

DISSOLVING THE DIVIDE: CROSS-RACIAL COMMUNICATION IN THE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Restorative justice encounters often bring together participants of differing races. The communication style of participants has a significant impact on such encounters. To date, the restorative justice literature has given little attention to the effect of cross-racial communication on the encounter process. This paper discusses this issue by exploring the risks and opportunities present when an individual from a traditionally marginalized race openly shares her experience of the crime with an individual from the dominant race. In order to draw these risks and opportunities into high relief, the author relies on a single example: a restorative justice encounter between a White victim and Black offender. This scenario is used to explore three major issues. First, the potential of restorative justice encounters to ease racial tension and ultimately perpetuate social justice is contemplated. Through storytelling, a participant voices her truth to the other participants, which may have a cathartic effect on the speaker, and an educational effect on the listener. Secondly, obstacles to effective cross-racial communication are considered, including the vulnerability of truth-telling, prejudice against certain linguistic styles, and manipulative manners of listening. Finally, practical techniques to remedy the obstacles identified in the second part are suggested. Though this paper is not intended to suggest that restorative justice is

a panacea to racial conflict, the author argues that an appropriately facilitated cross-racial restorative justice encounter could do much to increase understanding between races and dismantle the prejudices of individual participants
