

INTEGRATIVE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE NARRATIVE MEDIATION CIRCLE  
APPROACH: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE OF THEIR MSW PROGRAM  
EXPERIENCE

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of the Division of Social Work  
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of  
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

by

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SPRING  
2017

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Abstract  
of  
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The primary purpose of this study was to debut and evaluate the efficacy of an integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle approach. This qualitative content analysis study utilized non-probability convenience sampling to incorporate 23 MSW students. Participants were also asked to complete a post-circle survey addressing their experience and satisfaction of the circle process. One remarkable result was that regardless of participants' experience with restorative and narrative practices, every participant acknowledged a better understanding of the problems affecting their cohort as a result of the circle process. This study demonstrates the need for further research into the compatibility between restorative and narrative practices, as well as, the need for individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions to utilize the integration to be better equipped to address, prevent, and resolve conflict.

\_\_\_\_\_, Committee Chair  
Maria Dinis, Ph.D., M.S.W.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Maria Dinis, who gave us just enough guidance at just the right times, to find our own way within the narrow and highly challenging confines of scholastic/academic credibility. To Dr. David Nylund who fanned the sparks of who we've always been, into the roaring flames of who we are becoming: dedicated speakers of truth to power, please know all of this work boils down to how you personally and deeply inspired us. Thanks to Rick and Chris Garza for providing the perfect sanctuary for us to weave our magic. A special thanks to our SWRK 223 class for their trust in us and their willingness to be vulnerable and share their experiences. Without all of you, none of this work would have been possible. –Donna and Pixie

To Donna, you and I share a piece of soul. This thesis would not have been held so intentionally graceful if it wasn't for you and your gentle touch. Here's to years and projects to come. Thank you to Ms Rhonda, for never letting me lose faith in myself by modeling through your unconditional love and support. Lastly, thank you to my partner Zac for the insistence to take care of myself with cartoons and days off, and mopping up my emotional puddle when I didn't listen. -Pixie Ganem

To my thesis partner Pixie, your level of mastery as a facilitator and advocate puts me in perpetual awe. May we continue to complete one another sentences for as long as we both shall live! Lastly but never least, to my family and friends who continue to believe in and support me such that I never give up in the pursuit of realizing my dreams, please know that you are the very heart of my courage and this win is as much yours as mine. -Donna Duncan

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

This recent election has highlighted the desires of people to feel heard and have their challenges and concerns addressed (Campbell, 2016). Problems are often complex and require deconstruction of an issue in order to detangle its roots and truly understand its origins. Solution options then require brainstorming and creativity. Lastly, implementation of change requires buy in and collaboration. Few individuals understand and thrive in this arena. Most people feel frustrated, overwhelmed and ignorant as to how difficult issues can be repaired. Not knowing what to do, often things get left undone. As people withdraw from one another, the divide can become a chasm of blaming and shaming which can then fan the sparks of hatred and bigotry or apathy and resignation (Weber, 2004). Problems have a tendency to then be seen as something with which most people wish someone else would just handle. Meanwhile, situations continue to fester and the simmer of civil unrest heats up towards a boil. History teaches that ingredients such as these are a recipe for revolution (Gildea, 2013), civil war (Miguel, 2014) and genocide (Khadem, 2014). Typically this has meant catastrophic breakdown as the precursor to breakthrough (Thakadipuram & Stevenson, 2013). The aim of this research study is to propose another way toward transformation with the education and implementation of a simple and effective process. This tool of an integrated Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation approach isn't new, as the roots of its practices were foundational in the lives of our distant and not so distant ancestors (Zehr, 2005; White & Epston, 1990). It has proven positive in assisting participants to speak in a way that

allows them to be compassionately heard and offers an opportunity to assist people in finding common ground and creating new realities collaboratively.

This chapter will include clarification regarding the specific authoring of chapters, as well as the background of the problem relating to this research. It also states the research problem and the purpose of this study. In addition this chapter declares the research question, as well as the theoretical frameworks utilized in this study and how they apply to the research question. A definition of terms frequently referred to in this research is also included along with an explanation of how this research benefits and ties in with social work practice. Delimitations and assumptions will also be addressed in this chapter to clarify boundaries of the problem and to define assumptions expected to be accepted, when taking this research into consideration.

### **Statement of Collaboration**

This thesis was written in collaborative partnership of both Pixie Ganem and Donna Duncan. Both researchers worked equally on chapters two, three, and five. Pixie was the primary writer for chapter four, while Donna was the lead writer for chapter one.

### **Background of the Problem**

Historically, humanity peppered the globe with indigenous tribes who existed in a communal context (Leung, 1999). Governing Elders, lived alongside community members, and all members had an equal opportunity for their voices to be heard and their input to be considered. Solutions to everyday challenges, were cultivated collaboratively (Leung). In this current decade of severe and often paralyzing partisanship, the United States has continued to experience further divide amongst its citizens regarding issues of

poverty and affluence, power and inequality (Campbell, 2016). A majority vote means that as many as 49.9% of voters can go unsatisfied. The majority is seen to 'win' the election and those who speak out in protest have been referred to as 'sore losers' (Bernauer & Vatter, 2012). Government leaders often do not live in the districts of their constituents and rarely do they have much experience of what it is to live like, or with, the majority of people they claim to represent (Broockman, 2014).

Educational institutions are another mezzo example of systems wherein hierarchies of power stand in the way of equal contribution and collaborative efforts. Students are expected to follow arbitrarily inflexible rules and punitive actions of suspension and expulsion are directed disproportionately toward offending individuals depending more upon their race and ethnicity rather than the severity of their offense (Noguera, 2003). Even in educational institutions of higher learning, a climate of incivility and disrespect is reported about students and faculty alike (Knepp, 2012).

A paradigm shift is required to address these ever widening gaps that divide us. Well-developed tools do exist and are currently available but sadly underutilized. Beyond the aforementioned convenience and personal reasons for choosing this population for participation in this study, any organizational group would have been equally useful for this application as any organization has an occasional need for conflict resolution. Whether or not such conflicts get addressed, let alone resolved, depends upon the organization's desire to take the experience of its members into serious consideration as well as the organization's ability to effectively problem solve. Organizational conflict offers a different dynamic than one-on-one conflict in that

a myriad of personalities, desires, and grievances all interweave into what can become a complicated tapestry of challenges (Kure & Winslade, 2010). Resolutions that involve such a tangling require a uniquely dynamic approach. The integration of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circles meet these complicated requirements.

Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation have many similarities. Both came from a New Zealand origin and developed separately but simultaneously. In the last ten years, Restorative Justice has been moving to the forefront as people realize that decisions are being made on their behalf without their input or consent, while Narrative ties in with ‘response-based’ approaches to trauma and systemic oppression. Both Restorative Justice and Narrative Practices utilize the social worker ethics of Person-in-environment, meaning that individual action affects community, and community influences and affects its individual members (Greene, 2008). More on the specific principles that Restorative Justice and Narrative Practices share will be detailed in the following chapter.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

The research problem is that Narrative Mediation and Restorative Justice as an integrated process, is a relatively new approach. Four applications of its usage were utilized in reference for this research. As an underutilized tool, little testing of the efficacy of its use is available. The intention of this research is to contribute to the body of knowledge as to its origins, invite the expansion of its possible usage and to test its efficacy with participants.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study is to debut the newly budding integration of a process which incorporates Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation practices into communal circles within which populations of a wide variety, can address and solve problems and resolve conflict collaboratively. The secondary purpose of this study is to support the California State University, Sacramento MSW cohort in better cohesion and collaboration in voicing their current experience and having an opportunity to brainstorm about ways to improve their situation if desired. The peripheral purpose of this study is to make sure that the experience of the MSW cohort is honored as a way to increase the efficacy of the circle process.

Although any group or organization could benefit by utilizing this circle approach, the researchers of this study chose to apply their efforts toward their own direct environment, the social work graduate program within which they study. Much like a tribe, a student body shares similar goals, daily rhythms, and highly stressful challenges. Unlike previous times in history, students today are considered to have a voice, in that they are asked to do evaluations regarding their experience of their professors and their program's curriculum. Especially during times when a university's accreditation is up for renewal, the experience of the student as a consumer is said to be taken into serious consideration. Positive changes however, are frequently perceived by those students as few and far between in relation to those student's complaints and suggestions. In an effort to facilitate students feeling heard, connecting with one another regarding their experience, and brainstorming about suggestions regarding problems revealed, the researchers of this study propose to answer the following research question.



### **Research Question**

What are the perspectives of second year MSW students regarding their own MSW program experience using an integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle approach? And what is the satisfaction of second year MSW students with the circle process?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Considering this study involves exploring meaning derived from personal experience as well as the dynamics of hierarchical conflict, it follows that Social Constructionist Theory and Social Conflict Theory direct the research. Originally evolved from the deconstructionism of the Postmodern era, Social Constructionist Theory contains influences from Frederick Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard, and its most famous philosophers were Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (Besley, 2001). However, no one individual or academic discipline is associated with this theory. Rather it includes a composite of psychology, linguistics, epistemology, anthropology and biology (Greene, 2008). The most important aspects of social constructionism as they tie into this study, include the assertion that meaning can be found in a variety of places through a wide lens of perspectives which are constantly evolving (Greene). Social Conflict Theory also informs this research in that part of the dominant discourse, often identified in Narrative Practice, involves unspoken but highly influential societal power hierarchies (Burford & Adams, 2004), and the primary tenants

of Social Conflict Theory include societal oppression and inequalities of power (Johnson & Rhodes, 2015).

### **Social Constructionist Theory**

In direct opposition to the modernist era, Social Constructionist Theory is a theory that is opposed to the confines of theory, as it prefers to describe the world as vague and highly subjective (Greene, 2008). It regularly questions taken-for-granted, fixed assumptions and asserts that situations cannot be universalized. Social Constructionist assert that reality is shaped by current context and a variety of variables and that there is no such thing as objectivity or neutrality (Greene). It further asserts that definitions of concepts like normalcy are defined by dominant groups and perception of the self are co-constructed as people experience themselves through the eyes of others in a process of selective sorting (Greene). Social Constructionist Theory asserts that the concept of understanding is an easily influenced dynamic process involving multiple realities. Social Constructionists appreciate intersectionality and diversity with an understanding that individuals are a conglomeration of race, sex, and ethnicity, who are shaped by their socioeconomics, religion, neighborhood, community, and county. Social constructionist theory ties into the social work theme of person-in-environment (Greene), in that it encourages people to recognize the broad perspective of what it is to be a part of humanity. Each person is considered an expert in their own life as they weave their life story through a societal context. In this way, the process in which people describe and explain the world from their perspective is a form of social action that contains positive and negative consequences (Greene).

Social constructionism in action strives to provide a safe environment to start where a person is. Intervention is not seen as a treatment but as a dialogue which assists people in reframing personal narratives into a more empowered and resilient perspective.

### **Application of Social Constructionist Theory**

Social constructionist theory influences this study in that it asserts that people create meaning in their lives through their interaction with one another (Greene, 2008). Words become a marriage of the speaker and the listener with a co-creation of points of view and an establishment of shared understanding depending upon the context. In the integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle process, images are manifested collaboratively. This fertile ground establishes a container for new ideas to emerge from previously stagnant problem-saturated narratives (Besley, 2001). Through the lens of social constructionism a social worker or process facilitator is not seen as an expert who intervenes on a client's behalf. Instead they are considered an equal partner who mines for values through an in-depth and respectful process of discovery. It is therefore important, in the context of social constructionist theory for facilitators to stay in a state of not knowing. By operating in this state, the facilitators respectfully follow the client's agenda by not assuming to immediately know what is being said, and to ask for further clarification and understanding.

### **Social Conflict Theory**

Social Conflict Theory is frequently applied in social work as a lens through which the client's experience of oppression can be seen in context within the hierarchies of a capitalist society (Bouckenooghe & De Clercq, 2014). The imbalances in wealth and

power are perspectives often highlighted in Social Conflict Theory as groups and individuals are understood to advance their own interests over the interests of others by dominance, manipulation and dismissal (McKenzie, 2015). Conflict as it is seen by Social Conflict Theory is integrated into society in a dualistic format, meaning there is a sense of order in conflict, and a presence of conflict in states of order. Social Conflict Theory further asserts that social change is driven by conflict (Bouckenooghe & De Clercq). This manifests as long periods of stability interrupted by insertions of dissatisfaction as motivation for change.

Continuing on with the positioning of power and the exploitation of some groups, this directly speaks to the concern that students may be hesitant to report conflict due to the fear of increasing the conflict, especially without any guarantee of resolution within the organizational hierarchy (McKenzie, 2015). It also identifies the potential limitations regarding this study. Originally it was proposed by the researchers of this study that professors and directors of the university's social work department would be invited to participate in the circle process along with students. This unfortunately was deemed as too high of a risk factor. In the context of conflict theory this is seen as an example of a lacking in open conflict and therefore a sign of exploitation (Greene, 2008). Social Conflict Theory asserts that conflict exists as a natural part of social change which fluctuates between stability and change interruption (Bouckenooghe & De Clercq, 2014) however creating a container of safety and support to allow this natural evolution of growth is challenging under circumstances where power hierarchies dominate.

Without the encouragement of co-mingling between such strata as regulation makers and regulation followers, managers and employees, students and professors, one group cannot be expected to understand the needs and challenges of another group. Without understanding, no empathy or collaboration can be encouraged to develop. According to Social Conflict theory the absence or presence of these opportunities, shape future interactions (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2007). The trajectory of gaps widening or drawing closer together may therefore depend upon what tools are called upon to support communication.

### **Application of Social Conflict Theory**

Social Conflict Theory is highly applicable in this research regarding the demographic and environment as it apply to situations of hierarchal power pyramids (Burford & Adams, 2004). Institutions of higher learning, the one involved in this study, are undergoing a transformational process wherein the experience of students as consumers are taken into consideration especially during times of a university's accreditation renewal. The integration of restorative justice and narrative mediation process circles utilize the tenants found in social conflict theory, that assert conflict to be a normal part of human engagement and a catalyst for growth and change. These circles provide a forum for processing situations that can be uncomfortably confrontational if not navigated with care and clear intentions toward respect and compassion as it applies to the experience of all participants.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Aboriginal--** A member of the original people to inhabit an area especially as contrasted with an invading or colonizing people (Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary, online).

