

BOOK REVIEW

Micah E. Johnson and Jeffrey Weisberg, *The little book of police youth dialogue: a restorative path toward justice*. New York City: Good Books, 2021, 128 pp., ISBN-13: 978-1-68099-708-8

The little book of police youth dialogue (PYD) makes an important and timely contribution to the long-standing question of how, if at all, we might build understanding, trust and positive relationships between police forces and marginalised communities. Its authors work in Florida with the River Phoenix Centre for Peacebuilding, an organisation with extensive experience of facilitating dialogue between the police and young people: 100 programmes with 1,200 officers and 2,000 young people over eight years. Based on professional and personal experiences, and drawing on empirical literature from similar programmes, Johnson and Weisberg provide their methodology with the aim of helping readers understand the principles of PYD and apply them in different contexts. Though this book, as part of the *Little book* series, is targeted towards a US audience – and thus its examples are American-centric – its lessons are nevertheless important for all countries reconciling histories of structural racism with efforts to create more equitable, democratic approaches to policing. The authors propose that restorative practices and dialogic processes, if implemented carefully and with cultural sensitivity, can help ‘peel back the layers of mistrust to reveal a common humanity’ (6) between police and minority communities. We were especially thrilled to read this book, as we are currently organising a dialogue process in Dublin, Ireland, between police (or ‘Gardaí’) and young adults from the Black community.

This book pulls no punches in clarifying that the goal is not to restore the relationship to a mythical past in which it was consensual. After an initial chapter in which the authors discuss their experiences that led them down this path, the second chapter provides the historical context, demonstrating that ongoing challenges are structural in nature. Policing both reflects and perpetuates colonial, racist and sexist societal conditions, among other inequalities. We urge international readers of this book (we are Canadian and Austrian, respectively, and both live in Ireland) to recognise the universality of these structural barriers to equality. We recommend that readers do not dismiss the book’s teachings because of its wholly American frames of reference. Every country’s minority groups have strained relationships with the police based on experiences of social and state racism, with disproportionate and adversarial police contact being just one manifestation of this. As such, policing practitioners and scholars, as well as restorative justice advocates and community activists internationally, should understand the need for structural change and for relational work between police forces and officers on the one hand, and marginalised communities on the other. Those interested can explore this concise book for strategies to initiate, deliver, support or study related projects.

It moves from its analysis of the historical and contemporary contexts to exploring the different conceptions – guardians or warriors – of what police officers

can represent. This helps readers understand the conditions of modern policing, and the barriers to a more community-orientated, inclusive policing framework. Drawing on theoretical discussions in and beyond criminology, it briefs readers on the research on police cultures, noting that institutional cultures and sociopolitical discourses can differ between forces. Readers who wish to participate in PYD should explore the empirical research outlining the history and dynamics of police culture in their area or jurisdiction. In addition, any other sources of data and information from which readers might gain insights about the organisational and occupational cultures with which they will interact would aid in their implementation of PYD.

This book is of particular use in determining how to frame restorative encounters, due to the practical advice it provides. For example, the authors frame the police partaking in dialogue as a *positive* challenge: the police are ‘tasked with being brave enough to acknowledge systemic and interpersonal issues’, and ‘charged with having the courage to allow themselves to be changed’ (51). This language appears almost to goad the police into participating in dialogue – perhaps a culturally American approach to this work that may need adapting to different local contexts.

