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Victim-offender mediation as a social work practice

My PhD project focuses on the practice of victim-offender mediation, one of the most widely used restorative justice practices in Europe (Nugent et al., 2004). Restorative justice is an international emerging new approach that offers a very different way of understanding and responding to crime (Umbreit et al., 2005). Instead of defining offending primarily as a violation of the state's interests, crime is considered to be "a violation of people and relationships" (Zehr, 1990: 181). In my PhD project I compare victim-offender mediation for young offenders to victim-offender mediation for adult offenders in Flanders (Belgium) from a social work perspective. This comparison stems from two observations with regard to victim-offender mediation.

First, we can conclude that several scholars have indicated that "mediating conflict between crime victims and offenders represents an emerging area of international social work practice" (Umbreit, 1999: 215; see also Baldry, 1998; Wright, 1998). This assumption results from the view that mediation complements social work's values (Severson & Bankston, 1995). However, despite these clear links, social work is only to a small extent represented within restorative justice theory and debate. This seems to be the result of an instrumentalisation of social work by the criminal justice system, a process of which social work has not only been a victim, but to which social work was also adaptable to or not very critical about (cf. Bradt & Bouverne-De Bie, 2007).

Second, we can remark that the debate on restorative justice does not take account of the fact that even though nowhere in restorative justice theory it is stated that there should be a distinction between young and adult offenders, this distinction in practice exists. Internationally, because "restorative justice has typically been introduced as a measure for young offenders, often not breaking through subsequently to use with adult offenders" (Shapland et al., 2006: 506; see also Dzur & Olson, 2004; Home Office, 2003). Nationally, we can remark that mediation practices for young and adult offenders are further developed quite separated from each other.

In a first step of my PhD project I have conceptually analysed the victim-offender mediation practice for young and adult offenders. On the basis of a historical analysis of the introduction of the mediation practice for young and adult offenders in Flanders, we found that there are different perspectives on the concept of victim-offender mediation with regard to young and adult offenders. These perspectives imply (i) a different view on the role of social work with regard to the criminal justice system and (ii) a different interpretation of social change as the key focus of social work practice (cf. Bray and Preston-Shoot, 2006). In my empirical research I will do (i) a (quantitative)

analysis of mediation files and (ii) interviews with Flemish mediators. In both studies we will focus on how these theoretical concepts on mediation are reflected – if at all – in the mediation practice.

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