**Construct--** A theoretical narrative that provides a broader context (Androff, 2012)

**Unique outcomes--** Overlooked instances that are in contradiction with problem-saturated narratives (Besley, 2001).

**Double listening--**The process of listening for what is implied, though not plainly expressed, in connection with defining problem stories (Besley, 2001).

**Discourse--** Abstract constructs in social practice that form subjectivity and power (Besley, 2001).

**Indigenous Peoples-** Individuals and communities that are native to the origins of a specific location (Leung, 1999).

**MSW Program--** A Master's in Social Work Program which includes 16 hours per week of internship the first year, and 24 hours of internship the second year plus 2 years of full time academic attendance or 3 years of part time academic attendance.

**Narrative Practices-** Approaches that challenge people to unpack the very framework of power by constantly questioning taken for granted assumptions, meanings, and discourses (Besley, 2001)

**Restorative Practices--** Based on the philosophy that recognizes that alternative approaches are needed in our criminal justice, school disciplinary, and community systems that currently use punishment to manage misbehavior (Beck, Kropf, & Blume, 2010)

### **Assumptions**

The researchers of this study operate under the following assumptions and concepts of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation as an integrated process as it pertains to Social Work graduate students and institutions of higher learning. Firstly, it is assumed that social work graduate students are motivated to solve conflict and are able to consolidate and articulate their experience of the program in which they study. Secondly, those students will actively and truthfully participate when called upon to do so. An additional assumption outlines that the graduate student body utilized in this study is diverse in age, ethnicity, race, family history and life experience. This is connected to the assumption that graduate students, like any population, deserve to have their voices and experiences heard in regard to issues that affect their everyday lives. A related assumption signifies that institutions of higher learning typically exist as hierarchical power structures. The final assumption maintains that there is a lack of representation of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation being used as an integrated process.

### **Justification**

The National Association of Social Worker NASW, Code of Ethics (2008) preamble states that the core values of social work are: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Therefore providing, promoting and monitoring the efficacy of tools that support communication that is interconnected, compassionate, and collaborate toward problem and conflict resolution, is in direct alignment with the aforementioned tenets of social work. The integrated process of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation

circles has the high potential for organizing communities, confronting power imbalances and building on the strengths of diversity.

Social work today stands for numerous values regarding people's continuous capacity to grow develop and change (Beck, Kropf & Leonard, 2011). This includes the concepts of empowerment and resilience. Beck, Kropt and Leonard explain this consistent human phenomenon as the, "unpredicted or markedly successful adaptations to negative life events, trauma, stress and other forms of risk," which plays directly into the findings of this research further explained in chapters four and five.

This research promotes the integrated restorative justice (RJ) and narrative mediation circle process as a platform for participants to identify, cultivate and articulate their preferred stories of resiliency and personal empowerment. Social work distinguishes itself from other practices of human service in that it seeks to view an individual through the lens of Person-in-environment. The practices of RJ and Narrative are both deeply rooted in this same concept.

### **Delimitations**

This qualitative research study is exploratory in nature. Although the post circle surveys are quantitative, they are not a primary focus of this research study; they were done with the intention of creating a greater understanding of the efficacy of the circle as it was experienced by the participants. Although generalizability of the twenty-three students that participated in the circle process cannot be assumed regarding the experience of the entire MSW cohort of approximately 120 students, some generalizability may apply to situations of hierarchal power pyramids (Burford & Adams,



2004) whether institutional, corporate or governmental. Being that the researchers of this study are also members of this same MSW cohort as well as students in the same SWRK 223 class in which the study was performed, a familiarity and depth of rapport were already present before the establishment of this circle practice. The constructs influencing experience are not easily captured in research.

### **Summary**

This chapter has covered the general and more specific problems addressed by this research study. It also defines the collaborative efforts of the researchers and the specific research question addressed as well as the lens of theoretical application. It further lists definitions of terms utilized in this work, how the research furthers the values of social work, delimitations, and assumptions the researchers of this study need the reader to accept without further evidence.

In the next chapter a review of the literature will offer a more detailed version of the history, origins, and application of the integrated process of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation. Chapter three will present the methodology of the study by documenting the measures taken in this research process. In chapter four, the data that has been collected will be examined. Lastly, chapter five will discuss the results and implications of this research study.

## Chapter 2

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This chapter will include a review of literature and will be organized into four main sections: Historical Background, Restorative Justice, Narrative Practices and the Integration of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation. Three sections are also divided into subsections. Restorative Justice subsections include Victim-Offender Mediation, Peace/Healing Circles, Schools, and Community Reparation. Narrative Practices subsections include Narrative Therapy, Reflection Teams, Consumer-Ratings Feedback, Narrative Letters, Narrative Conferences, Definitional Ceremonies, and Narrative Mediation. The Integration of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation subsections include Restorative Schools Vision Project, Group Conferencing, and Appreciative Inquiry. Finally, the review of literature ends with a section dedicated to the gaps identified in the literature.

These specific approaches were chosen to broaden the knowledge of the social work community by facilitating further awareness of the components, origins, and intentions of the integration of Narrative Mediation and Restorative Justice.

#### **Historical Background**

Restorative Justice and Narrative Practices are thought of as comparatively new concepts, yet many factions have exercised forms of these creeds long prior to their current applications (Zehr, 2005; White & Epston, 1990). In 1970s and 1980s New Zealand, both practices independently reemerged as alternatives to the contemporary criminal justice system and family therapy models, respectively. Restorative Justice

initiated, what is now understood as victim-offender mediation, in response to the punitive punishment approach of the criminal justice system; while Narrative Therapy began its perspective through family-centered collaboration, in contrast to the primary deficit focused approaches of family therapy (Zehr; White & Epston).

Restorative and Narrative concepts are found even further back in literature. Restorative justice was evident in eleventh century England, where crime was understood as a conflict between individuals that was resolved by repairing the harm (Zehr, 2005). Even further into history, indigenous peoples believed in restoration and repairing the harm inflicted by a transgressive action (Leung, 1999). Narrative influences can be traced back from initial feminist principles, to post-structuralist concepts of Michel Foucault, and further back to 19th century notions of Nietzsche (Besley, 2001). Nietzsche sponsored thought surrounding the unveiling of power as it pertained to entities and relationships (Besley). The idea of dominant discourses present in Narrative Therapy are connected to Nietzsche's notion of 'reverse perspective', where no view/concept is allowed to be unquestionably upheld (Besley). Foucault, and then later Michael White, addressed the idea of modern power, stating that dominant societal discourses are ever present, but that actual lived experiences represent speaking truth to individual and community power (Besley). Contemporary Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation strive to re-establish the perception of responding to harm onto individualized compassionate approaches on how to make it right ( White & Epston, 1990; Zehr, 2002). Evolving from victim-offender mediation, Restorative Justice zoomed out to encompass repairing harm as opposed to focusing on punishment, through the

understanding that if individuals were going to be living in the same environment in which the harm happened, change would not occur unless the approach was altered (Zehr, 2005). This represents the purpose of restorative to address community healing by facilitating harm reparation. Narrative evolved from philosophical notions of power, to compassionate individual and group interactive techniques, where now it can be applied as an approach in a multitude of settings (Freedman & Combs, 2009). The evolution of these complementing restorative and narrative practices have paralleled in history and expansion, without any intentional overlap. The proceeding literature review will present in depth accounts of their evolution individually, and their compatibility to be integrated.

### **Restorative Justice**

Restorative justice (RJ) is a philosophy that recognizes that alternative approaches are needed in our criminal justice, school disciplinary, and community systems that currently use punishment to manage misbehavior (Beck, Kropf, & Blume, 2010). The traditional punishment-based approaches are structured systems of identifying and prosecuting the harm doer, with the understanding that punishment is deemed the best reasonable response to harmful behavior (Dzur, 2011). This is often accomplished with great cost to society, with little to no healing for those individuals and communities harmed, including that inflicted on the harm doer and their families (Dzur). The roots of restorative justice are deep in the rituals of indigenous tribes and religions in the United States, Canada, Europe and New Zealand (van Wormer, 2006).

Aboriginal teachings are proactive versions of justice focused on creating social environments that diminish wrongdoings and promote community, rather than addressing

what is done after things have gone wrong (Leung, 1999). Instead of basing off the now contemporary belief of continual presence of conflicts, aboriginal notions operate through the supposition that communities, and the people within them, want to live peacefully together (Leung). In their perspective, justice is equated to showing harm doers the correct path in life, rather than focusing on punishment of an individual for a particular behavior (Leung). These teachings also identify all things as a portion of a single entity, conjoined by reciprocal relationships, so when a person inflicts harm, relationships are broken and in need of healing (Leung). However, the responsibility of healing the relationship is dispersed through all those that contributed to the harm with an action plan (Leung). According to these aboriginal teachings, there will always be multiple perceptions of truth as it correlates with personal reaction and level of involvement to the harm, thus objectivity is not possible (Leung). This reinstates justice to addressing the harm and causes of the harm rather than becoming distracted with the assumed severity of the behavior (Leung). Within this community system, decisions are created in a bottom up fashion through the families involved, thus the accountabilities lie with those that are directly impacted by the harm (Leung). Lastly, these teachings perceive everything in a constant state of cyclical change, and as things are neither constant or random, justice is applied by correlating factors and relationships to the harm behavior and identifying positive implications of change (Leung).

In direct application of the above indicated historical teachings, Restorative Justice circle processes create a distinctive kind of space for restorative dialogue in modern culture. RJ circles are structured to emphasize community interconnectedness,

interdependence, and equality (Beck, 2012). Participants are encouraged to hold a mutual responsibility for the wellbeing of the community and the individuals within it, understanding that what happens to one person or one population affects the community as a whole. In the circle, all participants, regardless of role or status, age or experience, are considered of equal importance, with equal voice. The circle is inclusive, allowing even the facilitator, room to participate. While circles vary somewhat in style and structure, they all seek to cultivate a climate of mutual respect and compassion that is value-oriented (Beck). RJ circles emphasize learning through a collective group process, while aiming to repair harm done and assign accountability by identifying and deconstructing the problem in order to move towards solutions (Androff, 2012).

**Victim-Offender Mediation.** One of the biggest criticisms of our criminal justice system in this country is its focus upon punitive endeavors. Although the term rehabilitation is used in this arena, it is no way supported in being realized. This results in unsurprisingly high levels of recidivism. Outside of restorative justice practices, not much is being done to support harm reparation and/or offender reintegration (Dzur, 2011).

When examining RJ from a social work perspective it is important to acknowledge the dual relationships and responsibilities of the profession. On one hand social work encourages empowerment but it also includes a context of protection. This is evident specifically in the system of child protective services and in the realms of domestic violence and the correctional arena. All of these areas expect a level of personal accountability and safety for all involved. One aspect of restorative justice that

supports these non-negotiable concepts does so by highlighting and broadening the awareness of the consequences of individual actions upon the community of which they are all apart. Burford and Adams (2004) refer to this as the private and societal tie in. By inviting and including family and friends of the victim as well as the offender to participate in the circle process, the experiences and proclamations of each individual are being witnessed and validated by those whose opinions have the most value and credibility. This fresh perspective takes participants outside of the current pervasive paradigm that seeks to pathologize, marginalize and label them.

In any organization, be it educational, governmental or business, there exists regulatory pyramids (Burford & Adams, 2004) wherein a hierarchy of administrative power may assert coercive mandates. This is currently unavoidable but from a harm reduction perspective, its grip can be loosened. Compliance and cooperation from the lowest tiers of participation regarding the implementation of top tier mandates has a greater likelihood if these bottom tier members are invited to participate in the formulations of creating such plans by way of personal relevance recognition. Face to face opportunities for interaction can be a powerfully validating exchange. It can also be intimidating and confrontational if not facilitated with care, skill and an evidenced based process.

One critique of Restorative Justice is that it can be over-romanticized (Burford & Adams, 2004). A key component needed for a restorative justice approach is personal accountability and an acknowledgement that apologies and forgiveness are neither mandatory nor expected. Participants therefore must be encouraged away from making

the assumption that either one of these aspects will result in a given outcome of the process.

***Community Reparation.*** This program establishes Community Reparative Boards, also known as, youth panels, neighborhood boards, or community diversion boards, are decision-making entities much like victim-offender mediation (Dzur, 2011). This program seeks to more efficiently include community members in the justice procedures, identify and repair harm caused by a behavior, and successfully reintegrate harm doers back into the community. Community reparation acknowledges that community members are stakeholders in the peace and harm present in their environment, and models a local level social control in the justice process (Dzur). Currently, cases are sent to these boards by a judge, and thus the focus is not to determine culpability, but to identify a course of action that will repair the harm created by the behavior. During reparative meetings, board members discuss the nature of the behavior and the harm associated with the harm doer. Then a course of consequences and time allotments are proposed to the harm doer, which is discussed collaboratively until an agreement is reached. Documentation progress is required by the harm doer in order to fulfill the terms of the agreement. Once the allotted time has passed, a report is submitted to the court regarding the adherence to the agreed consequences, which concludes the community reparation board involvement (Dzur).

***Peace/Healing Circles.*** These circles combine restorative practice components such as victim reconciliation, offender responsibility, and community healing (Beck, Kropf, & Blume, 2010). They are used to effectively address conflict in a holistic



manner that is driven to solve problems. By focusing on the process of healing and learning as a group, peace circles aim to repair the harm inflicted whether intentional or peripheral, and delegate responsibility while talking through the problem (Beck, Kropf, & Blume). While peace circles began to emerge in the U.S. around the 1970s they have been in existence for quite some time. These circles are predominantly based on talking circles from indigenous peoples from around the world. Systems traditionally built on punitive punishment models are now seeing these restorative adaptations being stressed into implementation to deviate from unsuccessful judiciary means of conflict resolution (Beck, Kropf, & Blume).

