



Finding the 'voice' to speak: Women and men talk about relationships

AUTHOR

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Winja Ulupna ('women's haven') is an Aboriginal residential alcohol and other drug service for women. Galiamble ('dry place on a hill'), the equivalent service for men. These services are open to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Winja Ulupna and Galiamble are services of Ngwala Willumbong ('dry place') Cooperative.

Based in an Aboriginal service, narrative group work was used to assist women and men talk about relationships, in a safe and positive manner. Exchanges of collective documents between the groups led to joint readings and song. The women reported positive developments in attitudes and support provided by men at the service. The men reported improved understanding of the circumstances of the women and improvements in the quality of relationships with their partners. The article provides a case study of one approach to supporting positive developments in relationships in Aboriginal settings. The approach may also be relevant to non-Aboriginal settings. Also included are a series of reflections, responses and critiques from experienced Aboriginal health workers.

Keywords: groupwork, narrative therapy, collective narrative practice, documentation, song, alcohol and other drugs, gender, Aboriginal

A NOTE ABOUT TEAMWORK

This project has been developed by the Winja Ulupna and Galiamble teams which include Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers. The project was overseen and managed by Dion Anderson, Bea Edwards, and Mark Hammersley who also revised all documents prior to publication. As Mark was not available to co-facilitate due to other pressing responsibilities, the groups were primarily facilitated by Greg Smith and Marnie Sather. Bea and Dion attended the women's group during sessions that focused on planning for events and practice readings. Reflections about the use of non-Aboriginal facilitators are included at the end of this paper.

INTRODUCTION BEA EDWARDS AND DION ANDERSON

When women first enter our service, they find it hard to talk about the reasons for their use of drugs or alcohol. The reasons are complex and for our Aboriginal clients include the consequences of colonisation and stresses placed on culture.

As the women gradually feel safe, they will often talk about the challenges they face within relationships. Many of the women have been subject to physical, sexual and emotional abuse. For these and many other reasons, our women have often not felt safe to talk openly about their experiences of relationships, their feelings, challenges or hopes for the future. We feel that a 'silencing' of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women's voices can be found in many families, communities and community organisations.

Barriers to effective communication also impact on our men. The men's reflections recorded in this paper describe how particular common beliefs about male leadership responsibilities within families have worked against their desire for openness and mutual support.

In our projects, we want to find ways to support women and men finding their 'voices' in being able to talk about experiences, feelings, hopes and dreams around relationships. We need our men and women to be hearing each other. We need them to collectively solve the challenges that face them.

Narrative groupwork at our agency has assisted women and men to talk openly and safely. So has the use of metaphors.

METAPHORS AND DREAMINGS

I (Bea) often use stories about the day-to-day behaviours of Indigenous animals to help women develop new ways of dealing with the challenges and opportunities of life. For instance, in talking with a woman about protective practices, I might draw on a story about a turtle which, seeing danger nearby, retreats into its shell. I refer to these as 'animal dreamings'.

Within our narrative groupwork, metaphors taken from the physical environment have helped the women and men reflect on their circumstances. These have included the 'Tree of Life' (Ncube, 2006) and 'Crossing the River' as a metaphor about change (Hegarty, Smith and Hammersley, 2010). Collective documents and community events have also been important (Denborough, 2008; Denborough, Koolmatrerie, Mununggirritj, Marika, Dhurrkay & Yunupingu, 2006).

The project described in this paper started with the women developing their own butterfly metaphor, which became a 'dreaming' that had great significance for themselves and the men. In listening and responding to each other's stories, the women and men drew on Aboriginal culture to work towards common understanding and unity.

The groups consisted of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men and women. Through the experience, non-Aboriginal women found a 'sisterhood' with Aboriginal women, in shared experience and mutual support. The men reported developments in their own relationships in response to their participation.

For now, let's just say that the process opened up conversations that had never happened before in our work with women and men. The women found new ways of speaking. The men found new ways of hearing.

