

New development: Translating restorative practices into public sector organizations

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Citation:

CIESIELSKA, Malgorzata, DANBY, Gill and D'SOUZA, Nikki (2025). New development: Translating restorative practices into public sector organizations. Public Money & Management. [Article]

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New development: Translating restorative practices into public sector organizations

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IMPACT

Restorative practice (RP) is translated into public and private organizational contexts from the criminal justice system. It focuses on understanding the root cause of organizational incidents and addresses misconduct while building trust, incorporating wider stakeholder perspectives, and accountability. The evidence from the public sector shows that RP has the potential to build stronger communities, while reducing the number of disciplinaries, suspensions, staff turnover, and human resources (HR) costs at the same time as increasing productivity. **This article will be of value to a range of decision makers and practitioners interested in relational public services.**

ABSTRACT

This article examines implementation of restorative practice (RP) in public sector organizations through the lens of translation theory. Despite the global proliferation of RP, there is a scarcity of explanatory works on successful practice translations. The authors illustrate how RP has been decontextualized from criminal justice, and recontextualized for education/social care and healthcare. Effective translations require an understanding of both original and new contexts, attention to strategic and operational levels, as well as effective communication.

Keywords: Public sector productivity; restorative just culture; restorative justice; restorative practice; speak-up culture; translation theory. **Relational public service**

Introduction

This article contributes to the growing interest in the relational perspective of public sector organizations (Barbera et al., 2024) which focuses on the relations between individuals and organizations. Understanding people in an organizational context is the key to understanding how organizations operate and change. Public organizations are specific because they are affected by the broad context of public and private institutions, wider society, and politics (Christensen et al., 2020). Change in public organizations is embedded in relationships and dependencies. While an instrumental perspective emphasizes the role of managers and leaders in introducing change, one cannot forget that cultural norms and institutionalized solutions will influence this process. Both the private and public sectors tend to borrow fashionable managerial solutions that have proven to be successful in different contexts, sectors, or countries (Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón, 2013). We apply translation theory to RP expansion to understand how these organizational recipes, ideas and practices are being adapted to new settings (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008) through the process of copying, modifying, or altering the practice (Røvik, 2016). Røvik's model emphasizes the role of change agency and is particularly useful to highlight the link between the context shift and selected translation strategies (modes). In this article we look at how restorative justice (RJ) principles (criminal justice) have been de-contextualized and re-contextualized in the public sector such as: restorative circles/conferences (education and social care), and restorative just culture (healthcare). We also identify key learning points.

Why restorative practice?

The term 'restorative practice' (RP) was developed in the 1990s as an extension of the concept of restorative justice (RJ). It has since emerged as a transformative approach across multiple sectors and is a significant catalyst for change in education, social care and healthcare (All Party Parliamentary Group on Restorative Justice, 2023). Its use has broadened to various communities throughout the world (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2023) aiming to foster positive

relationships, prevent and repair 'harm' when it occurs. RP conceived in criminal justice settings is a dialogic process of repairing 'harm' resulting in healing and closure. It was developed in criminal settings as an alternative to a punitive framework to resolve conflict.

For the purposes of this article, and to differentiate from RJ (criminal justice), we use 'RP' when referring to restorative interventions being translated to an organizational context. RP is increasingly acknowledged as a positive approach to discipline, behavioural concerns, and relationship difficulties within organizations operating from a proposition that 'human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behaviour when those in positions of authority do things with them, rather than to or for them' (Payne & Welch, 2018, p. 3). Common examples of implementing a relational methodology in organizations include addressing misconduct at work, disciplinaries and grievances, reporting adverse incidents and resolving conflict within a learning 'mistakes-learned' environment. This type of systemic change needs an organizational culture and a 'mindset shift' that embraces new structures and processes (Hopkins, 2015).

Although adverse events in organizations cannot be eliminated, they can be reduced by strengthening accountability that requires employees to self-report mistakes in the interest of increased organizational learning. This forward-looking accountability as a response to an adverse event focuses on what is needed in the future to prevent re-occurrence rather than backward-looking, focusing on blame while reconciling relationships. Accountability in this context is involving everyone to give their account of the adverse event while contributing to finding a solution. A true restorative culture of accountability will support individuals to raise concerns and ensure a constructive response without a punitive reaction. This is essential in a restorative culture of learning and continuous improvement (Kaptein et al., 2022).