*Schools.* U.S. schools have mimicked the current governmental structure and thus their discipline has mirrored the criminal justice system (Dzur, 2011). The policies focus on punishing harm doers with the intention of enforcing corrective behaviors that are safer and less-disruptive. However, when implemented punishment is ineffective, students may be excluded through suspension or expulsion (Beck, 2012). These punitive efforts are connected to a potential of serious long-term harmful consequences to them, their community, and ultimately society as a whole (Dzur). These discipline procedures offer no opportunity for accountable social and emotional learning.

Restorative practices in schools are based on the above mentioned restorative justice principles, in replacement of punishment. They strive to create classroom communities that are harnessed with understandable agreements, genuine communication, and efficient processes to address conflicts effectively (Beck, 2012). These processes address harm by bringing together everyone affected by misbehavior,

through conferences to address feelings and affects, achieve understanding, and to create an agreement on harm reparation (Beck). Restorative practices assist schools in acknowledging that misbehavior is normal. Making things right is a powerful learning experience, and thus opportunities to learn important social and emotional skills are created when students behave in unideal ways. Restorative school practices distribute power and authority by allowing the traditional authority figure to stand in the role of a facilitator instead of ultimate decision maker. Community stakeholders, or those directly affected by the harm, are identified and given preparation and support to address the harm. The stakeholders explore the effects and solutions to the harm, and typically the harm doer accepts accountability and restoration agreements to repair the consequences of their actions. The difference in outcomes between the punitive-punishment approach and the restorative approach is one fosters potential resentment, alienation, guilt/shame, and misalignment with authority; while the other hosts space for empathy, responsibility/accountability, and assists in repairing relationships (Beck). Restorative practices in schools have shown that they reduce suspensions/expulsions, amount of instructional time lost to managing student behavior challenges, and disproportionate referrals of minority students; while improving teacher morale, teacher retention, and academic outcomes (Beck).

### **Narrative Practice**

Narrative practices began in the 1980s with the partnership of Michael White and David Epston. Michael White was a social worker and family therapist from Australia who passed away in 2008 and David Epston is a practicing family therapist in New

Zealand. In 1990, White and Epston published their book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* which not only presented in practical format how narrative could be applied in family therapy, but also established the theory and philosophy of the narrative practice. The significance of the establishment of narrative as a therapy was that it emerged from a social science framework as opposed to the default of the psychological approach. The primary influence on narrative was Michel Foucault, however Jacques Derrida, Gregory Bateson, and Feminist ideals were also credited to the narrative scaffolding.

Foucault introduced the nature of discourse and the conception of power which laid the groundwork to expand the personal, into the political (Nichols, 2013). He identified the power of knowledge and the significant influence over the scientific comprehension of 'truth'. By deconstructing the very structure of these 'proven truths', Foucault and narrative practitioners challenge people to unpack the very framework of power by constantly questioning taken for granted assumptions, meanings, and discourses (Besley, 2001). These overlooked instances that contradict the problem narrative were coined 'unique outcomes' (Besley). Also known as exceptions, 'unique outcomes' are distinct way of constructing an alternate narrative for people to accept and implement change (Besley). These are often hidden nuances in individual life experiences that were not acknowledged due to them not fitting with the main discourse. Heavily influenced by the work of Nietzsche and Freud, Michel Foucault earned his bachelor's degree in philosophy and his master's degree in psychology. He was a human rights activist and his work is considered the inspiration for critical theory (Power, 2011).

French born philosopher, Jacques Derrida was also inspired by Nietzsche and Freud but Marx and Kierkegaard as well. Derrida expanded the study of meaning-making into deconstruction and phenomenology which allows the therapist to listen reflectively to what people share about their lived experience. The idea of ‘double listening’ was adopted from Jacques Derrida (Besley, 2001). Double listening is explained as the process of listening for the “absent but implicit” or what is implied, though not plainly expressed in connection with defining problem stories. Derrida described this idea through the understanding that individuals can only identify and express concepts in relation to their opposites. Absent but implicit listening creates opportunities for discussions to establish preferences of one’s self and life through supporting exploration of the concepts that encourage promotion of that preference (Besley).

**Narrative therapy.** This type of therapy utilizes Bateson’s “interpretive method” to assist people in identifying dominant and alternative stories, and ‘re-authoring’ them through the lens of associated choice making (Besley, 2001). With a background in anthropology, Gregory Bateson followed in the footsteps of Alfred Korzybski when he pointed out that maps are mere representations or interpretations of territorial reality and then used that metaphor in his teachings of meaning-making.

Considered to be the core principle of narrative therapy, the “story” metaphor or “story telling” was gained from psychologist Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 2004). Continued through the understanding of the power of language, individual realities harnessed, are expressed by the language used and thus continued through the stories told utilizing such

language. These self-narrated stories contain life experiences that are presented in a manner that allows opportunity for observation of meaning therefore making individuals lives and life stories inseparable (Leahy, O'Dwyer & Ryan, 2012).

Aligned with the Feminist perspective, narrative utilizes externalization of a problem as the process of connecting personal experience to wider social history network, thus locating the problem outside of the person and allowing examination of the role context plays in the problem (Castronova, 2007). As clients are supported in viewing the problem as external to themselves, the therapeutic conversations can invite discussions around relations to the societal power hierarchy and its history as a greater problem. Both White and Epston (1990) agreed that due to the importance and yet uncertain nature of stories, that it is vital to be open to multiple meanings and interpretations (Sandelowski, 1991).

Narrative therapy argues that therapy is by nature a political activity, as it is established with set practices infused with power dynamics. Thereby executing that narrative based practitioners must hold in the ethic of decentering themselves from 'expert' positioning, and allow conversations led by the practice of transparency, 'remembering', and taking-it-back to organize the client as the 'expert' (Freedman & Combs, 2009). Narrative by design contains a heightened focus on language and its usage and how presentation can fragment, distort, or change experiences. By understanding the power of language and its ability to accustom how we feel, think, and act, narrative purposefully establishes its use of language as a therapeutic tool. Thus the language utilized by narrative therapists is intentionally 'ethically neutral', and avoids

typically used terms to extinguish pathologizing people and objectifying their stories (Freedman & Combs). Evolving from this combination of diverse influences, narrative therapy is considered as a postmodern, poststructuralist branch of therapy that aligns with social constructionist ideals.

Narrative Therapy allows a practitioner to come to the client's reality as their social and cultural context creates it. By acting within a strength based lens, the counselor can attend to the client's narrative as a learner, and assist in facilitating new 'stories' that embrace client's preferred self (Freedman & Combs, 2009). Language and dialogue is also a key ingredient in comprehending the client's narrative nuances. Presenting problems are viewed as a discourse from preferred self and this approach strives to assist in reconstructing alternatives to the "story" by inviting the client to re-author their narrative to identify the 'unique outcomes' (Besley, 2001). The externalization of problems allows the client to objectify these discourse causes, and then to identify the influence they have had on the client without assuming responsibility for their existence. This form of therapy allows the therapist to attend to the presenting problems of the client without allowing them to consume the identity of the client.

Narrative is also an effective therapy with children and adolescents as the storytelling aspects can be incorporated into puppet, sandbox and dollhouse play as well as dramatizations and art therapy depending upon the child's developmental stage (Ricks, Kitchens, Goodrich & Hancock, 2014). The collaborative process of narrative therapy empowers children to see problems, solutions and consequences and evaluate and implement them as they choose (Looyeh, Kamali, Ghasemi & Tonawanit, 2014). They

are encouraged to recognize their own abilities, strengths and competencies which begins to assist in equalizing the power struggles of performance and punishment models in some families and allows all members of the family to become experts in their own lives (Nichols, 2013).

Narrative therapy contains a myriad ways in which it promotes transparency, collaboration and accountability. These specific values add up to building a solid foundation of trust and mutual respect. This is especially apparent when Narrative practitioners incorporate reflection teams, consumer ratings feedback, narrative letters, Narrative Conferences, and Definitional Ceremonies into their practice (Leahy, O'Dwyer, & Ryan, 2012).

***Reflection teams.*** These teams consist of a group of carefully selected professionals and/or bystanders that brainstorm amongst themselves about possible solution ideas that clients might not think to come up with on their own. These outsider witnesses talk to one another in front of those in conflict, but not directly to them. This is with the intention of exposing new perspectives and fresh ideas. It is done from an exploratory, strength-based perspective not to be confused with praise which reflects a form of judgment albeit positive (Fredman, 2014).

***Consumer ratings feedback.*** This tool is a process in which the client or participant is seen as a consumer in that they are accountable for recognizing and declaring what about the process is working and not working for them. In order to be effective this information must be seen by the facilitator as constructive feedback. No matter how supportive or effective a counselor may experience themselves as being,

subjecting oneself to such honest feedback can be humbling but in Narrative therapy it is considered key. These concepts work if and when they remain grounded in the foundational concepts of the narrative approach because they avoid criticism and encourage discovery. Building trust and rapport is foundational in all aspects of this exchange. As long as the intention is made clear that in order to be successful, those involved must be willing to confront and share their experience. The FIT Rating Scale is an example of such an evidence based practice tool. Inspired by Michael Lambert and originally developed by Scott Miller and Barry Duncan, it is a two part, four item quantitative measurement utilizing a sliding scale meant to exam the alliance between participant and facilitator or therapist (Duncan et al., 2003). Taking just a few minutes to complete, the survey is divided into an outcome rating scale (ORS) which is taken by the client at the beginning of a session and a session rating scale (SRS) which is taken by the client at the end of the session.

*Narrative letters.* As defined by Bjorby, Madigan, and Nylund, (2015), Narrative letters are a way of summarizing and solidifying new meaning. White & Epston (1990) identify “letters as narrative” by facilitating the “storying” of an individual’s personal lived experience. No matter what insight is attained during a session, that awareness can fade over time. Creating a letter about the experience allows for a recording of clarity. Letters can also extend the conversation by posing questions for future reflection. Important to include are a recap of the general conversation and actual quotes from those involved. The general focus is upon reinforcing distinctions between the person and the problem sometimes with the use of humor but always with a focus upon



positive attributes. Creativity is encouraged as the writing can take on qualities of prediction, invitation and/or referral. Certificates can even be awarded for a recognition of shift from one reputation to another.

*Narrative Conferences.* As clarified by Freedman and Combs (2009), narrative conferences are a highly complex form of narrative with four main stages to the preparation and planning. Typically, half the facilitating team is preferred to have personal knowledge of the engaged group. Initial consultations are done with community representatives so that themes can be identified. Next facilitating team members compile the gathered information and create a plan. Then one member who is familiar with the community couples with one member that is not and the community representatives are presented with the tentative meeting plan for their consideration and input. Lastly an appropriate site is procured. The two to five day gathering begins with an opening ceremony which establishes intention and solidarity. Then pre-chosen members report the discovered themes and offer some of the stories that revealed those themes. Smaller groups are established and a team member joins each group serving to assist in the telling of life stories of those themes by all the people present. When the larger group is reassembled, the team members report to all, a summary of what they have heard. Lastly community members are invited to reflect upon their experience. The entire event is diversely documented in myriad ways such as songs, videotaping and poems. Community members assist in this process. Eventually a follow-up happens with the intention of keeping people in touch with their experience. Michael White stated that one of the most important aspects of his work on narrative conferences is its nature of

collaboration and cooperation. The facilitation of such must therefore be decentered and influential but with clear limits. Another important factor in narrative includes the concept of *double listening*. As people share their struggles, and pain, they also reveal their desires for things to be different. A good narrative facilitator sorts for these qualities. Narrative Conferences have been found to be useful in a broad application not only with indigenous tribes but community mental health projects, elementary and high schools and even with survivors of genocide (Ricks, Kitchens, Goodrich, & Hancock, 2014).

***Definitional Ceremonies.*** These events were founded by American anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff as a way for people to define relationship inside their group. This is done by outsider-witness conversation which was developed by Michael White (Fredman, 2014). The process begins by a group member telling their story through specific and purposeful questions being asked and answered. Through careful listening, people then respond with personal reflections and inspirations of what images come to mind as a result of this original sharing. Michael White's teachings asserted that one's identity is established within a social environment. In keeping with this method's encouragement toward the use of metaphor, people tend to experience who they are by the reflection they see of themselves in the eyes of others. In that mirroring one has the opportunity to expand and understand the effect we have upon one another (Leahy, O'Dwyer, & Ryan, 2012).

A combination of these narrative tools help to facilitate meanings that can then be experienced from a felt sense versus an intellectual distance (Hayward, 2003). This

dissuades judgment and separations of hierarchy or superiority and welcomes a sense of support in a way that can often be experienced as engaging and collaborative.

**Narrative Mediation.** Narrative Mediation in its entirety is a humanistic and empowerment based process that promotes externalization of problems, building teams against the problem, and finding effective resolutions as a communal process. There is validity in the efforts of utilizing Narrative Mediation as a baseline intervention for approaching conflict resolution in an organizational structure because it deviates away from hierarchy, stratified authority, and sacrificial compromise. It then repositions language used along with ability filled negotiation, towards a mutually beneficial solution. Despite the increased time, effort, and vulnerability required of this process, the results possible and probable, accurately represent its undefinable worth.

Narrative mediation defined by Winslade and Monk (2008) works to enable us to examine conflict mediation through the analysis and deconstruction of discourses, positioning, language, and influenced interpretations. This framework provides transportation through the problem solving process by highlighting common themes of interest between each side of conflict.