BUTTERFLY DREAMING

During a groupwork session, Ebony, a young Aboriginal woman of the Bajinji, Yorta Yorta, and Mutti Mutti peoples of South Eastern Australia, talked about how she was designing a butterfly drawing as a symbol of the courage of women coming to Winja Ulupna. Over the next few sessions, the life of a butterfly was developed as a metaphor to represent the experiences and hopes of the women at Winja Ulupna. Before too long, other women were also engaged in this 'butterfly dreaming'.

The women provided a range of reflections on experiences of life as like being inside a 'cocoon'. The cocoon was described as a 'dark and scary place', filled with 'bad thoughts', while it could also represent a place of safety and protection where women could hide and not be seen by the outside world.

The women talked about their hopes for 'flying' in the future. They described the circumstances that would help them fly and those that would seek to have the women stay on the ground or retreat back into their cocoons.

A dark, scary place

When I first came to Winja,

it was like I was covered in a cocoon.

In the cocoon, it's a very dark, scary place.

In the cocoon you hide all your negative thoughts and feelings

It is like being wrapped inside a big, heavy blanket.

It is filled with hate and bad thoughts about yourself.

You are still trying to work out who you are.

Like a butterfly

When we first came to Winja, we felt like we were in a cocoon.

We had to work out if we could trust people here.

We started to talk.

We started to become more comfortable in our own skin.

We started to spread our wings.

We started to show our true colours.

We started to be our 'real' self.

Starting to fly

Starting to fly is like a giant step into the unknown.

It's easier to stay on familiar ground.

I am apprehensive about the next step

I'm still grounded.

I'm scared of being blown away

I fear the unknown



In time, the women developed a booklet which included collective reflections and individual poems as well as paintings of butterflies that they had produced in art workshops. The women also prepared a DVD, in which the women showed their artwork and talked about their lives through the butterfly dreaming.

At this point, the women were asked if they would like to have their reflections and poems read out and shared at the men's narrative groupwork sessions, and the women indicated that they would like this to happen.

When the men read the women's reflections and discussed the issues that they raised for them, they asked for their reflections to be shared back to the women's group.

The initial reflections of the women did not directly refer to the role of men in contributing to the challenges they described, such as being covered within a cocoon as a 'dark and scary place'. On reading the women's words, however, the men began to reflect on their contributions to the challenges faced by women. One of the Aboriginal men during the first groupwork session considering the women's reflections, raised the question: 'Are we doing this to our partners?'

The nature of these 'sharings' had a particular spirit that continued throughout the project. The men and women accepted each other's reflections without a sense of disagreement or challenge. Instead, the responses of each group often identified shared experience.

The men indicated that they were 'not surprised' that the women thought they were 'worth nothing' in the eyes of their partners. This was acknowledged in a spirit of sharing their own vulnerabilities: 'As men, we can feel that way too, about what our partners think of us. It can be scary'.

SNAKES SHEDDING SKIN

At this point, the women invited the men of Galiamble to develop their own metaphor. The men responded with Shedding Our Skin, inspired by snakes shedding old skin, to reveal new skin underneath.

Shedding our skin.

It's about growth

New beginnings

Owning responsibility

It's about what we are trying to achieve.
Becoming a new person

The men, many of whom had direct involvement with prison and other violent settings, talked about the vulnerability of 'shedding' old ways of doing things. Their reflections and poems were published in a booklet which including paintings they created through art therapy workshops.

Being vulnerable

*When the snake is shedding its skin,
It stays amongst the rocks and shrubs.*

*It's very
vulnerable to attack.
Fragile.*

*A snake needs safety to shed its skin.
It will not shed it out in the open*

We need safety.

The men included in their booklet concrete examples of new developments, new steps they were taking within daily activities and relationships.

New skin

*The other day
I went into the pub
and had a milkshake,
not a beer.*

That was growth for me.

*I had tea with my partner.
Just to do it together*



THE BUTTERFLY CONCERT

The women then decided to host a 'Butterfly Project' evening where family and community members were invited to witness their readings, video and a collective song. The women invited the men to participate in the evening and they accepted the invitation, contributed readings, a collective song and video. In planning for the evening, the women and men were clear that the women had the lead role.



THE UNITY REFLECTIONS

In reflecting on the 'Butterfly Concert', the women referred to the 'warm hearts' shown by the men in responding to their readings. In the next groupwork session, the women talked about how they felt comfortable participating with men present and how significant this was to them.

