"Helping Ourselves, Helping Each Other": Lessons from the Aboriginal Women against Violence Project

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ABSTRACT

Aboriginal women in Australia experience unacceptable levels of interpersonal violence despite more than a decade of concerted effort by both government agencies and non-government organisations. This article reports on the evaluation of the Aboriginal Women Against Violence Project (AWAVP), a peer-mentor program informed by Indigenous community development and empowerment principles. These principles, shaped by cultural knowledge, led to the creation of space for Aboriginal women to speak and hear experiences of violence, disrupt the dominant professional (white)/client (black) relationship and challenge white services to improve their work with Aboriginal women. The article argues for a stronger policy and program focus on community development to support Aboriginal women in their efforts to live free of violence. It aims to enable mainstream (white) practitioners to reflect on, and engage in, empowering practice with Aboriginal women in relation to violence.

Keywords: *Aboriginal women; Violence prevention; Community development; Human services*

INTRODUCTION

This article reports on the evaluation of the Aboriginal Women Against Violence Project (AWAVP), a peer-mentor program informed by Indigenous community development and empowerment principles. The AWAVP commenced in 2008 in the south-western suburbs of Sydney (Liverpool and Campbelltown). The program aimed to empower Aboriginal women to become community advocates and mentors for women and children experiencing violence. This article briefly reviews existing research, discusses some methodological issues and reports key findings from the evaluation. Whilst small in scale, the study seeks to add to the existing body of research on supporting Aboriginal women live free of violence. In particular, it highlights the potential of adopting a community development approach, over the long term, in this work (Ife, 2010). Community development facilitates Aboriginal women to reclaim their position as experts in their lives, challenging white service providers to consider how they position themselves in the task of creating a safe future for Aboriginal women (Heron, 2007).

BACKGROUND

Violence against Aboriginal women

Aboriginal women in Australia experience unacceptable levels of interpersonal violence. Statistics in relation to interpersonal violence are often under-estimated due to reluctance to report, particularly among marginalised women (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Official figures suggest, however, that Aboriginal women are victims of interpersonal violence at a rate six times higher than non-Aboriginal women in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008; Grech & Burgess, 2011). Concern about the levels of violence experienced by Aboriginal women and children has instigated more than a decade of concerted effort by both government agencies and non-government organisations. In fact, some 35 government reports have been produced since 1979 (Herring, Spangaro, Lauw, & McNamara, 2013). Despite this effort, very little has changed in the lives of many Aboriginal women (Herring et al., 2013). Tragically, violence in Aboriginal communities continues to be so widespread that some mainstream (white) human service and social policy workers experience it as impervious to prevention efforts (Cheers et al., 2006). More recently, Aboriginal educators and practitioners are challenging assumptions about the hopelessness of the situation, turning attention instead to dominant white policy and human-service-provision responses to violence in Aboriginal communities. The majority of policy and service responses to Aboriginal family violence have been based on Western understanding of interpersonal violence and failed to take into account Aboriginal perspectives (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Cheers et al., 2006; Taylor, Cheers, Weetra, & Gentle, 2003). There is a growing critique of the failings of current policies and services to recognise the trauma created by the intersection of race, gender, power and culture in Aboriginal women's lives (Cheers et al., 2006; Herring et al., 2013; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; Vincent & Eveline, 2008).

Policy responses to violence in Aboriginal communities tend to be top-down rather than community-driven. These responses focus on individual service provision which separates individuals from supportive social and community networks (Cheers et al., 2006, p. 52). Additionally, trauma and racism has seen members of the Aboriginal community turn

inwards seeking protection within their community and culture, resulting in isolation and a reluctance to use mainstream services (Herring et al., 2013, pp. 109–110). Historically, many Aboriginal people have had negative experiences with white institutions and view them as reactive, superficial and quota-driven (Homel, Lincoln, & Herd, 1999). As a result, "the understanding present in Indigenous communities on how problems could be addressed in a more holistic fashion is simply ignored" (Homel et al., 1999, p. 186).

Indigenous community development and empowerment

Indigenous community development and empowerment have their foundations in processes and activities aimed at shifting power to those with less power (Rawsthorne & Howard, 2011). Rifkin (1996) argues that, in relation to health, this involves professionals giving up their dominant position in programs. Taylor et al. (2003) describe community empowerment as occurring when "local people become involved in a process of determining priorities and solving problems, and, in the process, increase their knowledge and skill base in addition to achieving a sense of control over their environment" (p. 99).