While Narrative Mediation takes on a nonjudgmental, holistic, and structured approach, there is a deficit in examples that utilize its application in organizational settings (Winslade & Monk, 2008). Restorative Justice can be aligned with narrative therapy as they both are established as person/community centered, utilize strengths-based language, and focus on the construction of relationships (Beck, Kropf, & Blume, 2010). The harm doer is empowered to accept accountability and invited to problem

solve the reparation of the harm instead of being sentenced away (Beck, Kropf, & Blume). This humanistic approach creates availability for healing to occur within the harm doer, those affected by the harm, and the community (Beck, Kropf, & Blume). The next section will introduce current efforts utilizing the combination of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation.

### **The Integration of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation**

Although Narrative Mediation and Restorative Justice grew from different origins and is currently utilized in separate applications, they share a myriad of values and guiding principles. Both begin with the honoring of an individual's fundamental right to choose their own desired degree of participation. Secondly, each process maintains the respect of its participants by drawing any focus away from blaming individuals, and instead acknowledges the influence of how problems exist in a broader container of environmental influence and cultivation. Both approaches hold participants accountable for their own actions and encourage them to experience their personal narrative as a piece of the puzzle as opposed to an isolated entity. The process of sharing stories face to face with other people supports the recognition of how personal experiences are a part of a broader political reality (Beck, Kropf, & Blume, 2010) and how no one story is more or less important than any other. Through these lenses, while one person is unlikely to shift paradigms alone, a group of people have a greater opportunity to create change inside a construct of consensus and collaboration. The following examples include current projects utilizing an integration of narrative mediation and restorative justice applications.

**Restorative Schools Vision Project.** (RSVP) utilizes internally created practices centered around the healing and empowerment models of restorative justice and narrative mediation to achieve a paradigm shift from punishment to restoration (Cohen, 2014). Harnessing the restorative justice school process that is built on relationships instead of rules, these efforts are constructed to employ empathy and skills to address conflict through empowering the agent that causes harm, to initiate its restoration. By joining narrative and the practice of externalization through the concept of “the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem”, participants can separate the effects from the problem story and emphasize the preferred story.

Specifically, restorative narrative conversation allows the opportunity for participants to acknowledge their preferred story, as opposed to cultivating negative ideals (Androff, 2012). RSVP identifies the art of establishing this type of conversation is to deconstruct the context of the situation and thereby reinforcing preferred states of being through questions based on restorative-narrative practices. These types of questions reposition participants from associating with the problem to being involved in the solution. Cohen expresses the need for the underlying theme to resonate that trust and understanding are vital and can be achieved through conscious focus on the problem not the person. This perspective theme permits agents to take responsibility for the harm or effect without assuming punitive judgements, thus hosting space for empowerment to assume responsibility while acknowledging the ability to achieve resolution. RSVP achieves this understanding through the naming of the problem, deconstructing the

problem and context, seeking unique outcomes, and acknowledging the discovered resolution/solution.

**Group Conferencing.** Cohen (2014) acknowledges that at times the harm or effects of a problem may be more complex and present with patterns of repetition, requiring a restorative narrative group conference. In this instance individuals secondary to the problem are brought in to support a comprehensive perspective representation of the effects and harm. This type of conference allows the opportunity to acknowledge that the effects and harm present can extend past the primary agents, thus allowing for a holistic opportunity at restoration. Conversations, mediations, and conferences alike utilize externalization, deconstruction, seeking unique outcomes, creating space for responsibility, removing problem from a perspective party, and collaborating on the solution. Whether in schools, communities, or with families, these narrative conferences utilize visual circles to depict the problem story and the solution.

This practice in alignment with other restorative and narrative approaches, focuses on the inter-relational nature of a situation. The restorative narrative format ensures that all involved are respected and heard since its intent is to remove blame and to instill empowerment and accountability to be a part of the solution (Cohen, 2014).

**Appreciative Inquiry.** Grounded in Generative theory and Social Constructivism, Appreciative Inquiry (AP) is considered a philosophy not a technique (Bushe, 2011). Looking through this lens which asserts perception perpetuates reality (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001) AP operates under the following eight core principles of engagement: reality is constructed and evolved through social interaction; thoughtful

questions immediately initiate change; co-authoring fuels the evolution of any system; visions for the future become self-fulfilling prophecies; there's power in numbers; co-creating comes from collective momentum; collaboration brings out the best in people, the future is now therefore we must currently model the preferred change and people must be allowed to choose how and when they participate without coercion or judgement (Preskill, & Catsambas, 2006). Focusing on what worked to create past success and fanning the flames of our visions for the future rather than focusing on conflict or problem solving are core aspects that make up Appreciative Inquiry. The former encourages growth toward the positive. The latter implies a brokenness or lacking which can in turn evoke defensiveness and fear.

Critiques of Appreciative Inquiry include the recognition that a preferred vision does not illuminate the pathway toward success nor motivate it toward realization. Real change requires discipline, consistency, energy and continued passion. All of which are challenging to maintain over time. AP proposes that group collaboration is integral to perpetuate achievement, like a relay team that divides its energy expenditure and revitalization amongst its group members.

Getting to know its participants from the beginning is also key in Appreciative Inquiry which asserts that participants fall into one of two groups: 'pre-identity' and 'post-identity'. Pre-identity participants as defined by Bushe (2008) include those who are motivated by personal interest and who are best served by a process of inquiry which allows them to be in discovery. Bushe further describes post-identity members as those who are more willing to compromise and sacrifice their personal needs for the

advancement of the group's need. These participants are better motivated by increasing and reinforcing competence, efficacy and conformity.

### **Gaps in Literature**

There were several gaps in the literature that will next be addressed. Due to their theoretical application, several research studies were hindered by the utilization of small convenience samples that cannot be generalized to the greater population, and therefore is in the early stages of empirical verification (Cohen, 2014; Fredman, 2014; Leahy, O'Dwyer, & Ryan, 2012; Ramey, Young, & Tarulli, 2010). Although some studies have focused on the implementation of narrative techniques to assist in the overcoming of mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, and behavior issues (Fredman; Freedman & Combs, 2009; Hayward, 2003), there has remained a deficiency of literature on the effectiveness of narrative to assist communities and systems in overcoming oppressive forces. Other studies have addressed the application of restorative practices to achieve community involved reparation and restoration (Leahy, O'Dwyer, & Ryan, 2012; Karp, 2004; Ramey, Young, & Tarulli, 2010); however there is a paucity in the attention to the delicate nature of mental health challenges and nuanced power of language.

While the work existing in Narrative is extensive, and the application of restorative justice is specifically more minimal, the application of approaches that have integrated narrative mediation and restorative justice are scarce. The compilation of the literature, while thorough in theoretical base and processes, is lacking in research based articles to track its efficacy and credibility. Restorative efforts alone do not harness the non-judgmental and supportive language that is apparent in narrative practices. Narrative



practices, in their current applications still host a therapeutic framework that can come across out of reach for community facilitated applications. This also leaves a vastly untapped resource of applications for this studies integrated approach.

This study seeks to fill the gap in literature by adding to the evidence-based practice of integrative narrative mediation and restorative justice circles in a variety of settings. This includes, but is not limited to, usage in human service organizations, institutions of higher learning, communities, government, and more. There is a further need of gathering information regarding the experience of those who have participated, and an intentional inquiry about the efficacy when this integrative circle approach is applied to group situations of conflict and problem solving.

### **Summary**

This chapter included a review of literature and was organized into three main sections: Narrative Practices, Restorative Justice, and the Integration of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation. These sections were also divided into subsections. Narrative Practices subsections included Narrative Therapy, Reflection Teams, Consumer-Ratings Feedback, Narrative Letters, Narrative Conferences, Definitional Ceremonies, and Narrative Mediation. Restorative Justice subsections include Victim-Offender Mediation, Peace/Healing Circles, Schools, and Community Reparation. The Integration of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation subsections included Restorative Schools Vision Project, Group Conferencing, and Appreciative Inquiry. Finally, the review of literature ended with a section dedicated to the gaps identified in the literature.

The following chapter explores the methodology and instruments used in the proposed research. It includes detailed descriptions as to how restorative justice and narrative mediation tools were integrated into a unique hybrid template which was then applied for use with a relevant population.

## **Chapter 3**

### **METHODS**

This chapter will address the methodology and expand on the processes of the study including its research question and design. The participants, including the criteria utilized to identify to qualify, sample population description, and sampling technique used are described in this section. Also included in this chapter are the study instruments, and data analysis. The final section presents the protection of human subjects.

#### **Research Question**

The primary purpose of this study was to debut and evaluate the efficacy of an integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle approach. In doing so, this study investigates the following research questions: What are the perspectives of second-year MSW students regarding their own MSW program experience using an integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle approach? And what is the satisfaction of second-year MSW students with the circle process?

#### **Research Design**

The research study is a qualitative content analysis design, using latent and manifest coding of content. Discussed below is a break down and the complete framework utilized in this research design.

#### **Qualitative Approach**

Qualitative research harnesses a large variety of disciplines that are focused on presenting data from a developmentally organic perspective (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). This approach allows researchers to explore and explain a phenomenon occurring

with real people in their natural setting. Therefore, qualitative methodology allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of experiences in contextual realms by highlighting otherwise nuanced characteristics into themes. Opposed to quantitative research, qualitative researchers conduct and interpret participants' views through non-numerical open-ended means. Through collaborative group participation researchers gain multi-faceted insight of the topic under study. This approach allows researchers to collect, present, and emphasize the diverse intersectionality of the participants.

The nature of the qualitative approach allows for intensive information gathering which results in a large data collection that can become time consuming. To manage the potential excessive data, one limitation to this study is the small participant sample that was utilized. Researchers are able to utilize the open-ended structure of this approach to gain comprehensive elaborate unbridled perspective of the participants on the study topic. A limitation to this is the potential for the researchers to unintentionally influence participation toward a single-storied outcome (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

### **Exploratory Studies**

The Exploratory studies method of data collection was selected upon assessing the limited amount of published information pertaining to the topic. Therefore, the study can be described as exploratory in nature. The results of this study, guided by the research questions, can be offered as a platform for further investigation. Exploratory studies may elicit additional questions worthy of investigation as specific research questions are addressed (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). A primary limitation of exploratory studies is the improbability of satisfactory answers to the proposed research questions.

## **Content Analysis**

Leedy and Ormrod (2016) reference content analysis as the following defining characteristics. It involves subjective interpretation of the data connected to patterns and themes within the coding process. The categories and themes are typically derived from the research question, the content of the literature review, and new ideas generated by participants. Content analysis in research generally encompasses two types of coding strategies. The first strategy is the manifest method. This method involves directly identifying and counting specific words or items that appear in the transcribed data. The second coding strategy scans for latent content. The latent method employs an interpretive analysis of the text and works to identify the underlying meanings of the content. Utilizing content analysis, the researchers created categories and derived themes from the circle process transcript. This design was chosen because the integration of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation is an understudied topic. A considerable disadvantage to this method is the presence of the possibility of error in the transcribing process.

However, the findings of this study offer expandable knowledge and credibility of the integration of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation as a viable tool in addressing concerns and conflict. The implementation of this process provides an in depth procedural format to replicate beyond the current application.

## **Study Population**

Study participants were enrolled and attending SWRK 226 at California State University Sacramento. The participant sample included 23 second-year MSW

students. The researchers considered this to be a quality representation of the MSW cohort due to its comprehensive variety of participant subject interests. Nineteen participants were female and 4 were male, with a variety of race and ethnicities that was not directly declared by the participants themselves. Nine participants identified themselves as under the age of 30, eight identified as being 30 years of age or over, and 6 participants did not declare their age range. While no knowledge of Restorative Justice or Narrative Mediation was required, the researchers asked the participants the amount of experience they had of each concept. Four participants identified 1-2 years of experience with Narrative Mediation, eight had under a year of experience, ten identified no experience, and one participant did not disclose their experience level. Three identified 1-2 years of experience with Restorative Justice, nine had under a year of experience, ten identified no experience, and one participant did not disclose their experience level.

### **Sampling Population**

This study utilized available subjects, also known as convenience sampling (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). In this particular method, the researchers accessed qualified participants that were simply available through the Social Work 226 course as approved by its instructor. This convenience sample was used due to its accessibility and potential diversity of participants.

The limitation of this type of sampling is that it is not generalizable to the population due to the lack of random sampling. Thus, the non-probability convenience sample limits the internal as well as the external validity of the data.

### **Instrumentation**

The integrative Restorative Justice Narrative Mediation circle is in and of itself an instrument. Certain specific aspects of this instrument are integral in establishing a repeatable framework. These key aspects are introduced and defined in the order they were carried out. Chairs are preassembled in a circle with a small opening at one end for the facilitator to stand. A hand held object that represents what is often referred to as a *talking stick* is produced, defined, and incorporated into the process. Written summarizations documenting the evolution of the circle process are recorded and visible to all participants throughout. The phrase, "*The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem,*" is written in banner form, as well as, the layout of two circles with outside spokes large enough to contain representations of themes from all participant sharing (See Appendix \_). Ground rules are collaboratively generated at the beginning of the circle process and an introduction to the purpose and format of the process is provided. Two facilitators are present; one facilitator is designated to facilitate the circle process, while the other facilitator is designated to visually record the unfolding process in a written format for all participants to view.

During the initial evaluation phase of the process, the facilitators ask, identify, and record the effects of the unstated problem upon the spokes of the circle on the whiteboard. The second step of the evaluation phase is focused on naming the problem that is the cause of the previously identified effects. The identified problem names are recorded in the circle on the whiteboard. The final step of the evaluation phase hosts the collaborative creation of the solution of the problem. The intended effects of the

potential solved problem are recorded on the spokes of the second circle upon participant identification, and naming of the solution is placed inside the circle. At the conclusion of the circle process a written group agreement that encompasses the identified solution and steps to achievement is generated and made available to all participants, and in some cases other relevant parties.