The transformation required to fully embed RP is significant. Any organizational effectiveness plan must be designed to recognize that this level of change is a social construct that identifies the organization as a human system which is subjective and unpredictable. This cannot be achieved through a technical solution (Dekker et al., 2022). Many organizations feel they know their culture, but the reality may be different for some. Training and 'buy-in' will be required throughout the organization from the leaders of the organization to those delivering direct services and this will have a cost.

From South Asia (Asadullah et al., 2021), South Africa (Murhula & Tolla, 2021) to America (González, 2020) and across Europe (Marder, 2020), RP is clearly gathering momentum. With RP being adopted by the social care and education sectors (Finnis, 2021) and in the healthcare sector (Kaur et al., 2019), the pathway has been paved for pioneering work across other public sectors (Hopkins, 2015). The push on implementing RP in organizations takes a new direction affecting not only organizational systems (instrumental), but also attitudes, norms and beliefs of those who make up an organization (culture perspective). This article takes a translation perspective to explain how restorative principles have influenced the public sector and how this legitimized managerial practices which were adopted and translated to education/social care and healthcare (Christensen et al., 2020) (see Figure 1).

ADD FIGURE ✓

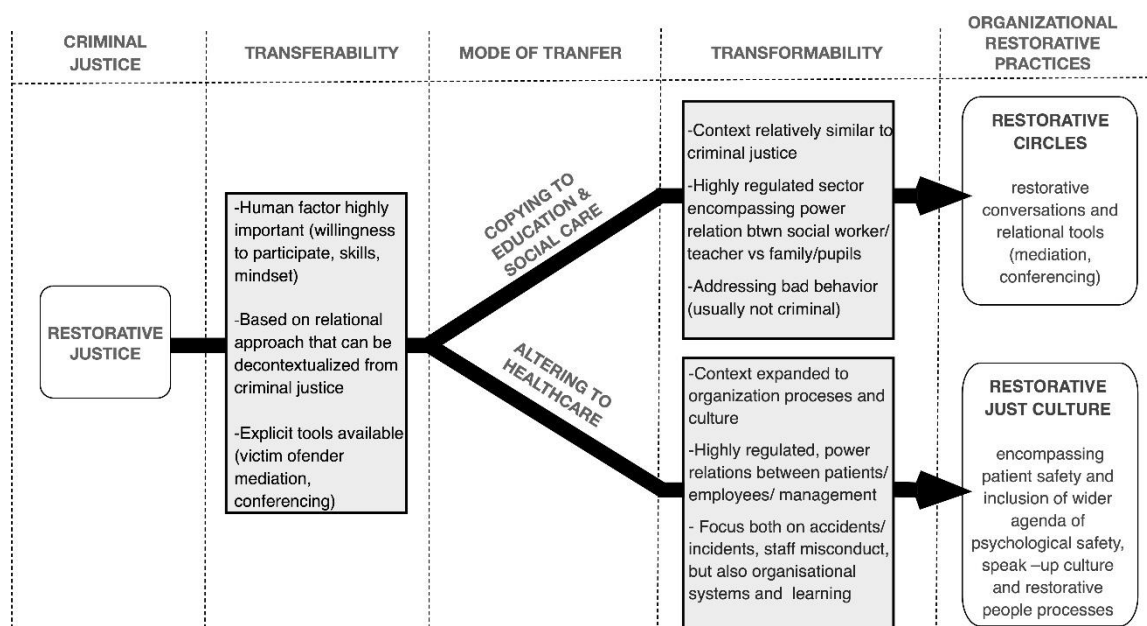


Figure 1. Translating restorative justice into restorative circles and restorative just culture.

De-contextualizing restorative justice from criminal justice system

In successful translation of practices, the first step is a process of de-contextualization which is defined as understanding how the original practice functions in its source

context. In Røvik's model (2016), translatability is dependent on extracting abstract representation of essential practice features and this is influenced by the characteristics of the intervention itself. The more complex, deeply embedded a practice is in its original context, the more it relies on tacit knowledge. Decontextualization can be a complex endeavour, when a practice is heavily based on a human component, has a low technology element and there is some ambiguity about how positive results are produced (Pilbeam & Karanikas, 2023).