This resulted in a weekly exchange of 'collective documents' between the women and men's groups, focusing on relationships. These were published in a booklet the participants titled 'Unity'. We have included here some examples of the words and stories that were exchanged:



FROM THE WOMEN

Showing a warm heart ...

You men asked why we described you as showing a 'warm heart' at the Butterfly concert. You thought that it may have been because you showed Respect, Care, Honesty and Hope. You felt you were able to notice the things we were saying. You took pride in what we were saying, and what we were achieving.

We could tell that you were genuine. It is all these things that showed us that you had a 'warm heart'

These things made us feel proud.
We felt worthy.

For some of us,
we had never felt this before.

Many of the reflections were based on the women encouraging their male counterparts to 'Open Up' and talk about their feeling with their women:

Sharing feelings with women

You should not be afraid to share your feelings in front of women.

This doesn't make you look weak.
It makes you look strong.
We want you to remember that.
Our men have had troubles with that.

The women felt that because they did not 'open up', their male partners would 'bottle things up' to the point where they would 'explode'. The women talked about living with the prospect of an approaching 'explosion' like 'walking on eggshells'.

What is it like:

living with men who do not 'open up'?

It leads to Frustration. Depression. Anger

It can be like walking on eggshells.
You don't know how to talk to them. There is always tension in the air.

Sometime more, sometimes less,
but it is there most of the time:
maybe all of the time.

When it is strong, no-one is talking.

The tension leads to Withdrawal: mainly from partners,
but kids feel it:
they know you are not speaking.

The women acknowledged care and concerns for children, as a shared experience with the men.

Reading them made me cry

Reading these words made me cry.

It hurts my heart:
the men thinking of family,
and speaking about their kids: knowing that they have the same emotions,
and can think like that
about their kids.

We see it the same way:
kids don't judge,
because they can't understand.

They didn't ask to be born.

We love them no matter what:
and we get unconditional love
from them.

It's just as hard for men to be away from their kids as women.

The women talked about how the responses from the men had been much more productive than they had anticipated. That this gave them hope for what may be possible in their relationships with partners in the future.

Deadly

This is deadly

We can see that they think like us.

We didn't think that
they would have this much to say ...
that they would be able to speak these things.

It gives us Strength, Hope and Respect for the men.

It is empowering.

Final words

We want to say thanks,
for Opening Up.

It's good to know that
you have feelings like us

FROM THE MEN

The feedback from the women about the men showing a 'warm heart' towards them at the concert had significant impact on the men. The feedback supported reflections by the men on what may have led the women to use that expression. They hoped that it showed the women that 'men can change':

Showing a warm heart

At the concert, you described us as 'Showing a Warm Heart'.

Maybe we showed that by not being judgemental.
We were not dubious.
We did not look down on you.

There was no fear
That was no violence

Instead, we think you saw
Love
Hope
Respect
Honesty
Care

And Pride: we told you 'You should be proud of what
you have done'

In the past we have not considered the women

At the concert, we showed that we could notice
things that women say

Maybe we have shown the women that Men can
Change

Subsequent groupwork with the men, supported by
regular reflections and responses forwarded by the
women, focused on the challenges men faced in 'showing
emotions':

Showing our emotions

It is good for us blokes to know these things.

We were brought up
to not show our emotions.

Australian society has this 'macho' image of being
a man.

To hear women say that it is okay to show our
emotions ...

We have heard it before
from other women.

Our mothers, our women have said to us 'don't
bottle it up!'

They can see it in our faces.

You know us better
than we know ourselves.

The men were aware of the impact of 'taking out their
anger' on their partners and ways of thinking that
contributed to these behaviours. Many of the men had
talked about their interests in finding alternative ways of
living with anger.

Talking, listening

When we get frustrated we take it out on the people
we love because we think they will understand what's
going on for us.

But they don't.

You want us to use 'I' statements,
so we talk about
what is going on for us.

I read somewhere,
'when you get angry, stop,
take a deep breath,
and then say what you're thinking'.

When I do that, sometimes I see that the person is
really listening.