The following are specific attributes that are contingent within this study. During the process, the researchers utilized the check-in process to gather summarizing words by the participants in order to get them to start thinking about their program perspective and establish the foundation of the circle. Participants were then asked by the facilitating researcher to expand upon these words, and share in whatever detail they preferred as to the nature of their experience with their MSW program. In an adaptive form of the group agreement, participants generated solutions and suggested approaches to the potential solutions based upon the outcome of the circle to be delivered in letter format to the Department Chair (see Appendix D). The writing researcher recorded those suggestions onto the whiteboard. Upon closing the circle, participants were asked to choose two words that represented their experience of the circle process. At the close of the circle process, the whiteboard remained visible reflecting the evolution of the process from perceived conflict to possible resolution.

At the immediate close of the circle process, participants were asked to complete a twelve question survey (see Appendix C). One question was of demographic nature and the other eleven questions utilized a 4-point Likert-scale. The following two questions asked participants' their previous knowledge and experience of *Narrative*



*Mediation*, as well as, *Restorative Justice*. The answer options ranged from “*No Experience*” to “*More than 2 years.*” The participants were tasked to choose the answer that best fit, and chose on the range from “*Strongly Agree*” to “*Strongly Disagree*” with given statements regarding their experience of the circle process. The statements included whether or not the participants found the process content to be relevant to their experience, if the process was structured to effectively and safely support their perspective, if the process allowed them to understand and connect to others affected, if the process was enjoyable, if they would use the process in the future, and if the participants found value in the study being replicated.

By its very structure, the integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle approach allows for a neutralization of power and authority. Upon commencement of the circle the ground rules address participation etiquette which decentralizes the problem and effects from a person or target entity. The integrative circle approach structure is facilitated in a way that supports individuals to participate in a manner that is applicable and relevant to their experience, which then allows each participant to identify their stake in the solution and contribute to its implementation.

A negative aspect to the integrative circle approach is the possibility that participants could break confidentiality, and thus some participants may not authentically contribute to the discussion. A limitation to this study’s application of the integrative circle approach would be the presence of a non-participating witness in the room. While the integrative circle approach holds flexibility for witnesses, some participants may have not authentically contribute to the discussion as a result of their presence. A primary

limitation to this instrument was the time restraint. Due to the structure of this study, the explanation and introduction of the integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle approach was brief and did not allow opportunity for deep understanding by the participants whom had minimal to no prior experience of the process, resulting in a slow and fragmented progression of the circle.

### **Data Gathering Procedures**

Researchers contacted the SWRK 226 course professor in person to inquire about willingness and permission to utilize the enrolled students and class time to complete the study. Upon approval the researchers provided the SWRK 226 students with the Research Participation Cover Letter and Informed Consent Signature Form (See Appendix A) at the beginning of the scheduled class. Prior to the study commencement, researchers explained the process, outlined key aspects noted in the cover letter and informed consent form, and notified students that while participation was voluntary their attendance was aligned with course expectation. Following participants' consent, the researchers began the audio recorded integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Circle (See Appendix B) for 1 hour, which ended in a written draft of solution-focused recommendations pertaining to the concerns addressed. Upon conclusion of the circle, researchers administered a post circle survey which was completed by the participants and submitted in paper form. These forms were distributed and completed while the researchers were not in the room, and were then placed in an envelope. Only the researchers and faculty advisor ever had access to the gathered data. When the data was

not in use, the researchers maintained confidentiality by securing the data in a locked cabinet at the home of one of the researchers.

### **Data Analysis**

The circle process was audio recorded except for the beginning section wherein each participant was asked to identify themselves by name, state their gender pronouns and one or two words that summed up their experience of the MSW program to this point. The recording was then transcribed and each researcher separately and repeatedly reviewed the transcription in search of apparent themes. These themes were then compared with the other researcher and noted for use in the creation of a narrative letter that was delivered to the social work department chair and study participants.

Upon completion of the data gathering procedure, digital recordings of the circle were transcribed into written text files manually through a word processing program. All raw data were transcribed verbatim with the exception of proper names and personal identifiers, which were omitted from the written record for confidentiality purposes. Data was coded under the umbrella themes of factors that facilitate underlying problems, effects, and desired solutions. The researchers first identified relevant passages within the data through illustrations of the common themes and notable differences. Next, the researchers looked to identify manifest content of the highlighted themes. Finally, the researchers inspected for the latent content of the most frequently identified ideas within the themes. Data percentages of the post circle survey were analyzed by using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22.0 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.software).

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The study was submitted to the Division of Social Work Research Review Committee and approved as “exempt” research. The approved research project was assigned a human subjects protocol number 16-17-022 (see Appendix \_\_). A letter of informed consent was given to every participant, informing them that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw consent at any time by not participating in the circle, without consequence. The letter of consent also discussed the potential benefits and risks of participating in the study, as well as the measures taken to insure confidentiality and privacy.

The benefits of utilizing the integrated Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle included that participants would attain the personal satisfaction of having participated in a study with the potential to benefit the MSW program. Through the circle process, the participants would have the opportunity to have their experiences and concerns heard, validated, and utilized towards program recommendations. This study allowed participants to gain the opportunity to witness and be a part of a process that they can utilize in the future both personally and professionally.

The integrated Restorative Justice and Narrative Circle is a group process in which participants directly contributed. This may have created opportunities for brief anxiety, discomfort, and/or stress. During the integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Circle the facilitators addressed concerns in a non-disclosing context, removing any personal identifiers to depersonalize the suggested problems. At the beginning of the process, ground rules were set and agreed upon prior to commencement, and study

participants were explained about the potential risks. Narrative Mediation is grounded in the understanding that problems are not rooted in individuals and thus the solution is only possible when viewing the problems affecting the comprehensive group. By operating through this Narrative lens, individual exposure and potential risks are avoided by addressing the conflict, effects, and solutions on the program not the individual.

Participants were asked to read the letter of consent and sign it with the understanding that they were giving their consent by completing and turning in the form (see Appendix A).

### **Summary**

In this section, the research methodology was explained, and included a discussion on the study design, study population and sample, instrumentation, data gathering procedures, and protection of human subjects. More detail was given regarding how and why particular study methods were chosen, such as sample size, subject population, survey design, and statistical analysis of data. Protection of human subjects was described to ensure that consideration was given to minimize risks to participants and maintain ethical research practices. The following chapter will focus on data analysis.

## Chapter 4

### **ANALYSIS OF DATA**

In this chapter, the researchers focus on the common themes derived from the perceptions of second-year MSW students regarding their own MSW program experience. Data was extracted from one 90-minute integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle approach with 23 second-year MSW students enrolled and attending SWRK 226 at California State University, Sacramento. The first section of this chapter will discuss the demographic portion of the research. The outcomes of the circle process will then be presented in the following sections: 1) Establishing a Summary of Experience, 2) History/Background of Experience, 3) Collaboration of Understanding and Connection, 4) Conceptualizing the Resolution, subsection on Identifying Catalysts to the Solution and 5) Creating a Designated Achievement Plan.

This chapter will also present the data that was collected from the post-circle survey. Descriptive statistics will be used to analyze second-year MSW students' satisfaction with the circle experience through: Problem Relevance, Effective Affirmation, Safe Space, Comprehension of Problems, Comprehension of Effects, Creation of Connection, Enjoyment of the Process, Personal Future Application, and Value of Future Academic Application. This chapter will focus on each area and will include direct quotes from the participants. To protect the identity of the participants, each participant was given a randomly assigned coded signifier, ranging from Student 1 to Student 23.

## Demographics

Study participants were enrolled and attending SWRK 226 at California State University Sacramento. Of the participant sample 82.6% (n=19) were female and 17.4% (n=4) were male, no participants presented as anything other than male or female. 39.1% (n=9) identified themselves as under the age of 30, 34.8% (n=8) identified as 30 years of age or over, and 26.1% (n=6) did not declare their age range (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1

		Age Range			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	UNDER 30	9	39.1	52.9	52.9
	30 AND OVER	8	34.8	47.1	100.0
	Total	17	73.9	100.0	
Missing	99	6	26.1		
Total		23	100.0		

While no knowledge of Restorative Justice or Narrative Mediation was required, the researchers asked the participants the amount of experience they had of each concept. Nearly one-fifth (17.4%) (n=4) identified 1-2 years of experience with Narrative Mediation, 34.8% (n=8) identified under a year of experience, 43.5% (n=10) identified no experience, 4.3% (n=1) did not disclose their experience level (see Table 4.2). About one-tenth (13%) (n=3) identified 1-2 years of experience with Restorative Justice, 39.1% (n=9) identified under a year of experience, 43.5% (n=10) identified no experience, and 4.3% (n=1) did not disclose their experience level (See table 4.3).

Table 4.2

**How much experience have you had with Narrative Mediation?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NO EXPERIENCE	10	43.5	45.5	45.5
	UNDER 1 YEAR	8	34.8	36.4	81.8
	1 YEAR – 2 YEARS	4	17.4	18.2	100.0
	Total	22	95.7	100.0	
Missing	99	1	4.3		
Total		23	100.0		

Table 4.3

**How much experience have you had with Restorative Justice?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NO EXPERIENCE	10	43.5	45.5	45.5
	UNDER 1 YEAR	9	39.1	40.9	86.4
	1 YEAR – 2 YEARS	3	13.0	13.6	100.0
	Total	22	95.7	100.0	
Missing	99	1	4.3		
Total		23	100.0		

**Study Findings****Establishing a Summary of Experience**

As narrative utilizes ‘externalization’ to connect personal experience to a wider social history network and allow examination of the role of context (Castronova, 2007), participants were asked to “give one word to represent your experience of this MSW program” to initiate the integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle and set the tone for the intention of the process. The following is a collection of answers provided (see Table 4.3).



Table 4.3

**One word representation of MSW  
program experience**

	<b>Frequency</b>
Stretched	2
Frustrated	2
Stressing	3
Meaningful	1
Exhausting	1
Challenged	1
Growth	2
Development	1
Irritated	1
Enlightened	2
Tired	1
Roller Coaster	1
Discouraged	2
Bamboozled	2
Emotional	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>

### **History/Background of Experience**

To avoid researcher assumption of semantical intention, participants were asked by the facilitating researchers to expand upon their one word representations, and share in whatever detail they preferred as to the nature of their experience with their MSW program. In alignment with the narrative and restorative practices informing this work, the following prompt was given to retrieve the participants' perspectives and explanations of their words (see Table 4.3). "Looking at these words as if they are names of entities. How did your relationship to bamboozled begin? How did your relationship to tired begin? How has it evolved? What does it look like for you?" The majority of participants addressed either a recent or continuing history of fighting through adversity, as it contributed to their personal and professional growth:

Student 1: So my word was ‘enlightened’...it just really enlightened me as to my capabilities and my ability to be effective as a social worker and so I think it’s been great for me. Yes, it can be a lot but it’s what I make of it. I make it to work for me.

This is the first instance of a participant’s integration of life experience and growth as it correlated with the MSW program, however did not speak to the program itself.

Student 2: I’ve had huge professional and personal growth over the past two years and it’s been super challenging with the program but I would not change it for anything so the growth, has been huge for me.

The participants’ contributions are congruent with social constructionist theory, in that they are creating meaning in their lives through their interaction with one another and their environment (Greene, 2008). Below, Student 3, also acknowledges the experience of the program as challenging, and then integrates their personal growth into the consideration of the program:

So I used ‘enlightened’...to show my boys that you can do anything that you put your mind to and you can overcome anything that you work hard at. It does take hard work and dedication and commitment and there’s gonna be obstacles and pains in the asses all the time. And those things grow you and they’re worthy and you’re worthy of growth.

Both Student 2 and 3’s statements represent the narrative concept, discourse, by basing their experience on the dominant assumption that ‘challenging’ is mutually exclusive to ‘growth’ (Besley, 2001). By applying the narrative practice of double listening, it

became increasingly evident to the researchers during the circle process, that participants integrated subsequent life experience with the summarization of their MSW program experience (Besley). This emergence is consistent with social constructionism, as it confirms the assertion that meaning can be found in a variety of places through a wide lens of perspectives which are constantly evolving (Besley). Just as meaning is constructed and reconstructed through dialogue, thirty minutes into the circle process while continuing to develop the history and effects of the participants' experiences, there was a shift in tone to one that situated in 'problems' present in the MSW program and the ensuing negative effects (Greene, 2008). Social Conflict Theory integrates this as the concept that conflict exists as a natural part of social change fluctuating between stability and change interruption (Bouckenooghe & De Clercq, 2014). The importance of this process is creating a container of safety and support to allow this natural evolution of growth which can be challenging under circumstances where power hierarchies dominate (Bouckenooghe & De Clercq).

Participants carried the concept of fighting through adversity and its impact on personal and professional growth through this 'problem saturated' shift:

Student 10: I put 'discouraged' [be]cause I'm worried that we really haven't learned anything here [especially] if you don't get lucky and have a good professor that you connect with or a topic that you're interested in...I feel if you want to learn here, you have to do it on your own. There [are] some pros but I do think this department needs some work."

Just as it is exemplified in Narrative Therapy, as the participants are supported in viewing the problem as external to themselves, this integrative RJ and NM circle approach to community conversation can continue to invite and facilitate discussions around relations to the societal power hierarchy and its history as a greater problem (Castronova, 2007). Student 6 illustrates the problematic power hierarchy as it relates to the MSW program:

Some of them don't teach...and because [a] professor is tenured there's nothing we can do about it. I didn't pay for a class to not learn anything or to walk out of their office [feeling] that I was about to quit the program, not feeling supported.

Participants continue to depict efforts of social constructionist notions, by identifying taken-for-granted assumptions and establishing new forms of meaning and action (Greene, 2008):

Student 6: I chose 'frustrated' because I don't think it was fair for me to be used as a guinea pig for the specializations, for the new computer software that they're trying to put in. That just added more challenges to my growth... so although I will rise and finish this I just don't think that it was fair for me.

The evolution of participation followed a 'breaking of the ice', and as more participants came forward with non-positive reflections of their MSW program experience, others followed or contributed verbal notions of agreement, "Yes," "I couldn't have said it better," "That's what I'm talking about," and "I just want to reiterate what has been said." As noted in social constructionism, participants' brief notions of agreement can be

seen as the development and evolution of their experiential meaning through their interaction with the circle dialogue (Greene, 2008).