When working with Indigenous communities a range of community development principles are relevant, including: being informed about, and responsive to, local knowledge and cultural processes; drawing on both informal and formal Indigenous leadership; establishing trust; demonstrating flexibility, particularly the ability to respond to changing circumstances through listening; demonstrating a willingness to leverage resources and influence; and actively building in processes and structures that enable sustainability of the intervention over time (Cheers et al., 2006; Ife, 2010; Rawsthorne & Howard, 2011).

Research supports the need for Aboriginal people to be involved in creating mechanisms to counter violence (Memmott, Stacy, Chambers, & Keys, 2002; Vincent and Eveline, 2008). Aboriginal women in particular have been at the forefront of community-led solutions in many communities (Homel et al., 1999, p. 189).

The AWAVP arose from local concern about the levels of violence being experienced by Aboriginal women, the systemic response to this violence and a desire for Aboriginal women to act to find local solutions.

CONTEXT

Joan Harrison's Support Services for Women (JHSSW) (Liverpool NSW, Australia) is a non-government women's refuge established in the early 1990s. In more recent years JHSSW has sought to provide a more holistic service response, developing a range of non-residential services to complement the provision of safe housing for women leaving domestic violence. These non-residential services have included an outreach service which focuses on support, crisis assistance, legal advocacy and community education. These outreach services have focussed on improving the support provided to Aboriginal women, drawing on strong relationships with local Aboriginal women who provide informal community leadership on issues affecting the Aboriginal community. Through conversations with these informal community leaders, JHSSW developed a project idea based on empowering Aboriginal women to "help each other" rather than being reliant

on services or institutions. Among those involved there was a sense that the institutional change required to protect Aboriginal women (particularly within the Police and child protection services) was proving to be too slow. JHSSW, with the support of the informal local Aboriginal women leaders, successfully applied for funding under the National Community Crime Prevention Programme (NCCPP) for the anti-violence project. The project was funded to address family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Liverpool and Campbelltown areas by training local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to become trainers, mentors and advocates in their own communities.

The project was funded to cover the neighbouring Liverpool and Campbelltown Local Government Areas, in the rapidly growing and socially disadvantaged south-western region of Sydney. The original inhabitants of the Campbelltown area are the Dharawal Aboriginal people, who continue to have a strong presence in the region. Additionally, as in other urban environments, Aboriginal people from throughout New South Wales have settled in the region. Some 6,000 Aboriginal residents lived in the region at the 2006 Census (2,204 in Liverpool and 3,832 in Campbelltown). The region is an area of significant social disadvantage. The residents of Liverpool in general have lower incomes, lower formal qualifications, lower access to internet and are more likely to come from a non-English speaking background than residents in Sydney generally (Liverpool City Council, 2011). Similar to Liverpool, residents of the Campbelltown LGA experience social disadvantage, with higher levels of unemployment, lower incomes, poorer educational outcomes and higher number of residents in social housing (Campbelltown City Council, 2011). Crime statistics in 2008 identified 610 domestic-related assaults in Liverpool and 994 in Campbelltown (Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research [BOCSAR], 2012). Campbelltown's rates of domestic-related assaults per 100,000 was nearly twice the NSW rate (663.9/100,000 population compared to 364.9/100,000). Whilst specific figures are not available for Aboriginal people, research suggests social disadvantage is compounded for Aboriginal residents.

In some areas [of Sydney] ... both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population have poor employment, education, income and housing outcomes. Even then, it is the Indigenous population who has the worst outcomes of all. (Biddle, 2009, p. 56)

The AWAVP took place in the context of high levels of domestic violence, the ongoing trauma of colonisation and significant social disadvantage. In this way it grappled with the intersection of class, gender, culture and location (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; Homel et al., 1999, p. 185).

AWAVP MENTOR PROGRAM: "HELPING OURSELVES, HELPING EACH OTHER"

The impetus for the anti-violence project came from frustrations among Aboriginal women and some white human service providers about the dependency on the formal service systems to protect Aboriginal women and the slow pace of change within such systems. Following months of conversations between JHSSW staff and local Aboriginal women leaders a successful grant application was made under the NCCPP. This early establishment phase reflects community development principles of involving communities to identify

issues and to participate in the development of solutions (Taylor et al., 2003). The funding application arose from pre-existing relationships that had been established over time (Cheers et al., 2006).