The men also explained that they were brought up with
the understanding that to show emotions reflected
weakness, which would threaten the viability of the
family. Holding onto emotions was related to a desire to
provide strong leadership and protect the wellbeing of
the family.

Not wanting the family to break:

Men were brought up with
these ideas about pride:
to hold onto our emotions.

We were not supported
to show 'weakness';
otherwise the entire family
would break.

The men talked about the improved understandings they
had achieved through examining the reflections with
the women and changes that had occurred within their
relationships.

Empathy

We don't know just what you are going through.

But we can have empathy for you.

It's part of the healing.

Saying 'thank you'

Each time I go home now

I say 'thank you'.

Walking on egg shells

We relate to how you talk about men not opening up.

'My partner says it's like walking on eggshells. I keep the problem in, and then I explode.

It helps me to speak to my partner, and my counsellor.

I did not used to do that, but I do now.'

FINAL JOINT READING

The men and women participated in a joint reading of material from this booklet at a Christmas lunch.

The readings used a chorus using words and imagery developed by the women

Butterfly fly ... show your colours
Butterfly fly ... spread your wings
Butterfly fly ... into tomorrow
Butterfly fly, Butterfly fly.

At the end of the combined readings, one of the men called forward all the other men at the lunch to sing the chorus to the women as a show of respect and support.



REFLECTIONS ON THE PROJECTS

After the final 'joint reading', the women and men were invited to reflect on the process of the previous few months.

WOMEN 'FINDING A VOICE'

The women placed their highest value on being able to talk openly about their experiences, thoughts and feelings. The women indicated, 'We don't normally get to do that'.

Talking openly had sometimes included references to abuse:

The hardest thing was being honest: opening up. It was for the first time: I had always kept these things inside. I feel much better now: like a weight being lifted off my shoulder. Keeping these things inside used to make me sick. When the abuse started I started to get depression. It was a dark place. I kept them all inside.

A recurring theme in reflections by the women was that, prior to coming to Winja Ulupna, they had believed that they were alone with their problems: that they all had thought 'it was just me'. The groupwork discussions had helped them come to the view that they were not on their own in dealing with the problems.

SISTERHOOD

It is hard to do justice in writing to the importance that the women placed on sharing experiences, feelings and hopes with each other, and the mutual support established between them. The 'sisterhood' established within the group, irrespective of whether the women were Aboriginal or not, was often named as a key feature supporting their time at Winja Ulupna.

This shared identity with other women also supported the telling of stories. In reflecting on the reading from the booklets at a community event, one of the women reflected:

It was an Act of Courage. At first it was a Shame Job. It got easier. I wanted to tell people my story. I knew that we were doing it together.

Working closely with the men extended their support and shared experience to include male peers:

I now know that I am not alone: it's not just me. I am 'in company': being needed and wanted: involved. You realise that you're not alone. It helps leave resentments behind, and move forward. We can see that we are needed and wanted: that the future is to be lived in the company of others.

People need people. We see how we can help other people, and how they can help us.

The women felt that their willingness and capacity to talk more openly about their thoughts and feelings would continue:

I think it will help me in the future. I'm not going to be so closed up. I'm definitely going to be saying what's on my mind. To men and women.

Gradually, we have all come out of our shell.

FROM 'FAIR GAME' TO 'HEARING STORIES'

The men indicated that the most significant effect of the project was a change in their attitudes to women. Several Aboriginal men talked about how, if a woman was not a cousin, they were offered much less respect or consideration:

We were brought up to think about women: they haven't got any balls. They know nothing ... If you haven't got balls, shut up, go and talk with the other women. You don't know anything. They can get out of the way. That's how it works. I used to hate women, unless they were my cousins.

If you were related, you respected them. If you were not, they could get f'd. You could get involved. They were fair game.

Galiamble and Winja provide the men and women with access to a number of counsellors and group programs. The developments and changes in attitudes to women by the men would therefore have been influenced by a number of different sources of support. The men also talked about how attitudes to women in the wider community had changed before they entered Galiamble. Hearing the women of Winja Ulupna talk about their experiences, however, was identified by the men as a major influence on their changed attitudes towards women.