RJ in a criminal justice setting shifts the focus from punishment to relationships (and their restoration) between involved parties. The proponents of RJ reject retributive (punitive) practices arguing that neither fear nor pain in punishment served can address the harm caused by a crime committed. This became especially evident in juvenile imprisonment cases that often led to further negative societal consequences instead of rehabilitation (Walgrave, 2011). RJ offers an alternative solution, a possibility of healing through bringing together the victim, the offender and the wider community into a dialogue.

While dealing with physical and/or emotional harm, RJ largely relies on human factors, like mediation, dialogue skills and a willingness to take part. To support the RJ agenda, a range of explicit relational interventions has been developed, for example victim offender mediation or family/community group conferencing. These tools have been designed to empower participants, allowing for opportunities to discuss the crime in a safe environment while addressing emotional healing for all parties, restoring relationships, and possibly reintegrating the offender into society. It is worth noting that tools like mediation have a long history and have proven transferability to many settings in dispute resolution, including peacekeeping, private or family law.

Although it might be challenging to understand the complexity of how RJ affects all parties involved, the evidence is encouraging. RJ interventions have significantly influenced the high rate of agreement and compliance with mediated agreements alongside very high satisfaction and perception of fairness in the process (Walgrave, 2011). At the justice system level, the implementation of RJ has proven to reduce reoffending and brought significant cost savings compared to the costs of prosecution (Grimsey Jones & Harris, 2022). Decontextualizing this practice, we can conclude that

focusing on repairing harm and relationships while engaging all stakeholders of the incident brings positive long-term benefits in comparison to a punitive approach.

Contextualizing restorative practice into organizations

The second step required for successful practice translation is contextualization. Transformability of a practice is primarily influenced by differences between original and target contexts (Røvik, 2016). The more different these contexts are, including national or organizational cultures, regulations, internal processes, structures, or demographics, the more challenging translation may be. Similarly, the level of discrepancy between prevailing and new practice can affect preferred modes of implementation from simple coping, through modification to alteration.

There are some parallels between how the criminal justice system works and how traditionally other organizations ensure compliance. Retributive (punitive) practices in organizations are designed to safeguard and deter from unacceptable behaviour through regulations, rules and procedures and investigate how those rules might be breached and what happens if they are (Dekker & Breakey, 2016).

In the highly regulated fields of education/social care and healthcare, a range of stakeholders (for example teachers, social workers, **peers**, community members, patients, doctors) are involved in conflict resolution with recognition of some power imbalances, for example between pupil–teacher and patient–doctor. However, within healthcare, RP has expanded into the area of staff relations to address a broad range of issues such as misconduct, patient safety, and discriminatory behaviours. In a highly demanding work environment people often use ‘workarounds’ to meet performance requirements which are designed to bypass the existing rules and procedures to meet job goals. Although they often allow for short-term efficiencies, workarounds contribute to creating high-risk situations, as discussed in the safety literature in healthcare (Ashour et al., 2021). This has inevitably impacted wider people processes and organizational culture, in ‘translating’ into practice alterations.

Modes of translation

Translating practices into other organizational contexts are achieved in three ways by:

- Copying the practice as closely to the original source as possible.
- Modifying the practice through adding or removing elements depending on the new context.
- Altering a practice to create a new one, inspired by the original or other implementations (Røvik, 2016).

Below we discuss two examples of how RP was ‘copied’ into restorative circles and ‘altered’ as a broader concept of restorative just culture (see comparisons in Table 1).

Key concepts	Criminal justice	Education/social care	Healthcare
Context	Criminal proceedings	Resolving behavioral issues and problems between peers and family members	Safety (physical, psychological) in the workplace, delivering safe and effective care/services
Level of intervention	Individual	Individual with elements of cultural change	Organizational, procedural, and individual level
Nature of harm	Crime	Behavioral issues, coordination between others involved	Workplace misconduct, mistakes, safety incidents
Harmed	Crime victims	Peers, stakeholders	Staff members, patients, patients’ families, and other members of the public
Harmer	Crime perpetrators	Other peers, family issues, less common teachers/education staff	Staff members, workplace systems, workarounds
Power imbalance	Yes: criminal law; facilitators, offenders and their victims	Yes: family and criminal law; teachers, social services versus pupils, families, stakeholders	Yes, private and employment law; herarchical structures, employment relations
Participation	Voluntary, no consequences if not involved (with some exceptions)	Voluntary, but other option less attractive to participants (formal disciplinary, suspension, expulsion)	Voluntary, but part of the work system, so expected level of compliance and other options less attractive to participants

			(formal disciplinary, suspension, dismissal)
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Table 1. Comparison of restorative justice and its translations to education and social care and healthcare (source: authors).