The funding specified that the project would develop and offer mentor programs in Liverpool and Campbelltown areas for Aboriginal women to become trainers, mentors and advocates for women in their own communities. This article focuses on the four mentor programs offered between 2008 and 2010. The group program was designed to increase knowledge, raise awareness and enable action (whether on an individual, group or community level). The specific goals included:

- increasing Aboriginal women's knowledge of services and service providers;
- increasing Aboriginal women's confidence in relation to accessing services;
- increasing the ability of Aboriginal women to identify situations as violent or abusive;
- increasing Aboriginal women's ability to reject violence-supporting myths;
- enhancing Aboriginal women's knowledge of the legal aspects of domestic violence and child protection; and
- enhancing Aboriginal women's knowledge of the mental health aspects of family violence.

The AWAVP was responsive to what can be understood as local cultural practices (Ife, 2010, pp. 29–35). This included: holding groups in spaces welcoming to Aboriginal women, including community agencies and designated school facilities; and, recruiting participants via existing social groups, community networks and community organisations. More generally, the mentor program sought to create a supportive and safe environment for Aboriginal women to speak about the impact of violence on themselves, their families and their community. The initial program (Program 1) ran one morning per week (3 hours) over a 12-week period. In the subsequent programs (Programs 2, 3 and 4) this was reduced to one morning per week for nine weeks to coincide with the NSW school terms. This change demonstrated flexibility and a willingness to listen to participants' experiences and opinions. Each group session included a shared meal at its completion aimed at building relationships and shared understandings among the women. The program was not designed as a therapeutic group and prior experience of interpersonal violence was not a criterion for participation however, there was awareness that many participants have been affected by violence.

Specific strategies were put in place to maximise the sustainability of the outcomes from participating in AWAVP mentor programs. At the completion of the program, women received a Certificate of Participation at a Graduation Ceremony designed to celebrate their success and to shift dominant representations of Aboriginal women. Additionally, whilst the mentor program was not formally accredited, the AWAVP worked closely with the Technical and Further Education Commission (TAFE) Outreach to create a pathway into further study for women who completed the program.

METHODOLOGY

A process evaluation was undertaken to monitor and document the implementation of the project. The evaluation was particularly interested in understanding the relationship between specific program elements and program outcomes (Saunders, Evans, & Joshi, 2005, p. 134). The evaluation adopted Lori Heise's ecological framework, conceptualising violence against women "as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and socio-cultural factors" (1998, pp. 263–264). Personal, economic, social and cultural factors combine within "embedded levels of causality" (Heise, 1998, p. 264). An ecological framework enables the individual(s), their context and broader socio-cultural factors to be considered. The ecological framework explains gender-based violence as arising from the "interplay of personal, situational, and sociocultural factors" (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottmoeller, 2002, p. S7). The framework comprises a number of levels: individual personal histories; the immediate social context in which the abuse takes place (micro-system); the formal and informal institutions and social structures (exo-system); and finally the general cultural views and attitudes (macro-system).

The study collected data from a range of sources, aiming to collect robust and triangulated data for the evaluation (Whyte & Krakouer, 2009, p. 23). These sources included:

- focus groups with mentor program participants (three focus groups with a total of 38 participants);
- interviews with two project staff;
- interview with the Manager, JHSSW;
- a focus group with four Aboriginal women involved in the AWAVP committee;
- a focus group with stakeholder agencies including health, police and women's services (one group with 12 participants, two of whom were Indigenous); and
- an observation and document review.

The focus group questions with peer-mentor program participants included: what do you understand by the term *domestic violence*?; in what circumstances (if any) is domestic violence acceptable?; what has been the most valuable aspect of the group?; what is needed to help Aboriginal women experiencing violence?; what new information did you get from the group?; what services did you learn about from the group? would you feel confident using these services in the future? and, what would you do if you saw someone threatened?

The interviews with staff and the small focus group with AWAVP steering committee members focused on: how was the project developed?; what was the project trying to achieve?; how successful was the project?; and what were the key lessons from the project?

