.
Locus and Focus of Accountability	Accountability directed toward external actors, leaders, and funders.	Accountability based on program and agency's values and principles.
Impact of Evaluation on Organizational Culture	Often creates a fear of failure.	Develops and cultivates a desire for deep reflection and learning.

Notice how evaluation is reframed here from being a linear process accountable to external demands, to a cyclical learning process accountable to a program's internal values and principles. Because of the negative preconceptions that most individuals and programs have about evaluation, we believe it is useful to build relationships before undertaking evaluative work in order to clarify expectations and build trust among those involved in the evaluation.

Trust is foundational to the shift toward more collaborative and exploratory approaches to evaluation. For successful innovation, trust must be built among those identifying as evaluators, program administrators, and participants—and this takes time. O'Sullivan (2004) has described collaborative evaluation as a form of participant evaluation that emphasizes the engagement (and therefore development of trust) of key program stakeholders in the evaluation process. In a developmental/collaborative evaluation process, the expertise of the participants, program staff, and program leadership must be engaged in all phases of the evaluation process. She goes on to explain that collaborative evaluation "enhances their [participants'] understanding of evaluation so that they gain new skills" (O'Sullivan, 2004, p. 26). So, while this approach requires more initial time with relationship-building than a traditional model of evaluation would normally set aside, the learning benefits and development of skills become well worth the effort.

"Evaluation voices" is one way of establishing evaluative mechanisms which support the creation and maintenance of a collaborative learning community (O'Sullivan, 2004, pg. 28). This approach combines cluster evaluation and collaborative evaluation. Cluster evaluation brings together similar programs to strengthen evaluation expertise. When combined with collaborative evaluation, O'Sullivan (2004) explains that,

> *"programs with similar goals can strengthen their evaluation strategies through cluster networking and must build evaluation expertise from within. To accomplish this, evaluators from different programs with similar intents meet to focus on a process " (p. 28).*

Evaluation voices has a "consistent process of (a) perceiving a vision for the program(s), (b) forming evaluation questions relevant to that vision, (c) designing and implementing an information system to help answer those questions, and (d) summarizing the information collected so that the vision for the program may be revisited" (O'Sullivan, 2004, p. 29). Accordingly, we suggest that a trusted "learning community"

provides an effective approach for undertaking an innovative approach to evaluation which includes dynamic vision and information-sharing.

Imagine for example, restorative justice groups within a given region working together to learn and share information. They may determine together that they wish for crime victims to experience being heard throughout the processes offered by their programs. Together, they could develop a way of measuring victims' experience of "being heard." As the data becomes available, they may come to see that one program shows 80% of victims served experience being heard, while another program (using the same evaluative tools) shows 98% of victims served experience this. The knowledge derived from shared evaluation strategies provides an opportunity for the programs to compare their practices, and potentially make changes to enhance their programs. In this manner, collaborative evaluation uses a strength-based approach that encourages celebration and exploration of all learning and success, produces a practitioner community from which to learn, and fosters innovation by providing indicators of how to enhance service for participants. In current project "*Evaluating for Restorative Results in BC*," the overall purpose is to create mechanisms that support the restorative justice community in BC to learn together in ways that they can collectively strengthen practices and programs.

This learning community, once established, is in an ideal position to create mechanisms and agreements for the sharing of individual programs' experiences and outcomes. The opportunity is then available to use that information for the advancement of services, in addition to creating an ongoing beneficial reflective practice ("What are the methods and outcomes of our program? What are the methods and outcomes of your program? How can we compare notes to ensure our participants are getting the best service possible?"). This kind of advancement and reflection, based on shared data, becomes encouraged amongst the learning community.

Conclusion

Using inspiration from these innovative approaches to evaluation leaves a great deal of freedom and control in the hands of programs seeking to evaluate and learn. Programs are released from the confines of external judgments and open to determining what, in fact, they wish to better understand about how their program operates and how service delivery can be enhanced. This exploration, in turn, stands to strengthen the outcomes of the restorative justice approach, giving programs more confidence to make claims about the benefits of restorative justice to participants, communities, funders, referral sources and the public.

References

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