Practice copying: Restorative circles in education and social care

RJ principles have been copied to education and social care through numerous interventions including restorative circles and conferences with objectives ranging from community-building to harm-repairing. Both restorative circles and conferences are focused on managing family/pupil behaviour by creating space for reflection and avoiding traditional punitive outcomes. They are used to address specific behaviours, incidents and/or conflicts between peers, and often gather a wider stakeholder group, including parents, and local community representatives to address more serious transgressions (Lodi et al., 2021). The basic restorative conversation is based on three main pillars: exploring *what* happened, *who* has been affected and *how* to repair any harm caused (Finnis, 2021) and lessons learned to avoid further ‘harm’ (Dekker et al., 2022).

There is a high similarity between these interventions and the mediation/conferencing tools developed as part of RJ, often involving youths and families, with a focus on restoring relationships and harm caused. It offers a similar shift from behavioural policies, which are often punitive, focusing on individuals and leads from a range of negative consequences (disciplinary, suspicion, expulsion) to a relational approach (working with stakeholders). The main difference is the regulatory basis and focus on non-criminal behavioural issues, often prevention. This approach has been applied to a range of social work activities. For example, Devon County Council (2020) uses restorative circles as a basis for social work practices to encourage respectful communication and problem-focused discussions.

Many studies report that, similarly, RP in schools and social work has assisted in establishing a sense of community and are considered both by teachers and students as transformative (Lustick et al., 2020). Although the whole-school effect of RP may be more difficult to achieve, research shows that clear individual-level effects positively

change students' attitudes and behaviours, decrease expulsions, and reduce exposure to bullying (Acosta et al., 2016). However, positive outcomes are reduced if all relevant parties are not involved, disengage, fight or lie during the process, potentially leading to frustration and disappointment (Ortega et al., 2016). These problems can be exacerbated by a lack of buy-in from key stakeholders, or a change in top management, or a preference for punitive approaches leading RP being misappropriated as another sanction (All Party Parliamentary Group on Restorative Justice, 2023)

Practice alteration: Restorative just culture in healthcare

Another significant implementation of RP has been taking place in healthcare in the form of restorative just culture (RJC). This approach was pioneered in the UK by Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, and successfully rolled out to other NHS Trusts across England and Wales (NHS Improvement, 2018). Mersey Care's path towards RPs started with patient safety concerns, staff concerns of being blamed for unintended events and the level of disciplinary/grievances causing 'harm' to staff. A fundamental review of people processes was undertaken to avoid unnecessary disciplinary investigations and suspensions (with no case to answer), This was perceived as punitive through which the organization faced high staff turnover, absenteeism and legal costs (Kaur et al., 2019).

Mersey Care's RP implementation was based on a new framework inspired by the work of Dekker & Breakey (2016) on safety interventions and NHS guidance on linking patient safety with staff accountability and procedural fairness. It included a shift away from disciplinary processes towards understanding trigger incidents and its consequences, restabilizing the situation to prevent further harm, understanding multiple accounts of the problem, repairing trust and relationships and identifying lessons learned. This led to further significant procedural and cultural change fostering psychological safety and a 'speak-up' culture underpinned by restorative HR processes (Oates, 2022).

The speak-up culture approach has been promoted by NHS Improvement (2018) and sits within its civility and respect programme aimed at reducing bullying and harassment at work to establish a culture that is compassionate and inclusive where

people are encouraged to raise concerns and are assured that those concerns will be listened to and acted upon in a fair and consistent manner. A focus on implementing a speak-up culture could avoid creating a 'bystander effect'—a situation in which people do not help or speak up about wrongdoings or problems because of the uncertainty of breaching social or organizational norms, and how they will be perceived for challenging those norms (Sanderson, 2020).

An initial assessment of RP implementation revealed that Mersey Care had £2.5m (GBP) savings from a reduction in salary, legal and employment termination costs (Kaur et al., 2019) and a 15% rise in productivity over a four-year period (Boer & Kaptein, 2022). Further, the focus on a holistic understanding of the incidents and learning led to improved staff retention and staff wellbeing as well as significant cost reductions (Kline, 2023). It is reported that these long-term effects have been possible through an increase in good faith, trust in management, overall morale and job satisfaction as well as an enhanced sense of belonging (Flores, 2022). Despite these overwhelming positive effects, patients have concerns that RJC implementation can be inward facing, focusing on support for staff and organizational learning and potentially neglecting obligations towards the harmed patients and their families (All Party Parliamentary Group on Restorative Justice, 2023).