Student 2: I had a choice to stay in the program and fight through the adversity...it would have been very easy for me to just say I'm taking a break, I'm not going to do this program anymore because this is more important. I was able to find a way to make it work... so I don't know that that speaks to the program I think that that speaks to me and my dedication to want to complete it on my timeline.

Participants also began to distinguish their personal life experiences from that of the encompassing program experience.

Student 2: I'm going to talk about 'bamboozlement'. So, I did not know when I signed up for the program that I would be paying the university to work for free...I do not think it is fair. I do not think that is a reflection on our growth as professionals. I feel like there are numerous parts of the program that are disorganized that I don't know if it is intentional for them to teach us how to fight against the system so that we know how to do it when we graduate but that's what I feel like is happening in numerous different arenas. Not being able to work while you're going through the program, classes not being offered at times that are convenient for students or having access to the types of classes that we would like to better ourselves as professionals...I really do not like the focus of specializations and the lack of student involvement in the development of them. The survey that was sent out was not done so with informed consent it was just sent out as a survey, students were not informed that they had an option to

continue with the advanced generalist if that was their option because that is the program that they enrolled in. That was disclosed after surveys were completed which totally goes against everything that they are asking us to do with our thesis projects and our IRB forms and informed consent with treatment.

As the facilitators continued to harness the space to express the effects of the program, participants transitioned from abstract and generalized statements, to specific and deliberate factors contributing to their experience.

Student 9: I felt like after that semester with my ears wide open and my awareness now enlightened and widened, I was beginning to see the same things that [they were] teaching us, in our program that says we are charged to fight against. I just felt I was so enraged sometimes sitting in these classroom where all of these vignettes where these wonderful (not wonderful because of course they had diagnoses) but they were of these white women who were educated, married with their children or these white men who had jobs or Asians who were in school but the one African American person that was discussed was unemployed, living in poverty, drug addicted, long history of incarceration and I was saying thinking about that class where they talked about all this internalized oppression and racism and white privilege. I felt bamboozled and angry but I also felt like that this experience has encouraged me to have a voice.

Acknowledgement of oppression and microaggressions emerged and were expressed with an understanding of the misalignment with the program structure.

The verbal entries were summarized into affirmed key phrases at the end of each participant's 'turn' and made visually available for all participants to see. Upon the organic completion of participants' contributions to the 'effects' of their experience, the facilitators recapped the 'entries' and directed the circle to collaboratively name the 'problem' through identification of themes.

### **Collaboration of Understanding and Connection**

The evaluation phase of the circle is focused on having participants collaborate on 'naming the problem' that is the cause of their previously identified 'effects'. The facilitator prompted this phase with "[Looking at the circle], what are some of the underlying themes that you see?" Just as the researchers established from the initial progression of the circle participation, the students identified 'adversity' as a main theme recurrent in both positive and negative effects represented. Student 3 addressed the resilience in the face of adversity as 'capacity':

The capacity that we have as people to face all of these things and I've gotten to know so many of you and your capacity just always is just so astounding and it helps me to understand my own capacity and um our capacity to care, our capacity to have encouragement, our capacity to stand up and fight, our capacity to embrace one another.

'Disorganization', 'disrespect', 'undervalued', 'bias', and 'Neoliberalism' were also identified problems that addressed the overarching effects.

Student 8: Well, I'm going to use the word *biased*. You're dragged into an arena where you're just going to get chewed up so to speak. You can't interrogate a

professor. You can't do any of that kinda stuff...Certain professors do things a certain way. Others do them differently. The standard seems to be different.

The above participants' presented problems are interpreted as a discourse from their preferred program model, and the next phase of this integrative approach strives to assist in reconstructing alternatives to identify and align with their preferences (Besley, 2001).

### **Conceptualizing the Resolution**

Emphasizing RJ circles that host collective learning while aiming to repair harm done by identifying and deconstructing the problem in order to move towards solution (Androff, 2012); the next phase of the circle hosted the collaborative creation of the solution to the problem. The facilitator's prompt asked "what would it be like or look like if these things were resolved or carried on? How would the [change/resolution] effect your experience of the program? And what would need to happen in order for that to manifest?" The primary collaborative solution was 'integrity'. Student 4 clarified their interpretation of what integrity could have looked like:

I think that if [the administration] had told this cohort that things were going to be changing before they signed up for the program...that level of integrity could have given space for being informed and if we knew the kind of changes we were going to be experiencing it would give the relationship the space for that to happen without a lot of pushing or conflict.

As the participants clarify the components of 'integrity,' they outline common restorative school practice outcomes that strive to create academic communities that are harnessed



with understandable agreements, genuine communication, and efficient processes to address conflicts effectively (Beck, 2012).

Student 23 expressed an incident when they were told by a professor that “It isn’t my job to teach you how to be a social worker, you have to do that.” This experience identifies the social constructionist concept that as knowledge or education is perceived as essential and becomes exposed to oppressive institutionalization practices (Greene, 2008). Social Conflict Theory also addresses this conundrum that groups in a position of power are often seen to use their status to exploit groups in a position of less power (McKenzie, 2015). This can create hesitancy in students to report conflict due to the fear of increasing the conflict, especially without any guarantee of resolution within the organizational hierarchy (McKenzie). Student 23 stated that their intention of the program was to build confidence and to “learn how to be a school social worker.” They closed with the understanding that ‘integrity’ to the students would increase confidence at the end of the program. According to social constructionism, this process in which participants describe and explain their experience is in of itself a form of social action that contains positive and negative consequences (Greene, 2008).

**Identifying catalysts to the solution.** The secondary piece to this phase of the integrative circle is the identification of the factors that would initiate the solution of ‘integrity’. The facilitator asked “If integrity is what you want, how do we get there? How can ‘integrity’ (the solution) recruit ‘adversity’ (the problem) onto our side to achieve success?” Congruency, consistency, communication/clarity, advocacy,

transparency, and empowerment were identified as the stimulants to achieving the participants' perspective of 'integrity'. Student 10 clarified:

Consistency in the way professors teach in the way professors grade people.

Consistency with information, that would [be] consistently pass on to us, back and forth, that goes both ways. I mean, it's not perfect I understand that but it definitely I would say consistency moving forward."

Further, Student 2 expressed transparency as "the department should model what they expect of us as social workers." As participants' experiences are expressed, they begin to accumulate conceptualizations that reflect the comprehensive participant group context and proceed toward collaborative considerations (Greene, 2008).

### **Creating a Designated Achievement Plan**

In the last phase of the circle process a written group agreement that encompasses the identified solution, and steps to achievement is generated and made available to all participants, and other relevant parties. Agreements are made by consensus which requires that all participants can support the decision. Written agreements are often the best way to achieve the necessary level of clarity and understanding by all parties (Beck, 2012). In this adaptive form of the group agreement, participants generated solutions and suggested approaches to the potential solutions based upon the outcome of the circle, to be delivered in letter format to the Department Chair. This letter is influenced by the practice of Narrative letters, as it will summarize and solidify new concepts addressed through the participants' experiences by facilitating documented accounts and solutions (White & Epston, 1990). The participants were asked "[from the discussion of the

solutions] what are real steps, statement steps, that can be put in the letter to help the program achieve ‘integrity’?

The program improvement plan included the following steps: (1) Utilize bi-semester surveys; (2) Apply the ‘informed consent model’ to student participation in all aspects of the program; (3) Establish visible leadership with clearly defined roles and responsibilities to ensure subsequent accountability, this should include an available listing of names, titles (situations/reasons why you would contact that position), and expected wait time for response; (4) Transparency into decisions, allowing students the right to explanations of decisions that affect them; (5) Accountability structures upheld with professors to ensure delivery of effective education and support; (6) Adapt the culture of the program to incorporate more collaboration for students to have a voice on how goals are approached or accomplished; (7) Adjust the program credits required to graduate so that students are not expected to pay for field time, especially as internships are unpaid; (8) Create an interdisciplinary specialization process:

Student 2: Specializations that [are broken] down into micro versus macro practice level, and people are afforded the opportunity to get specialized skills in their area of focus. so Macro level practice [student would] still need to take micro level focus [their] first year...then the second year all [their] classes are focused more on the macro level policy level, and vice versa. So people have an idea of what’s going on in the policy level and on the direct service level.

(9) Effectively organize the class schedule to avoid conflicts between electives and practice courses; (10) Human Behavior in the Social Environment (theory) is taught by

the same professor for the first and second semester for a continuum of learning; (11) Align theory (HBSE) and practice objectives to maintain a consistency of the field application of theories.

Student 23: Having that sort of structure would make us more competent and again make us feel more confident in what we're doing because we're learning the theory and we're being able to practice it and then potentially use it at the end of the week.

This plan represents social constructionism in that, the cohesive understanding of experiences, problems, and effects encompass a recognition of the communal process that is permissive and intentionally deviates from the identified oppression (Greene, 2008). It also addresses the social conflict sentiment that, without the amalgamation of multi-level experiences, one group cannot understand the needs and challenges of another (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2007). Without this understanding, no empathy or collaboration is developed, and the absence of these opportunities shape future interactions (Hutchison & Charlesworth).

### **Participant Satisfaction with Circle Experience**

Restorative Justice circle closings are intended to recognize the experience of the circle and affirm the interconnectedness of the participants, while preparing participants to transition back into their regular life proceedings (Beck, 2010). Participants were asked to do a two word check out to summarize their immediate feelings of the circle experience to close the process in an affirming way and remain aligned with the integrative practice approach. Their responses included; Student 13: "Freedom to just

explode or allow talk without judgement," Student 1: "Personalized safety," Student 14: "More understood now," Student 23: "Hopeful and supported," Student 15: "Understood by peers," Student 9: "Very supported," Student 10: "Thankful and appreciative," Student 16: "Helpful and collaborative," Student 17: "Insightful and helpful," Student 18: "Relieved and helpful," Student 19: "Insightful and collaborative," Student 3: "Enlightened and encouraged," Student 21: "Informative and I'm tired," Student 2: "Uncomfortable, honest and solution focused," Student 8: "Appreciative for understanding," Student 22: "Productive and honest," Student 11: "Encouraged and helpful," Student 23: "Thankful for my cohort," Student 12: "Supported and hope," Student 4: "Normalized, person-in-environment."

These verbalized responses represent a generally positive initial experience of the integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle process. This initial outcome aligns with the notion that circles have a positive impact on participants as they embody validation and fairness by creating opportunities to self-reflect, voice their concerns without fear of judgment or negative consequences, gain a better understanding of others, and become a force for future change (Cohen, 2014).

**Post-Circle Survey.** Social constructionism deems an acceptable outcome of an intervention as the generation of alternative narratives that enable a person to create new meaning the person will experience as more helpful, satisfying, open-ended, and establish coveted possibilities (Greene, 2008). The following are descriptive statistics representing the participant's' survey responses to seven questions regarding their experience and satisfaction of the circle process. Just as with consumer feedback scales utilized in

narrative practices, the post-circle survey was an imperative process that inquired about what worked and did not work for the participants during the circle and to honor the “culture of feedback” (Duncan et al., 2003). The researchers developed each of the seven questions to achieve a comprehensive outlook of the factors that represent and contribute to the analysis of the overall circle experience. These questions were modeled after the Feedback Informed Treatment (FIT), Session Rating Scales (SRS) which categorizes session experience into four items (Duncan et al.). First FIT SRS item, ‘Relationship’ rates the experience on a continuum from “I did not feel heard, understood, and respected” to “I felt heard, understood, and respected.” Second FIT SRS item, ‘Goals and Topics’ rates the experience on a continuum from “We did not work or talk about what I wanted to work on or talk about” to “We worked on or talked about what I wanted to work on or talk about.” Third FIT SRS item, ‘Approach or method’ rates the experience on a continuum from “The therapist’s approach is not a good fit for me” to “The therapist’s approach is a good fit for me.” Finally, FIT SRS ‘Overall’ item rates the entire experience on a continuum from “There was something missing in the session today” to “Overall, today’s session was right for me.”

**Problem Relevance.** In alignment with the FIT SRS second item of ‘Goals and Topics’ (Duncan et al., 2003), participants were asked how they resonated with the statement “The problems addressed in the circle were relevant to me,” ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” About 95% (n=22) of participants reported agreeance to the statement. Almost three-fourths (73.9%) (n=17) marked “Strongly

Agree," and 21.7% (n=5) marked "Agree." 4.3% (n=1) indicated that they "Disagree," and no one reported "Strongly Disagree."

**Effective Affirmation.** In alignment with the FIT SRS first item of 'Relationship' (Duncan et al., 2003), participants were asked how they resonated with the statement "This process was a way for my experience to be effectively heard," ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Over four-fifths (87%) (n=20) of participants reported agreeance to the statement. About one-third (30.4%) (n=7) marked "Strongly Agree," and 56.5% (n=13) marked "Agree." More than one-tenth (13%) of participants reported disagreement to the statement. Almost one-tenth (8.7%) (n=2) marked "Disagree," and 4.3% (n=1) marked "Strongly Disagree."

**Safe Space.** Also in alignment with the FIT SRS first item of 'Relationship' (Duncan et al., 2003), participants were asked how they resonated with the statement "I felt safe sharing my feelings and experiences within the circle," ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." More than three-fourths (78.3%) (n=18) of participants reported agreeance to the statement. More than one-third (39.1%) (n=9) marked "Strongly Agree," and 39.1% (n=9) marked "Agree." About one-fifth (21.7%) of participants reported disagreement to the statement. More than one-tenth (13%) (n=3) marked "Disagree," and 8.7% (n=2) marked "Strongly Disagree."

**Comprehension of Problems.** For the survey's first of four branches constructed from the FIT SRS fourth 'Overall' item (Duncan et al., 2003), participants were asked how they resonated with the statement "I have a better understanding of the problems in this MSW program," ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." About 90%

(n=21) of participants reported agreeance to the statement. About one-third (34.8%) (n=8) marked “Strongly Agree,” and 56.5% (n=13) marked “Agree.” Less than one-tenth (8.7%) of participants reported disagreement to the statement. Less than one-tenth (8.7%) (n=2) marked “Disagree,” and no one marked “Strongly Disagree.”