Aboriginal culture places great value on the responsibilities owed to cousins. Cousins may be related through marriage, partnering or birth. Children of close family friends might also be described as 'cousins'. The men drew heavily on this cultural value in changing their attitudes towards the women involved in the program, and in their relationships with their partners. This came about in several ways.

Some of the men had cousins who were residents of Winja Ulupna. The cultural value placed on supporting cousins, resulted in these men listening closely to the stories told by these women. These were often included within collective reflections, representing cousins and other women. The men talked about noticing that the stories of these women held much in common. This helped the men recognise the 'shared story' of the women, irrespective of kinship relations.

Men who did not have 'cousins' at Winja, noticed that the stories they heard from the women at Winja were similar to those of their cousins living in their communities.

The cultural value placed on supporting cousins seemed to take the form of a 'bridge' which supported the men in recognising experiences common to other women. This recognition worked against attitudes that were dismissive of women who were not related.

AN ABORIGINAL MAN REFLECTED:

You hear their story and you think: 'Poor woman: she reminds me of Auntie. Auntie was going through the same problem'. They're similar people to who your relations are: they're no different. They've got the same problems as what they had. And you're willing to listen to them: it's a bit of an education about how to treat women. That's what I've had. I've been educated on how all women work. They've got the same feelings as your family.

Now I can see we are similar people. They think like us. They are just like us. They think the same as us. They are just the same as our auntie, our uncles. They've got a voice.

These discussions were informally led by the Aboriginal men in the group while non-Aboriginal members of the group were very attentive to the discussions. Several gave examples of how their conversations and behaviours with partners had been influenced by their experiences with the program.

A NON-ABORIGINAL MAN REPORTED:

I'm starting to question some of my relationships in the past: before I came here. You can't do anything about the other party's view, but I have changed my own ... I look at it now, and think: gee that was pretty shallow ... everything seems so flakey. A bit of substance but very lacking. I seemed to live in my own little world. I still do that a bit.

REFLECTIONS OF OTHERS

We have included here reflections from a number of workers about what they noticed about the significance of this project.

AN AMAZING TRANSFORMATION

Cheryl Harrison

(Yuin / Yorta Yorta. Koori Access Support Program)

My role is to support the women from when they enter a detox program to when they enter Winja Ulupna. From knowing these women from that time in their lives to seeing them share readings with the men and the crowd at the final lunch was an amazing transformation.

It was a great project and a credit to the women who opened up their hopes and their feelings: who got into their vulnerability and shared that with us. You could see the men's ears prick up to what the women had been saying: to what it really feels like to be 'locked up' inside a 'cocoon'. To see Aboriginal man actually understanding the Aboriginal woman's perspective was amazing. It was great that the women felt that the men had listened and acknowledged what they were saying.

For the men to acknowledge that they do not have to be 'big strong men' who never cry or never share anything that is close to their hearts is a huge step: exploring their vulnerabilities, and being able to trust that to a woman.

The men have heard it from the women's view, and they have realised they've got a mother, aunty, sister: a daughter, cousin. There are similarities between men and women and I think the project has helped the men get a better understanding of that. There are also differences. I think the listening will help them understand those differences as well.

A DIFFERENT WAY OF HEARING THE WOMEN

Mark Hammersley (Manager of Galiamble Mens Recovery Service, art therapist and narrative therapist)

I want to acknowledge the courage that it took for the men and women to put themselves 'out there' in front of people at the concert and lunch, and perform readings from the Butterfly and Snake booklets. I had met the women before the 'butterfly' concert and I saw a big difference in them on that night. I could see how their sense of self-worth had grown. It was like they were different people. They had grown so much in confidence.

I have also seen a big difference now in the relationships between the men at Galiamble and the women at Winja Ulupna. I have seen the same changes in how the men talk about their partners. For one of the men in particular who took leadership amongst the men in the project, I have seen a changed relationship with his partner. I have seen him get a lot closer. It is as if they now have a different way of hearing the women.

I could see how proud they are of themselves. Their courage has inspired me in my own life. As the men have been going through the process, I have been also. It's helped me have different ways of listening to my own partner.