Data from all interviews, observations and focus groups were transcribed and entered into NVIVO qualitative software. Inductive analysis techniques were used to identify and code

themes. Networks of themes were developed around key research interests, particularly with regard to: knowledge and attitudes towards violence against women; knowledge of options available to Aboriginal women experiencing violence, including services; and willingness to act to prevent violence in the future. Thematic coding was undertaken by the author and two social work honours students (Alice Chivell and Alison Smith). The researchers cross-checked the themes identified by each other, with numerous meetings being held to discuss the analysis. The reliability of the evaluation data was strengthened through checking conclusions reached from one focus group with participants in subsequent focus groups; checking conclusions with the project worker and other key people involved in the project; and reference to Aboriginal women who work and write in the field of preventing violence against women.

FINDINGS

Peer-mentor program outcomes

A total of 49 women completed the four mentor programs offered between 2008 and 2010 (attending at least 80% of weekly sessions). Attendance levels varied across each program and from week to week, although no group session ran with less than three participants. On a few occasions up to 20 women participated in a weekly session. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 years, with most aged in their 30s. Most were parents, some grand-parents. Whilst a previous experience of violence was not a criterion for participation, the vast majority of participants' lives had been touched by interpersonal violence (as children and/or adults).

The AWAVP impacted on all four concentric circles or levels identified by Heise et al. (1998, 2002). Table 1 attempts to illustrate simply the impacts of the project on the ecological frameworks. The composition of each group influenced the specific circle or level impacted. For example, Group 2 comprised mainly women who had not experienced domestic violence but felt strongly about Aboriginal women's rights. For this group there were personal (confidence), micro- (willingness to act and assist) and exo-level (knowledge of domestic violence dynamics and support services) impacts. For this group exo-level impacts were most significant. Group 3, by comparison, had an established group identity and relationship, arising from their personal histories of domestic violence. For this group, the mentor program reinforced personal and micro-level relationships, however, the greatest impact was on their desire to be involved in institutional change (macro–level) change. Group 1 on the other hand, did not have pre-existing relationships, making it very hard to establish a safe level of participation. For this group the program impacted mostly at a personal level, and to some extent, the micro level. This indicates that the impact of the mentor program on the circles or levels of the ecological framework is strongly influenced by the way the groups are constituted and their pre-existing relationships.

Table 1. Outcomes/changes from participation in AWAVP

OUTCOMES/CHANGES	PERSONAL	MICRO	EXO	MACRO
New friendships and supporting existing relationships	✓			
New knowledge about domestic violence	✓	✓		
Increased knowledge of service system	✓	✓		
Greater confidence in accessing services	✓	✓		
Ability to identify violence behaviour	✓	✓	✓	✓
Introducing white services to Aboriginal women and Aboriginal women's perspectives			✓	✓
Seeking accountability from white institutions (such as DoCS and Police)			✓	✓
Building networks that challenge violence against Aboriginal women			✓	✓

The personal outcomes achieved through participation in the AWAVP were facilitated by the creation of a safe space for Aboriginal women to speak about the impact of violence and provide hope for a different future. From a community development perspective, this was about acknowledging Aboriginal women as experts, establishing trust and drawing on informal community leadership (Cheers et al., 2006; Ife, 2010; Rawsthorne & Howard, 2011).

And sometimes you don't realise that it has made an impact until you do something like this, a group is offered like this, and then you start bringing it up and talking about it and feeling comfortable amongst a group of women and seeing they are comfortable as well, so it breaks down that barrier of that shame and isolation. But the biggest impact that it has made for me is that I am now looking at what has happened through my life and how that underlying factor of domestic violence, even though I don't live in it, but I am controlled by it, by decisions that I make, by decisions that I don't make, things like that. So it has really opened my eyes there. This group has had a really big impact on me and how I think. (Participant, Group 3)

The project brought Aboriginal women together to learn and support each other in welcoming environments. Learning in an informal setting was seen as very "culturally appropriate" by mentor group participants and stakeholders. An Aboriginal participants in the stakeholders' focus group noted that "the most important thing is that it [support] is happening between our women". Friendships were forged or reinforced through the informal structure of the groups and the sharing of experiences, opinions and food. The Project Co-ordinator noted the program is a "way of resourcing the community in a culturally appropriate way and it was a way of hopefully addressing some of the issues for that community... The program is now seen as a credible program and trusted by Aboriginal people in this area". The benefits of the mentor program were commented on by many participants, as exemplified in this quote:

Sharing each other's experiences I think helps a lot of women understand. Because you don't know anybody out there that you feel like "oh my god I'm the only one that's going through this", until you get to know the groups, some of them. There are women going through exactly the same thing and you can talk about it, you can resolve your problems with each other and it's just good to socialise. (Participant, Group 3)

Community development is founded on people becoming aware of common issues confronting their community and being brought together to act (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2011). The mentor program facilitated a reconnection with the strength and pride within the local Aboriginal community (Cheers et al., 2006). This strength and pride gave women the confidence and belief to *act*. The peer-support element of the mentor-group program was highlighted in the stakeholders' focus group with participants commenting:

The young women, the young mothers, need to know it's not ok. The women from the group [Group 2] are continuing to support each other. They meet for coffee and that's continued on. Most are young mothers and have a long way to go. [After the group] they talk to their mums about [domestic violence]. The network is going on. (Aboriginal participant, Stakeholder focus group)

Peer support is vital. Through doing workshops they're willing to take this on. I've observed if you educate women they will support each other, tell people it's not OK. It's great to talk about systems, like to pretend they work, but violence is still happening. If someone would say, "I'm going to the Police" and her friends say "we're coming with you" that would make such a big difference to women's experiences. (Non-Aboriginal participant, Stakeholder focus group)

As argued previously, community development involves shifting existing power relationships (Rifkin, 1996). AWAV, through bringing white service providers into a predominantly black space (the mentor group) disrupted dominant professional relationships and required professionals to operate outside their traditional roles. As Herring et al. (2013, p. 110) note, most Aboriginal women come into contact with the service system as clients, often in crisis. A key element of the mentor program was the participation of local services as guest presenters to inform women of the support available to women experiencing violence. The mentor program enabled participants to obtain information about services and to meet service providers as students and future mentors/

advocates rather than as clients. It was initially planned that Aboriginal workers from services would present information to the groups, however, due to the low number of Aboriginal workers in services, this was not always possible. Guests included: women's health service workers; refuge workers; mental health workers; child protection workers; the Police; Department of Housing representatives; community legal centre workers/ solicitors; and court support workers. Focus group participants indicated a marked increase in their knowledge and awareness of local services due to their participation in the mentor program. In Group 1, for example, prior to participating in the group, the Police were the only service identified by the group as being able to support women. Whilst presenting information on services could be viewed as unlikely to increase access, this strategy appeared particularly important for Aboriginal women because they could "put a face" to a service as well as "suss them out". This highlights the importance of face-to-face information strategies for services wishing to work with Aboriginal women.

Glenda knows all the names. I know all their faces and that. Knowing what they do was really interesting 'cause now we know and that and they gave us cards. There was like heaps of them. It's easier when I know whose face, like if I know what they can help me with it is easier to call rather than ring up and find out they can't help me with what I need and then they pass me on to somebody else. (Participant, Group 2)

The lack of knowledge and awareness of support services evident among most participants prior to the group is at odds with the level of violence known to be experienced within Aboriginal communities (Herring et al., 2013; McKenzies & McNamara, 2008). There is a clear challenge facing mainstream services in supporting Aboriginal women, and this must begin with information, awareness and knowledge. An unintended outcome of having non-Aboriginal guest presenters was to bring these workers into contact with Aboriginal women. Despite being a priority group for many services, the small size of the Aboriginal community coupled with a reluctance to access mainstream services, meant that many non-Aboriginal workers had little experience or contact with Aboriginal people. The JHSSW Manager acknowledged this, noting that the AWAVP had increased cultural awareness among the JHSSW staff. She noted:

I think it has increased our understanding of working … with Aboriginal women. I think it's improved that, because I think some of the staff here probably haven't had a lot to do with Aboriginal women or the Aboriginal community before. (Manager)