**Comprehension of Effects.** For the second branch from the FIT SRS fourth ‘Overall’ item (Duncan et al., 2003), participants were asked how they resonated with the statement “I have a better understanding of the how the problems in this MSW program effect my cohort,” ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” A complete 100% of participants reported agreeance to the statement. Almost two-thirds (60.9%) (n=14) marked “Strongly Agree,” and 39.1% (n=9) marked “Agree.”

**Creation of Connection.** For the third branch from the FIT SRS fourth ‘Overall’ item (Duncan et al., 2003), participants were asked how they resonated with the statement “As a result of the circle, I feel a greater connection with my cohort,” ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” More than four-fifths (82.6%) (n=19) of participants reported agreeance to the statement. Less than half (47.8%) (n=11) marked “Strongly Agree,” and 34.8% (n=8) marked “Agree.” Less than one-fifth (17.4%) of participants reported disagreement to the statement. Less than one-fifth (17.4%) (n=4) marked “Disagree,” and no one marked “Strongly Disagree.”

**Enjoyment of the Process.** For the fourth and final branch constructed from the FIT SRS fourth ‘Overall’ item (Duncan et al., 2003), participants were asked how they resonated with the statement “I enjoyed this process,” ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” More than three-fourths (78.3%) (n=18) of participants reported



agreeance to the statement. About one-third (34.8%) (n=8) marked "Strongly Agree," and 43.5% (n=10) marked "Agree." Close to one-fifth 17.4% of participants reported disagreement to the statement. 8.7% (n=2) marked "Disagree," and 8.7% (n=2) marked "Strongly Disagree." About 4% (n=1) did not respond to the statement.

**Personal Future Application.** Parallel to the FIT SRS third item of 'Approach or Method' (Duncan et al., 2003), participants were asked how they resonated with the statement "I would use this process again in the future to address problems," ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." About 90% (n=21) of participants reported agreeance to the statement. About one-third (34.8%) (n=8) marked "Strongly Agree," and 56.5% (n=13) marked "Agree." Less than one-tenth (8.7%) of participants reported disagreement to the statement. About 4% (n=1) marked "Disagree," and 4.3% (n=2) marked "Strongly Disagree."

**Value of Future Academic Application.** Also parallel to the FIT SRS third item of 'Approach or Method' (Duncan et al., 2003), participants were asked how they resonated with the statement "I feel there is value in repeating this process with future graduate students," ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." About 90% (n=21) of participants reported agreeance to the statement. More than half (52.2%) (n=12) marked "Strongly Agree," and 39.1% (n=9) marked "Agree." Less than one-tenth (8.7%) of participants reported disagreement to the statement. About 4% (n=1) marked "Disagree," and 4.3% (n=2) marked "Strongly Disagree."

### **Summary**

The integrative circle approach structure is facilitated in a way that supports individuals to participate in a manner that is applicable and relevant to their experience, which then allows each participant to identify their stake in the solution and contribute to its implementation. This chapter provided analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the study data. The following chapter will be a description of the conclusions and recommendations. The limitations of this study and the implications for social work practice and policy will also be discussed in chapter five.

## Chapter 5

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This chapter summarizes the key data collected during this research study. Significant, unexpected, and important findings that were presented in the previous chapter will be discussed. The limitations of this study will then be described. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of implications for MSW students, social work, conflict resolution/harm reparation, and future research recommendations.

#### **Conclusions**

The results of this research project are worthy of attention as there is a wave of social and systemic reform that is growing against current educational, societal, and governmental structures. The problems at the forefront of these waves are often complex, and require deconstruction of an issue in order to detangle its roots and truly understand its origins. Educational institutions, including those of higher learning, are mezzo examples of these systems wherein hierarchies of power stand in the way of equal contribution and collaborative efforts. This project was constructed to derive honest assessments of second-year MSW students regarding their MSW program experience utilizing an integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle approach, as well as, their overall experience and satisfaction with the circle process.

In the spirit of ‘externalization’ (Castronova, 2007) the integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle initiated the process by prompting participants to represent their program experience into one word. These words ranged from ‘stretched,’ to ‘stressing,’ to ‘bamboozled,’ to ‘enlightened.’ Continuing on in alignment with the

narrative and restorative practices informing this work, participants were asked to expand upon their one word representations to retrieve their personal perspectives and explanations of their words. The majority of participants addressed either a recent or continuing history of fighting through adversity, and integrated life experience and growth as it correlated with the MSW program. However, their initial shared experiences did not speak to the program itself. These initial contributions establish their life meaning as it interacts with other participants' experiences and their environment; which is congruent with social constructionist theory (Greene, 2008). Student 2 expressed their growth over the program's two year span, identifying it both as challenging and irreplaceable.

Discourses began to emerge, and were represented in the participants basing their experience on the dominant assumption that 'challenging' is mutually exclusive to 'growth' (Besley, 2001). Participants carried the concept of fighting through adversity and its impact on personal and professional growth even as the discussion shifted to being saturated in the 'problem' and its ensuing effects. Student 6 illustrates the problematic power hierarchy as it relates to the MSW program through their experience with tenured professors creating a sense of lack of support, education, and ability to be held accountable.

Acknowledgement of oppression and microaggressions emerged and were expressed with an understanding of the misalignment with the program structure. Student 9 outlined in detail the mismatch in program competencies and actual content being taught in classes through their experience with racism being present in vignettes and case

summary discussion. As the participants were supported in viewing the problem as external to themselves, this integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle approach to community conversation continued to invite and facilitate discussions around relations to the societal power hierarchy as a greater problem (Castronova, 2007). Through their interaction with the circle dialogue, the development and evolution of the participants' experiential meaning was confirmed in brief notions of agreement (Greene, 2008).

Upon the organic completion of participants' contributions to the 'effects' of their experience, the facilitators directed the circle to collaboratively name the 'problem' through identification of themes. Participants identified 'adversity' as a main theme recurrent in both positive and negative effects represented, while 'disorganization', 'disrespect', 'undervalued', 'bias', and 'Neoliberalism' were also identified problems that addressed the overarching effects. These 'problem' themes were interpreted as discourses from the participants' preferred MSW program model, and this integrative approach facilitated the reconstructing of alternatives to align with their preferences (Besley, 2001). The primary collaborative solution presented to the problem was 'integrity.' 'Congruency', 'consistency', 'communication/clarity', 'advocacy', 'transparency', and 'empowerment' were identified as the stimulants to achieving the participants' perspective of 'integrity'. Student 2 expressed transparency as having the department model what is expected of social workers.

As participants' experiences were expressed, they began to accumulate conceptualizations that reflected the comprehensive participant group context and

proceeded towards collaborative considerations (Greene, 2008). As written agreements are often the best way to achieve clarity and understanding (Beck, 2012), an integration of the restorative group agreement and narrative letter was generated by the participants that contained consensus driven solutions and suggested approaches to achieve them. This agreement letter, titled the 'program improvement plan,' included 11 steps that would intentionally deviate the MSW program from the oppression identified in the circle process (Greene, 2008).

Lastly, in efforts to affirm the interconnectedness harnessed in the circle process, participants were asked to do a two word check out to summarize their immediate feelings of the circle experience. Some responses were; Student 13: "Freedom to just explode or allow talk without judgement," Student 1: "Personalized safety," Student 14: "More understood now," Student 23: "Hopeful and supported," Student 15: "Understood by peers," Student 9: "Very supported," Student 10: "Thankful and appreciative," Student 16: "Helpful and collaborative." The participants' closing summaries represented a generally positive initial experience of the integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle process, which remained parallel to the notion that circles have a positive impact on participants as they embody validation and fairness through the creation of opportunities to self-reflect, voice their concerns without fear of judgment or negative consequences, gain a better understanding of others, and become a force for future change (Cohen, 2014). However, to honor the narrative influenced emphasis on the "culture of feedback" through consumer feedback scales (Duncan et al., 2003), the

post-circle survey was implemented as an imperative process that inquired about what worked and did not work for the participants during the circle.

The researchers identify importance in noting that of the seven questions asked on the post-circle survey none fell below 78% in agreeance ('Strongly Agree' or 'Agree'). Even with only about half of participants stating they had some ('Under a year' or '1-2 years of experience') of either Restorative Justice (42.1%) and/or Narrative Mediation (52.2%), over 90% reported that they would use the process again in the future to address problems, and over 90% reported that they felt there was value in repeating the process with future graduate students. In fact, as a result of the circle process 100% of participants reported having a better understanding of the how the problems in this MSW program effect their cohort.

### **Recommendations**

A main motivation for this research study was to utilize and test a lesser known conflict resolution/harm reparation process by applying it to a currently relevant issue. Researchers of this study had a sense that the MSW graduate school cohort, to which they belonged, struggled with issues that seemed to be going unaddressed. The presence of these challenges presented an opportunity to debut, apply, and test the efficacy of the underutilized process of integrated Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circles. The application however, came with a variety of challenges. Originally, in alignment with the proceedings of group conferencing defined in chapter two, the researchers of this study intended to invite the university's faculty and administration to join in the circle process. However, the risk factors for such a study

were considered too high to be feasible, even if would provide a more thorough alignment with integrative restorative and narrative practices, and provide greater potential benefit to participants. A constrained version of this integrative circle process approach is still a valid contribution to expanding the evidenced based body of knowledge.

Reiterating the statement previously declared in chapter two, some research exists as to the efficacy of the integrated circle approach as it is being used in primary and secondary school settings within the Restorative Schools Vision Program (RSVP) (Cohen, 2014). The researchers of this study were unable to find any research studies that incorporate the integration of Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation as it intersects in the arena of institutions of higher learning.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The researchers have identified importance in the efforts of utilizing integrated Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circles as a baseline intervention for approaching conflict resolution/harm reparation in organizational structures. As this method has not been widely applied to organizations, communities, and systems by way of published research, the researchers of this study suggest the application of this method to an array of environments to test its range of possibility in effectiveness. Focus could then be deviated away from hierarchy, stratified authority, and sacrificial compromise and repositioned to language used, externalization of the problem, teaming up against the problem, and ability filled negotiation towards a beneficial solution. It is the hope of the researchers of this study that despite the increased time and effort that is required of this



process, there will be future studies to create a base of reliability of integrated Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circles regardless of the micro, mezzo, and macro implication.

In the case of traditional restorative circles, extensive in-depth interviews would have been conducted before the circle process in order to pre-establish themes and mitigate any re-traumatizing of participants. In order to maximize the output toward solution, greater time should be allowed in preparation of participation before the circle. Just as in restorative justice and victim offender mediation, participants are interviewed at least once if not several times before coming to the table with one another (Zehr, 2005). The intention of this is to minimize re-traumatizing the participants by proceeding to quickly with a lack of information.

Facilitators can assist the success of the process by developing a comprehensive communication plan that provides background information on Restorative Justice, Narrative Mediation, the integration of the two concepts, and outline each step of the circle process. The plan should also include follow-up communication on the post-circle survey orchestrated to formally discuss participant feedback to apply suggestions to improve further applications.

### **Limitations**

Utilizing the population of the SWRK 223 class for this research study contained advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of convenience and personal relevance assisted the facilitators of this process in the areas of pre-established rapport with fellow students, as well as, the benefit of providing a possible opportunity for growth and

improved change as a parting contribution to the university's Social Work department. One disadvantage included not having the voices and perspectives heard of the department's administration and faculty. Utilizing a small sample size instead of accessing the entire cohort population, provided another disadvantage. Finally, the limited amount of time allotted to conduct the circle process from start to finish created a valid disadvantage.

Although each integrated Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle is a stand-alone event, the process is meant to ultimately function as a piece of a bigger puzzle. As seen in social conflict theory (Bouckenooghe & De Clercq, 2014) as well as social constructionist theory (Greene, 2008) such circles are a process built on a philosophy of subjectivity and collaboration respectively. While primarily viewed as a limitation, studying the integrative circle process' efficacy from a mostly qualitative perspective therefore seemed appropriate.

Certain circumstances inherent in the nature of this type of study research, may have affected its outcome. A percentage of participants also lacked education about or exposure to the circle process. Because this research study was conducted as a part of the regular curriculum of the SWRK 223 class-time, with the willingness and approval of its presiding professor, some student participants may have felt hesitant to honestly reveal the depth of their relevant experience within the circle. Specifically, because the professor was present but not positioned to participate in the circle process (due to the IRB approval obtainment process), his presence may have been confusing or a deterrent to the building of trust within the circle context. This too may have affected the circle's

context of safety and potential for success. A limitation that speaks to the efficiency and positioning with the integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation approach, the researchers/facilitators were prohibited from acting as participants. This limitation represents the notion that this study does not enmesh with current approved and valid research methods or structures, which ultimately contributes to its lack of empirical data.

### **Implications for Social Work Policy and Practice**

Theories and philosophies that inform Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation are in full alignment with the following values as stated in the Social Work Code of Ethics (2008): integrity, dignity and worth of the person, social justice, and the importance of human relationships. Integrated Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circles are humanistic and empowerment based processes that promotes externalization of problems, building teams against the problem, and finding effective resolutions as a communal process (Androf, 2012; Beck, Kroft, & Blume, 2010; Cohen, 2014). All these add up to the person-in-environment themes that are the very fabric of Social Work (Greene, 2008). Although Social Work students are taught these values and ethics inside the confines of the classroom, some students from this research study reported being told that it is their job alone to figure out how to best apply these ethics in the field. If this assumption is deemed true, it leaves a void, ripe for the filling.

In its micro implementation, the application of communication tools such as Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circles to the social science and human service curriculum would arm future providers of care and advocacy with practical ways

to become more effective with clients in the field. Individuals would then have a platform to share their personal experiences, as well as, a forum to give and receive peer validation and support. If these practices became more prevalent in use, further studies could then be done to test and expand upon the efficacy of such circles, in a variety of settings and applications.