I think it will help the men in the future by being able to realise that men and women do have different ideas, principles, and values: that it is possible to take time to hear these things and acknowledge difference. I can see it helping to know that it is not a case of 'right' or 'wrong': just differences that we can hear and learn about.

A LIFE OF ITS OWN

Greg Smith (Non-Aboriginal narrative facilitator)

Marnie Sather and I had been familiar with the ideas behind collective documents (Denborough, 2008) and exchanges of stories between Aboriginal communities (Denborough, Koolmatrrie, Mununggirritj, Marika, Dhurrkay & Yunupingu, 2006).

In the past the groups at Winja Ulupna and Galiamble had exchanged collective documents with residents of an Aboriginal service in Katherine Australia, and a group in Dublin, Ireland.

The women, as did the men, responded with enthusiasm as reflections were recorded on a whiteboard, and brought back the following week in written form. The women enjoyed reading these 'collective documents' aloud: even those women with limited levels of confidence in reading in public. The women talked about how it was 'good' and 'helpful' to see their thoughts written down. It seemed that the documents had an important role in supporting a developing sense of 'sisterhood'. It seemed that it was this strong sense of sisterhood and the confidence in 'opening up' that then provided a basis for them to share documents with the men.

Over six weeks, the exchange of the readings as collective documents between the women and men developed a 'life of its own' due to the level of engagement of the groups. Bea described the readings/writings as a 'third person' moving between the groups, carrying messages.

This progressive exchange of the readings/writings prepared the way for the men and women to come together at the community night where the women and men read separately from the 'butterfly' and 'snake' booklets. Further exchanges and responses supported the subsequent lunch where the men and women alternated readings within a combined presentation and chorus.

I am reminded of Michael White's (2004, p 59) descriptions about how developing a safe territory of identity can at first be like finding a small island to stand on ... and then we might find that we are in an archipelago of small islands ... and then in time we are on a larger, secure continent ...

THE IMPORTANCE OF RITUAL

Marnie Sather (Non-Aboriginal narrative facilitator)

My mentor, Troy Blow, is a Yorta Yorta man from central Victoria. In co-facilitating a support group for men leaving Galiamble, Troy generously taught me the importance of ritual. Troy would say that rituals 'keep your spirit strong.'

Troy's rituals included playing the Yidaki (didgeridoo) at the start and end of each session and inviting ancestors to join the gathering. Troy also invited each participant to 'check-in' at the start of each session and to 'check out' at the end with feedback to let facilitators and other participants know how they are going at each stage.

This helped us know if any of the men needed additional support.

Troy's teachings on ritual helped me co-facilitate the men's group for this project. I was able to identify and build upon the 'rituals' that developed through the leadership of the Aboriginal men.

Notes from discussions were made on whiteboards, typed up and returned to the group the following week. A ritual developed whereby these were read aloud each week by men confident in reading.

Within the exchanges between the men's and women's groups, unimagined opportunities arose. In response to one of the lines from the women's poem, 'A Dark Scary Place' (... *It is filled with hate and bad thoughts about yourself* ...) one of the members of the group, Will, asked a question for all the men to think about: 'Have we done this to our women?'

This was the entry point for a discussion initiated by the men about men's accountabilities within their relationships. The men opened up about which relational practices they had engaged in with their partners that could have their partners hating themselves. The men respected the women from Winja and wanted to respond back to them in appreciation of the women's courage in speaking up and sharing their words with them.

Will talked about the importance of 'yarning' (talking), and men and women gathering to tell their stories. He described men who supported these kinds of gatherings and other efforts to support community as being 'community men'. Will felt that being 'community men' was just as important as being 'warrior men' and fighting on behalf of your community. Reflecting his commitment to being a 'community man', Will suggested the women and men get together for a 'feed' and talk informally. This is what led to further rituals, including a gathering of the men and women where we shared food and stories. Will had indicated that the appropriate ritual meal would have been a barbeque. For practical reasons we had to settle for Kentucky Fried Chicken!

IF THIS APPROACH IS TO BE TRIED IN OTHER CONTEXTS

We are hopeful that the ways in which women and men have shared their stories with each other in this

project may have some relevance in other situations. We are aware, however, that care would need to be taken if others were to try to use this approach in different contexts. We have included here reflections from a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues about the project, ways that it may be relevant in other contexts, and areas of possible concern.