By bringing mainstream service providers into the group space the program shifted the traditional relationship between clients and services/professionals. The group participants effectively issued a challenge to guest presenters and their agencies: *why should we trust you?* Like Aboriginal women in other research (Cheers et al., 2006; Herring et al., 2013), many participants in the mentor program reported a great reluctance to ask for help from white agencies. Participants showed a clear preference to accessing services from an Aboriginal worker, pointing to the need for greater numbers of Aboriginal staff being employed and supported if services are hoping to improve their relevance to Aboriginal women (Lumby & Farrelly, 2009). The participants in the mentor program, however, also identified "good women" who were non-Aboriginal. These "good women" embodied aspects of culturally

competent practice identified by Herring and her colleagues (2013): being informed; taking a stance and reaching out. They demonstrated a genuine interest in learning from, listening to and working with Aboriginal women. These "good women" were greeted with warmth and generosity, an experience noted by other non-Aboriginal service providers seeking to work with Aboriginal women (Herring et al., 2013; Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011). The Project Worker contrasted this approach with that of some white workers who came to the group directing the Aboriginal women on what they needed to do without taking into account the barriers these women face in order to access services. This approach also fails to acknowledge the expertise held by the Aboriginal women about effective services.

Yeah like the parents don't like going to speak to them—the white people for instance, because they have a different attitude towards things, they're quick to judge you without even asking. I'd like to help people get through it and understand what that is. Only because I've been through the same sort of situation and I understand now, but I wish there was an Aboriginal worker that I could have talk to maybe that could have gotten me a lot further, do you know what I mean. But I've been working around the white society that have been so judgmental to me and have just been that quick to criticise me and I've still beat them, because I was persistent and I kept going. But I really think that's important, that's why I think it's a big issue for me, I'd like to go that way and try and help in that aspect. (Participant, Group 3)

The AWAVP enabled Aboriginal women to challenge mainstream service providers to listen. Mentor-program participants expressed a strong sense of frustration at being "told what to do" and not being able to express their views or tell of their experiences. Being part of a group gave some participants the courage to "speak up" and for those services willing to listen this provided a great opportunity to learn more about their own services and how to improve their work with Aboriginal women.

They came almost preaching to us rather than the other way around [listening to us]. So my idea was to … get the police to listen to what we've got to say, and we're not going to listen to what you've got to say, okay? (Participant, Group 4)

The Project Worker identified that many guests were not culturally aware or cognisant of the educational disadvantages experienced by many Aboriginal women, which was supported by the researcher's observations. Sigrid Herring and her colleagues (2013) note that becoming informed is a key step for practitioners in creating welcoming services for Aboriginal women. The AWAVP Worker noted that there is "a big gap" between the Aboriginal women in the mentor program and some white service providers who would come to the group:

talking at this big academic level and [they're] talking to Aboriginal people who may not have the same education and most times they don't... When you get someone who is Aboriginal speaking to them on their own level they feel more relaxed, they're more willing to participate. (Project Worker)

The mentor graduation ceremony disrupted stereotypes of hopeless and despair (Cheers et al., p. 59). It was a celebration of the achievements of the mentor group participants,

attended by families, friends and the local media. The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs officiated at the Graduation Ceremony for the second and third groups. Graduates received a certificate and those who spoke acknowledged the significant impact participation in the group had upon them. Celebrations such as these of Aboriginal women's strengths, resilience and achievements are important aspects of changing dominant understandings. Quite a few graduates had thought about further education due to the positive experience in the mentor program.

I'd like to go on and get a further education based around the kids if I can get time. But definitely this course has taught me a lot as well. Many of us have learnt a lot from it. And yeah basically just continue, instead of it going to waste I'd like to get another certificate or do one after this. (Participant, Group 3)

LESSONS FOR MAINSTREAM SERVICES: IMPROVING OUR WORK WITH ABORIGINAL WOMEN BY BUILDING TRUST

There are lessons for mainstream service providers from the way in which JHSSW developed, implemented and evaluated the AWAVP. Many of these lessons relate to the process used, reflecting community development principles. These principles included time, respect for local leadership, flexibility and trust built on relationships. The project arose from conversations over time, and grew organically from the energies of informal local leaders. Staff from JHSSW maintained this conversation throughout the project, adapting to changing circumstances and responding flexibly. In this way AWAVP can be seen as continually evolving rather than being "rolled out". Trust was a repeated theme throughout the project, highlighting the importance of time to establish relationships and earn trust. It may be that through this type of *slow* work that mainstream services can overcome the historic and ongoing tensions between Aboriginal women and the white service system.