The three chapters encompassing the second half of the book speak about the foundations and objectives of PYD, the models and organisation of dialogue, and individual and organisational risks and possible solutions to avoid, or respond constructively to, problems. The first of these defines dialogue, clarifying both what it is and what it is not. This improved our understanding of the parameters of ‘dialogue’ by, for example, contrasting it with ‘debate’ and other structures for communication. Drawing on another book from the same series – namely, *The little book of dialogue for difficult subjects* (Schirch & Campt, 2007), which we recommend for reading alongside the current book – the authors argue that dialogue can be best understood as a form of communication primarily characterised by participants sharing personal experiences in order to build understanding and relationships. The key to successful dialogue, they propose, is that participants should not see it as an exercise in convincing others of their world view, in speaking about concepts in abstract terms or in passing judgement about others’ beliefs or motivations. Rather, participants should speak primarily about their own personal experiences, be inquisitive about how others’ experiences formed their differing beliefs, and remain open ‘to incorporating the truth of others into one’s own perspective and ideas’ (Schirch & Campt, 2007: 56). The foundations of PYD are twofold: restorative practices – specifically, the circle process – and ‘Bohman Dialogue’, from which the idea that participants are collaborating, instead of debating, emerges.

The chapter on models and organisation provides practical advice around the use of single and multiple sessions and embedding dialogue in police training. It proposes specific activities that align with PYD objectives. This chapter outlines the core role of the facilitator in the dialogue, referencing studies on what the outcome-evaluated processes have achieved. The final chapter prior to the book’s conclusion addresses potentially limiting factors to the success of dialogue – both at individual and organisational levels. This chapter addresses the remaining questions concerning the suitability of dialogue for healing specific wounds caused

by policing practices. PYD aims to help participants understand and transform patterns of deep structural discrimination based on ethnicity and other characteristics. Yet, it can struggle to do so when emotions are raw from recent incidents, or when there is little commitment among participants and their organisations to ongoing change. The *Little book* seems to stay true to the restorative ethos, calling on readers to avoid blame and judgement of individuals, and instead to collaborate and to reach out across social schisms to understand, educate and build a new future, relationally and collectively.

It is neither a theoretical nor an ideological book. Rather, it provides a systematic guide to plan, implement and evaluate projects that build understanding and strengthen relationships between police and minority communities. It offers a practical, insightful overview of various methods, skills and approaches that the authors have developed and tested. We found it particularly helpful that Johnson and Weisberg provide explicit lessons and key challenges so that readers can learn from their efforts and experiences, and from those of the many similar projects they reference. Relatedly, the book is based primarily on their experience, not on a methodologically rigorous evaluation of their work. Thus, further quantitative and qualitative research is needed to explore the impact of PYD work, especially in terms of whether any changes in attitudes and behaviour can be directly attributed to participating in dialogue and, if so, whether these sustain over time.

Overall, the book successfully contextualises and rationalises the use of PYD, and supports and inspires readers to try this work in their own context. Given the limited empirical study of these types of practices, the book has been essential in supporting us to identify literature and design, deliver and research our dialogue process, using restorative practices. This book gave us fresh, first-hand, evidence-based perspectives on both the benefits and potential dangers of dialogue, and how to communicate those confidently and effectively to our own project stakeholders and prospective participants.

Crucially, the authors repeatedly remind readers of the importance of equity in the design and delivery of a dialogue process to minimise the influence of existing power imbalances, ensure that marginalised voices are uplifted, and prevent experiences from being dismissed. It provides a compelling explanation of the transformative potential of moving collectively, transparently, trustfully and light-heartedly towards a shared goal.

Another similarly optimistic and practically oriented resource we found valuable in our project, as mentioned earlier, is *The little book of dialogue for difficult subjects* by Schirch and Camp (2007). This book complemented our learning about different forms of dialogue process, shedding further light on how to organise PYD. Again, despite their relatively narrow geographical scope and US-centric frames of reference, both books can and should be read and used beyond the United States. Both short, yet potentially transformative, pieces greatly informed our approach to the Irish project, as well as the connected research design.

We hope this book will encourage restorative practitioners to establish and evaluate projects of this kind, and to read widely in the field of dialogue studies, the

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relevance of which to our work is clear, but authors from which seldom seem to be referenced in restorative justice literature.

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References

Schirch, L. & Campt, D. (2007). *The little book of dialogue for difficult subjects*. New York City: Good Books.

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