I HOPE ALL COMMUNITIES COULD END UP WITH BOOKLETS LIKE THE BUTTERFLY, SNAKE AND UNITY DOCUMENTS

Aunty Barbara Wingard, Team Leader of Aboriginal Projects at Dulwich Centre Foundation, Adelaide

Reading about the Unity Project was very meaningful to me. This seems a fantastic way of getting people to tell their story. Using the metaphors of the Butterflies and the Snakes shedding their skin made it possible for women and men to share what they wanted to share. The people who shared their story would have had many sad events in their life and in this process they could share only what they felt comfortable with. The strength in this project is that it is just the beginning with more stories to come!

If most of the direct group work in this project was undertaken by non-Aboriginal workers they need to be congratulated because it has given a lot of people the opportunity to read and hear these beautiful stories. They were so heartfelt. In the ideal world it is a good practice for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to work in partnership together to facilitate the groups. Many of our people do have the skills and certainly have the Aboriginal knowledge. If they don't have the narrative skills we should be training them and eventually they will run the show. That would be culturally appropriate. Aboriginal people understand the narrative concept. We have been telling and retelling stories for thousands of years. Funding to allow more of our people to enhance their skills in narrative practice would be beneficial to Aboriginal communities.

I hope that many more Aboriginal people are trained in narrative practice and that all communities could end up with booklets like the Butterfly, Snake and Unity documents.

UNITY BETWEEN THE MEN AND THE WOMEN

Uncle John Murray (Elder, Yorta Yorta, Victoria. Experienced community and drug and alcohol worker and Chairperson of Ngwala Willumbong Cooperative)

What stood out from the booklets and the DVD was the unity between the men and women on the same issues. It is not very often that you hear men and women talking together about the challenges that they have experienced in relationships. You could hear the men and women saying, 'We're all facing the same issues'. The women and men were openly talking about these things with each other. The men could see what the women were going through, and the women could see what the men were going through. They were able to support each other.

I have not seen men face these things like that before. These men have been through hard times in life: the same for the women. Previously the men and women just experienced these things as individuals, thinking: 'It's just me that's gone though this ...'. People tend to keep these things to themselves, and the emotions just get bottled up.

You have to make people feel safe. Otherwise it would have been difficult for the men or women to talk about these things with anybody else. You could see how it came about, with men and women interacting over a period of time through the readings and concert.

You could see that the men felt good about themselves for what they have done: the same for the women.

THERE ARE DIFFERENT WAYS OF COMMUNICATING IN DIFFERENT SETTINGS

Gillie Freeman (Jiddabul, Far North Queensland, Counsellor)

There has been a long history since colonisation of non-Aboriginal people collecting Aboriginal stories told in different ways, including words, art and dance, and misusing and profiting from them. It is important in projects like this one to have someone with Aboriginal cultural knowledge and of Aboriginal heritage in the central role.

An Aboriginal man in the group might say something about his culture, but he might not have a complete

understanding: only part of it. An Aboriginal facilitator could have an understanding about culture and discuss or enquire more on the issue to try to get facts closer to the truth.

A non-Aboriginal facilitator would need to check what was said with other people who know the culture before it can be taken as truth. In an earlier project, a man suggested a name for a concert. When checked by a person in the community, a different meaning was given to the name written on the invitation. So how do we know what it the true meaning then of that event?

An Aboriginal facilitator could be aware if someone is talking about issues that are painful: he/she may recognise what is going on, and encourage the facilitator to 'pull back'.

These booklets might not be appropriate for all communities. In traditional cultures, men might be sitting there, not talking to their partners: rarely even looking at them and things might not be spoken, but that does not necessarily mean they do not express the same feelings and emotions as those who speak or write the words. There are different ways of communicating in different settings. Things can work in other ways.

Men might be forbidden to speak to some women following or during certain ceremonies: mothers, sisters, and some cousins.

In certain communities where Aboriginal people live amongst non-Aboriginal community, they may be influenced by different expectations, such as that people should talk about 'feelings' and 'love'.

