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Book Review of *"Will the Circle Be Unbroken?": Aboriginal Communities, Restorative Justice, and the Challenges of Conflict and Change* by Jane Dickson-Gilmore and Carol La Prairie

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“Will the Circle Be Unbroken?”: Aboriginal Communities, Restorative Justice, and the Challenges of Conflict and Change. By Jane Dickson-Gilmore and Carol La Prairie. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. xii + 268 pp. Notes, references, index. \$65.00 cloth, \$31.95 paper.

Over the past decade or two, restorative justice has become a popular approach for the criminal justice system to take in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. In part, this is due in all three countries to an appalling disproportionality in the incarceration rates for racialized minorities. As the authors of *“Will the Circle Be Unbroken?”* point out, however, governments have been attracted to restorative justice for cost-cutting reasons as well. A burning question, therefore, is whether restorative justice works.

This book attempts to assess the efficacy of restorative justice programming in Canada, but with reference to the experience in the other two jurisdictions. The authors approach the task from a criminological perspective. Therefore, they make no attempt to address the theoretical aims of sentencing and of the criminal justice system, nor do they devote a great deal of attention to the role played by the police and the prosecution in the disproportionate jailing of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and their indigenous counterparts in the other two countries.

At the outset, the authors state their support for restorative justice. They express a concern, however, that the concept has been overly romanticized, underresourced, and placed in the hands of communities that are too dysfunctional to implement and maintain viable programs.

The result is often that expectations of success may be unrealistic.

For example, the lack of institutional resources is likely to lead to the burnout of the few key individuals who make restorative justice programming work. It also represents offloading by governments to volunteers of serious problems that the conventional justice system has not been successful in handling. A major concern is that victims are not nearly as satisfied by the results of restorative justice as are offenders. Another is the adaptability of programs from relatively homogeneous communities, such as reserves, to urban settings, a matter of some urgency given that Aboriginal peoples are nearly as urbanized in Canada as the non-Aboriginal population.

Pointing to the lack of rigorous evaluation of restorative justice programs currently in existence as an obstacle to avoiding mistakes in the future, the authors set out some prescriptions for improving restorative justice programming. There must be a core group of functional and committed members of the community, ideally with at least a smattering of knowledge of the criminal justice system and without the intrusion of local power relations. Much more planning is required before programs are developed, including the provision of a wider range of options to respond to the needs of both offenders and victims and the resolution of the jurisdiction of the program. Accountability and responsibility must be ensured and verified through careful evaluation.

I have two reservations about the book that cause it to present a more pessimistic view of restorative justice than may be warranted. First, there is sometimes confusion about whether the aim of restorative justice programs should emphasize reducing the disproportionate incarceration rate for indigenous peoples or whether the aim should be broadened to include victim satisfaction and community development. The authors take the latter view, even while correctly making the point that the criminal justice system can contribute little to rectifying broader societal ills. A narrower aim might be more realistic. My second reservation is that we should not have unduly high expectations for the success of restorative justice, since we must always remind ourselves that the regular system is a dismal failure at preventing recidivism, avoiding incarceration, satisfying victims, or healing communities.

These reservations aside, this book should be required reading for anyone involved in the design and implementation of restorative justice projects. It is a valuable and thought-provoking addition to the literature on restorative justice. **Tim Quigley**, *College of Law, University of Saskatchewan*.