The mezzo expansion of this tool would equip communities and organizations with the power to create realities that establish a new paradigm, deviated away from power struggles of dominant groups. Group Conferencing Circles as they are used today, could be adapted to support neighborhoods, clinics, religious establishments, and political grassroots efforts. Collaboration of effort could act as a change agent affecting solution toward a myriad of society issues. Ultimately, equipped with this integrative tool, communities and organizations would influence the macro level structures needed to establish effective community-based policies.

In its macro stage, Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circles could be applied to national and international governmental infrastructure and policy making. The implementation of this circle process would create opportunities for conflict and harm to be addressed as interdependent systems. The micro individuals and focus groups would inform the organizations and communities, which then would be represented in policy and society. Each level honoring the experiences of the 'problem', the ensuing effects, and the collaboration towards cohesive solutions. Circles, as they exist today, could then be evolved in ways that cannot be currently conceived. Despite the increased time,

effort, and vulnerability required of this process, the results possible and probable, accurately represent its undefinable worth.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to debut integrated Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circles in a wide variety of populations to address problems and resolve conflict collaboratively. The secondary purpose of this study was to support the California State University, Sacramento MSW cohort in voicing their current experiences of the MSW program through the opportunity to brainstorm about ways to improve their situation through the circle process. The peripheral purpose of this study was to honor the ‘culture of feedback’ and increase the circle efficacy by obtaining the second-year MSW participants experiences of the circle process.

It was the intention of the researchers to contribute the integrative circle process to the body of knowledge largely absent from literature. The study data presents the utilization of the integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation circle template as well as the participants’ feedback regarding their circle experience. In addition to recommendations for future research, the researchers provide Social Work implications on the micro, mezzo, and macro system levels. One major implication of this study is the applicability to implement this integrative approach in any situation in which conflict accrues. Although this study contains limitations in design and generalizability, this study approach offers significant insight into ways in which power hierarchies can be identified, addressed, and reconstructed.

### **Appendix A**

## Research Participation Cover Letter and Informed Consent

Study Title: Integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation Circle Approach: Students' Perspectives of their MSW Program Experience

Dear MSW Student,

Our names are Pixie Ganem and Donna Duncan. We are fellow graduate students in the Division of Social Work at California State University, Sacramento. We are conducting a thesis research study as part of the requirements to fulfill our Master of Social Work degree.

We are studying the utilization of an Integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation Circle Approach, to address students' perspectives of their MSW program experience. We are inviting you to participate in our study; and if you decide to participate, you will be asked to do the following: (1) participate in a group integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Circle addressing student's perspectives of their MSW program experience, and (2) fill out a brief follow-up survey.

Both the 1 hour Integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Circle, and 10 minute survey will be conducted in your classroom. The process will be audio recorded so that we can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by the two researchers and their thesis advisor (Maria Dinis). The researchers will transcribe and analyze the recordings. Then, these recordings will be destroyed.

There are no known risks to participation in this study. Although your participation in this study is not anonymous, the information you share with the researchers will remain confidential. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings. Study information will be kept in a secure location and one of the researcher's home. We will protect your identity to the extent possible; therefore, please do not write your name or other identifying information on any of the study materials that may identify you. During the Integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Circle, others in the circle will hear what you say, and it is possible that they could tell someone else. Because we will be talking in a group, we cannot promise that what you say will remain completely private. We will, however, ask that you and all other group members respect the privacy of everyone in the group and keep all information that you hear in the group private.

Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to do it. You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering. Due to this study being conducted during your class time, even if you choose to not participate (at any time), you will be asked by your Professor to remain in the classroom to bear witness to the process

as a classroom instruction.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. If you have any study related questions, you may contact Pixie at [REDACTED] or [pixieganem@csus.edu](mailto:pixieganem@csus.edu), Donna at [REDACTED] or [donnaduncan@csus.edu](mailto:donnaduncan@csus.edu), or our faculty advisor, Maria Dinis at [REDACTED] or [dinis@csus.edu](mailto:dinis@csus.edu), if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Affairs, California State University, Sacramento, (916) 278-5674, or email [irb@csus.edu](mailto:irb@csus.edu).

I have read the descriptive information on the Research Participation cover letter. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary. My signature indicates that I have received a copy of the Research Participation cover letter and I agree to participate in the study.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to be digitally recorded for the purposes of this study.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date:

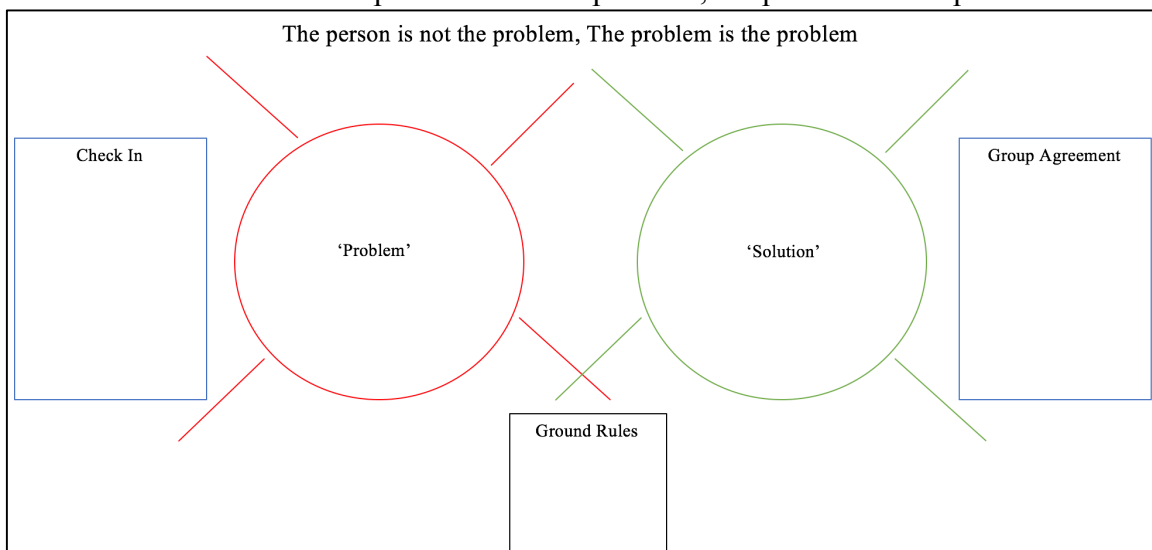
Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please sign and date this consent form and we will pick it up prior to the circle.

## Appendix B

### Integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation Circle Procedure

#### Environmental Procedures

- The chairs in the classroom will be set-up in a semi-circle with a white board at the front of the room
- A clock will be made visible by all
- One researcher will be designated as the facilitator, the other researcher will be designated to record onto the whiteboard
- A talking stick will be prepared and present
- The whiteboard will have the images of two large circles drawn with spokes protruding from each circle. At the top of the white board the following statement will be written: “The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem.”



#### Circle Process

- Introduction
  - Notification of audio recording and its confidential component
  - Intended purpose of the circle and designated ending time
    - “The intention of this 90 minute circle is to create a restorative forum to address your experience of this MSW program through narrative means.”
  - Establish ground rules of the circle (*Suggested ground rule foundations*)
    - Use “I” statements
    - Speak in a manner that is respectful to myself, others and relationships
    - Please listen generously
  - Introduce opportunity for use of safety word. (Trigger warning/emotionally charged topic).



- Talking stick will be introduced
  - Give those who hold the talking stick your full attention
  - When holding the talking stick, give full attention to your truth
  - Speak to the center of the circle
- Beginning the Circle
  - Check in
    - Instruction of participants to do an internal self-evaluation, don't change it, just notice it and be mindful (energy level, emotional availability, etc.)
    - Passing of the talking stick to participants and asking the following
      - Introduce yourself and your pronoun(s)
      - Give one word to represent your experience of this MSW program.
- Evaluation
  - Effects of the Problem
    - Facilitator states "Looking at these words as if they are entities with these names, think about the history of your relationship to them"
      - Could you say more about what that looks like for you?
      - How did your relationship to this begin?
        - How has it evolved?
    - The talking stick is passed between participants allowing for group sharing
      - As questions are answered the Recorder will write (onto the white board) stated key words into spokes of left circle to represent effects of the problem.
  - Naming the Problem
    - "Now take a look at what was shared, what do you think are some of the underlining problems?"
      - Recorder places problems as they are named into the center of the left circle on the white board.
    - The talking stick is passed between participants allowing for group sharing
    - Facilitator will summarize the problem circle
  - Solution
    - Facilitator asks:
      - "What would it be/look like if this was resolved?"
      - "How would it effect your experience of the program?"
      - "What would need to happen in order for this to manifest this?"
    - The talking stick is passed between participants allowing for group sharing

- Recorder fills in the spokes on the right circle (on the white board) to represent effects of the solution.
  - Group Agreement/Program Improvement Plan
    - Facilitator asks (while gesturing toward the solution circle on the white board),
      - “If this is how we want it to be, how do we get there?”
      - “How can we recruit (*the problem*) onto our side to achieve success?”
  - The talking stick is passed between participants allowing for group sharing
  - Facilitator summarizes participants statements into steps for continuing the resolution of (*the problems*).
    - Agreements are generated by consensus and not imposed upon participants by Facilitator and Recorder
      - Recorder creates a bulleted list of these steps towards a statement of vision, hope and need for genuine consideration.
- Conclusion and Closing of the Circle
  - Instruction of participants to do an internal self-evaluation, don’t change it, just notice it and be mindful (energy level, emotional availability, etc.)
    - Passing of the talking stick to participants and asking the following
      - A two word check-out summary
      - Participants are thanked for their engagement and reminded that there will be a post survey emailed to them.

## Appendix C

Post Circle Survey				
<i>Please circle the most appropriate answer of each statement which corresponds most closely to you.</i>				
Age Range	Under 30		30 and Over	
How much experience have you had with Narrative Mediation?	No Experience	Under 1 year	1 year - 2 years	More than 2 years
How much experience have you had with Restorative Justice?	No Experience	Under 1 year	1 year - 2 years	More than 2 years
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The problems addressed in the circle were relevant to me				
This process was a way for my experience to be effectively heard.				
I felt safe sharing my feelings and experiences within the circle.				
I have a better understanding of the problems present in this MSW program				
I have a better understanding of the how the problems in this MSW program effect my cohort.				
As a result of the circle, I feel a greater connection with my cohort.				
I enjoyed this process.				
I would use this process again in the future to address problems.				
I feel there is value in repeating this process with future graduate students..				

## Appendix D

### Program Improvement Plan Letter

To the CSUS Division of Social Work,

Our names are Pixie Ganem and Donna Duncan, and we are current MSW II students. We conducted a thesis studying the utilization of an Integrative Restorative Justice and Narrative Mediation Circle Approach, to address students' perspectives of this MSW program.

During the process, we utilized the circle check-in to gather summarizing words by the participants in order to get them to start thinking about their program perspective and establish the foundation of the circle. These check in words ranged from 'stretched,' to 'stressing,' to 'bamboozled,' to 'enlightened.'

Participants were then asked to expand upon these words, and share in whatever detail they preferred as to the nature of their experience with the MSW program. The majority of participants addressed either a recent or continuing history of fighting through adversity, and integrated life experience and growth as it correlated with the MSW program.

Participants identified 'adversity' as a main theme recurrent in both positive and negative effects represented, while 'disorganization', 'disrespect', 'undervalued', 'bias', and 'Neoliberalism' were also identified problems that addressed the overarching effects. The primary collaborative solution presented to the problem was 'integrity.'

'Congruency', 'consistency', 'communication/clarity', 'advocacy', 'transparency', and 'empowerment' were identified as the stimulants to achieving the participants' perspective of 'integrity.' In an adaptive form of a traditional concluding group agreement, participants generated suggested approaches to the potential solutions based upon the outcome of the circle to be delivered in this format to you. This letter will summarize and solidify new concepts addressed through the participants' experiences by facilitating documented accounts and solutions.

The Program Improvement Plan includes the following suggested steps:

- 1) Apply the 'informed consent model' to student participation in all aspects of the program
  - a. Transparency into decisions, allowing students the right to explanations of decisions that affect them
  - b. Adapt the culture of the program to incorporate more collaboration for students to have a voice on how goals are approached or accomplished

- 2) Establish visible leadership with clearly defined roles and responsibilities to ensure subsequent accountability
  - a. This should include an available listing of names, titles (situations/reasons why you would contact that position)
  - b. An expected wait time for response should also be included
- 3) Utilize bi-semester surveys
  - a. Accountability structures upheld with professors to ensure delivery of effective education and support
- 4) Create an interdisciplinary specialization process to allow for a macro/micro cross-sectional social work education
- 5) Effectively organize the class schedule to avoid conflicts between electives and practice courses
  - a. Design theory (Human Behavior in the Social Environment) to be taught by the same professor for the first and second semester for an emphasized continuum of learning
  - b. Intentionally align theory (HBSE) and practice objectives to maintain a consistency of the field application of theories
- 6) Adjust the program credits required to graduate so that students are not expected to pay for field time, especially as internships are unpaid

In order to welcome ‘integrity’ as an active member in program proceedings, these steps are acknowledged approaches of invitation. Each step signifies an action that enhances ‘integrity’ and actively deviates from previously identified presences of ‘disorganization,’ and ‘disrespect.’ Through partnership with ‘integrity’ and ‘collaboration,’ students have identified the potential for a holistically enriching program. By acknowledging the experiences presented before you, there is opportunity for greater understanding, empathy, and consideration to cultivate future interactions.

We hope that you utilize this letter as a platform for program reflection. The comprehensive process and outcomes can be found in our full thesis. We welcome you to review our research and consider our integrative circle template as a tool for gathering future students’ experiences. We would be happy to be available for consultation and facilitation if desired.

Thank you for your time,

Pixie Ganem and Donna Duncan

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