If this document went to more traditional communities, could it make women question 'Why don't our men talk more?', even though things are done differently in those in those places?

When people's names are given in writings in the book talking about the future, or they are on a DVD, it could lead to problems. If they relapse, they could be a source of shame for them: cousins, and community members might see it.

When it comes to DVDs and personal writing, there is the risk that people can feel 'pushed in' to being involved, by peers. When you do talk to people about how they might feel in the future about appearing in a DVD or booklet, you need to be very clear, by saying such things

as 'What if you are drunk and in the gutter: how are you going to feel then if someone is looking at this DVD then?'

People can also feel shame if they think they are expected to write, or read in front of others, because they may not have the skills and confidence. When others can read and write, it can lead to a sense of 'competition', which makes the shame worse.

RESPONDING TO 'SHAME' IN AN ABORIGINAL DRUG AND ALCOHOL SERVICE

Authorship team

The nature of 'shame' in Aboriginal culture is complex. Women and men at Winja Ulupna and Galiamble refer to 'shame' in a range of contexts: experiences of abuse, senses of personal 'failure', limited skills such as reading, or having a prominent role at public gatherings.

It seems that significant forms of shame experienced by Aboriginal people have their roots in colonisation. Removal from traditional lands, restrictions on cultural practices and negative attitudes within non-Aboriginal communities towards Aboriginal people, seem likely to contribute towards 'shame' experienced by Aboriginal women and men.

The women and men we work with are particularly vulnerable to negative self-judgments against common expectations about what is involved in being a 'good' mother, father, family or community member.

Women and men may often have intentions of living alcohol or drug-free lives at the time of leaving rehabilitation services. Our clients will often be returning to families and communities, however, where they will face challenges that are much the same as when they entered the rehabilitation service. If the woman or man returns to alcohol or drug use at some stage in the face of these challenges, shame contributes to guilt and a loss of hope and confidence: it can also contribute to a 'disconnection' from the insights and skills that were rediscovered during their time at the service.

In discussing with the men and women their future after leaving the Winja and Galiamble, we seek to be honest and transparent in conveying our understanding of the challenges involved and the possibilities of return to previous use of alcohol or other drugs. We discuss with clients their personal strategies for dealing with appearances of 'shame' in their future.

This includes talking about the consequences of having booklets published with their photos, names and writings. We ask them about these booklets as possible sources of 'shame' if they are unable to sustain the changes that they hope for. In response to these 'cautions', the women and men have, up until now, always agreed to include photos of them in the documents with their first names.

Our feedback about such documents from previous clients has only been positive to date, however, we need to be open to hearing other responses.

We are interested in challenging shame associated with negative judgements of Aboriginal people irrespective of their use of drugs and alcohol.

CULTURALLY SAFE WAYS OF TALKING ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

A final reflection from Bea Edwards and Dion Anderson (Panne Mukeer/Gunia Kurnia. Managers, Winja Ulupna)

Due to the effects of colonisation, traditional Aboriginal cultural practices have been disrupted. The disruption of traditional practices has been particularly evident in south-eastern Australia, where this project was undertaken.

The particular practices that have been helpful in this project may not be appropriate for other cultural settings. In our view, however, the ideas and general approaches behind this project have much to offer other communities.

Although violence within families is widespread in all sectors of Australia, it is a particular problem within Aboriginal communities. As with related challenges in the use of drugs and alcohol, the factors involved are complex and relate to the ongoing effects of colonisation.

Our aim has been to find culturally safe ways of enabling women and men to discuss the factors that contribute to these challenges and their effects. We want to help women and men find ways of 'shining a light' into the dark corners that exist within our communities.

Some understandings may hold that it is not culturally appropriate for Aboriginal women or men to discuss issues included in this project in public forums, or directly with each other.

In the context of this project, the women, men and support staff have concluded that the approach has

been effective, with observed positive outcomes. This project has shown that supporting the voice of women can contribute to their individual health and wellbeing, and to the life of the community. The project has also shown that, within this process, men can find their own voice and challenge unhelpful expectations about ways that men should manage emotions, behaviours and relationships.

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