Good translations—implications for practice

To achieve the discussed RP benefits a fundamental and systemic shift is required within an organization. There are challenges to contend with while implementing and sustaining an RJC in a way that is integrated into organizational culture as 'business as usual'. Translation theory offers a way to consider how to achieve 'good translations': attention to translation competencies, understanding that translation is both a strategic and operational activity and that practice translation will be affected by organizational readiness to change and the persuasive communication.

First, translation literature postulates that managers should develop translation competencies—the ability to translate ideas between organizational contexts—focusing on translatability, transferability, and translation modes (Røvik, 2016). The probability of achieving organizational goals is closely linked to complexity, embeddedness and how explicit the practice is (Pilbeam & Karanikas, 2023). Evidence

from schools shows that hiring external agencies (psychologists, organization experts) is beneficial especially at the initial stages to increase an understanding of RP approaches (Jeznik et al., 2020). Much will also depend on the breadth and depth of the ambitions within the public sector—whether RP is to be utilized in one part of the organization, or whether selected aspects of practice will be used with identified stakeholders, or whether it will be used across the full range of activities and strategies in a holistic manner to become a restorative organization.

Second, translation literature emphasises the importance of both strategic and operational translation. Endorsement, encouragement and direction by senior executive leadership is crucial with any change implementation, but none more so than for a RP culture. In part, this is because embedding a new approach such as this involves eliminating or reducing the impacts of long embedded punitive, and consequential practices. This can take a form of informal executive walkarounds to show visibility and enabling speaking-up (Feitelberg, 2006). The successful translation process needs to involve champions at local levels to provide operational translation (Øygarden & Mikkelsen, 2020) and encourage adoption (Pilbeam & Karanikas, 2023).

Finally, fostering readiness for change is based on persuasive communication (Øygarden & Mikkelsen, 2020). One of the key areas for leaders to consider is how to develop ownership in new ways of working across the organization, so that staff embrace the values inherent in implementing RP such as respect and civility described above. In both discussed cases, this is achieved through extensive training and development (for example NHS Civility & Respect programme). Good-quality training contributes to staff-buy-in, demonstrating the potential powerful impacts of the approach while upskilling the workforce and addressing the scepticism and reticence/resistance about the change (Armstrong, 2021). Highly-trained, highly-skilled staff are required in the role of facilitators (Mann, 2016) for interventions for example restorative conferences. In some contexts, particularly in serious and complex scenarios, this may prove a hindrance to quality interventions, with costs being prohibitive (D'Souza, 2019). The year-on-year short-term funding cycles that many public sector organizations are reliant upon can adversely affect the survival of such schemes (Shapland et al., 2011). Translation success might be easier to achieve

in smaller organizations, where resources are actively available (Pilbeam & Karanikas, 2023).

Conclusions

The key limitation of this article is that it is based on a literature review. Many of the publications and examples rely on self-reported data by organizations implementing RP which sometimes leads to overemphasis of the positive effects, and less reflection on challenges. Moreover, there are no standardized measurements of RP success which makes comparisons across sectors difficult. Therefore, future research should focus on gathering comparable data across different types of organizations to provide an in-depth understanding of the organizational change processes required for successful RP translation in different contexts, including best practice guides and implementation roadmaps.

RP is gathering momentum across the globe and emerging as a transformative approach across multiple sectors, and as a catalyst for change particularly in education, healthcare and social care. The authors posit that it is easier for other government-funded public sector bodies, with their highly regulatory frameworks, to make a translation *within* and *across* diverse public sector bodies but more problematic or challenging in the autonomous private sector.

The road to transformation is never easy, nor is effective transformation ever quick; however, Røvik's model (2016) offers a way to achieve 'good translations' and through transformation, organizations will reap many benefits including improved behaviours, better staff communications, strengthened accountability, increased psychological safety, and cost savings. This, we believe, is a compelling business case to consider adopting RP within public sector organizations.

While RPs are applicable to most organizational settings, it is not a panacea for all ills. As a social construct, the translation needs to recognize the subjectivity and unpredictability of the organizational human system. This requires long-term buy-in and change across multiple systems and organizational cultures.

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