The project acknowledged Aboriginal women as experts in their lives, challenging white service providers to consider how they position themselves in the task of creating a safe future for Aboriginal women (Heron, 2007). In this way JHSSW aimed to utilise and reinforce the strengths and resilience of the Aboriginal community, lessening the chance of imposing patronising white assumptions on Aboriginal women (Cheers et al., 2006, p. 59; Heron, 2007). The AWAVP, by asking white service providers to listen to a group of Aboriginal women together, challenged professional/client dynamics which disempower Aboriginal women. In this way the prevention of violence against Aboriginal women was not viewed as an individual responsibility but a joint responsibility requiring interventions at the levels of the individual, the family, the Aboriginal community and the broader community (Cheers et al., 2006, p. 59).

Similar to previous research, all JHSSW staff identified trust as a major issue for the Aboriginal community (Herring et al., 2013; Lumby & Farrelly, 2009). During the evaluation the mentor-program participants indicated a general mistrust of mainstream services. When asked whether institutions/services could be trusted, four out of five women indicated no institution of government (such as the courts, the Police, child protection,

health or housing) could be trusted. JHSSW sought to earn the trust of Aboriginal women by being flexible, creating a safe space for Aboriginal women to learn, being open to feedback, responding to ideas generated by participants, working at a pace that suited each group (that is, not imposing external deadlines) and facilitating pathways into further education. This also included "taking a stance" (Herring et al., 2013) that women were not to blame for the violence they experienced and believing in Aboriginal women's capacities to make change. Distrust can be a barrier to service use, as the JHSSW Project worker noted:

[Aboriginal women] don't trust them…some of the services have no understanding of Aboriginal issues. (JHSSW Project worker)

All JHSSW staff interviewed acknowledged that the process of building up trust and connections in the community is not easy and needs to be a gradual process. One interviewee noted that trust "takes a long time to build up in the Aboriginal community" (Project co-ordinator). Herring and her colleagues describe this process as "reaching out" (2013, p. 13). JHSSW's experience was that once they had been found "trustworthy" by some Aboriginal women this was shared through word of mouth to others in the community. This was reflected in increasing ease of recruiting women to participate in the program over time and the increasing number of participants (from 5–8 in Group 1 to 15–20 in Group 3). The Project Co-ordinator noted:

If you work with the Aboriginal community one of the biggest forms of communication within that community is word of mouth… This is about the trust factor. So word of mouth is often more trusted, so one member of the community will tell another and they, in turn, will tell another. And that will be more trusted than a total stranger coming in and telling them. So it is about supporting that as a structure that is used by them and how you can support that, and that is their way of communication.

Supporting Aboriginal women's desire to live free of violence requires services and individual workers to confront both overt, and indirect, forms of racism in Australia. Racism and racist interactions were a common feature of mentor-program participants' stories during focus group discussions. These stories were of everyday life (such as responses from staff in shops and on buses) as well as with mainstream state institutions (such as Police, child protection and housing). Behaviours which mentor-program participants reported included rudeness, verbal abuse, offensive gestures, being ignored and interactions escalating quickly into angry confrontations. A lesson from JHSSW's experience with the AWAVP was that mainstream services wishing to work more effectively with Aboriginal women need to be aware not only of the *grand history* of racism (such as colonisation, the legacy of the stolen generation and the dispossession of traditional lands) but also of the day-to-day reality of racism experienced by every individual and family.

CONCLUSION

The development, implementation and evaluation of the AWAV Project by JHSWW provide a best practice example of working with Aboriginal women to prevent violence.

JHSSW drew on thoughtful practice wisdom about working in a respectful and inclusive manner. For social work and welfare educators it provides insight into the importance of community-driven programs, informed by community-development principles in a field dominated by individual service responses. Core skills for success in this context include listening, relationship-building, flexibility, and the ability and preparedness to leverage resources. It requires professionals to adopt an active learner position. The experience of the AWAVP suggests that disturbing the client/professional relationship has beneficial outcomes for both Aboriginal women and service providers.

The AWAVP mentor program created a safe space for Aboriginal women to explore the painful reality of violence in their lives, their families and their communities. It broke down barriers to formal education and mainstream support services for Aboriginal women. It highlighted, once again, Aboriginal women's rejection of violence and their determination of address violence in their communities. In many ways, the Project issued a challenge to mainstream service providers: how can *we* support Aboriginal women?

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