

Developing outcome measures for crisis support and intervention: a summary of lessons learnt by women's specialist domestic and family violence services from a research project

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE PAPER

This summary has come from a national research project with three independent women's specialist services and the work they do with and for Aboriginal women experiencing domestic and family violence (DFV). A range of methods were employed in the project including literature reviews, surveys, interviews and focus groups.

The focus of the resource paper is on the research activities undertaken by the partner services. The services wanted to find out and to develop effective measures to assess whether their crisis intervention and support was meeting the needs and producing outcomes for their clients and, in particular, for Aboriginal women. The purpose of this paper is to briefly describe the research process and to document the lessons learned from the activities. For further detail on the partner research activities and for more information about the project as a whole, please consult the final research report - Putt, Holder & O'Leary (2016).

For current information and further background on the three partner services please consult the following websites:

Alice Springs Women's Shelter - www.asws.org.au

Domestic Violence Crisis Service - www.dvcs.org.au

Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council Domestic and Family Violence Service (NPYWC DFVS) - www.npywc.org.au

Introduction

Three women's specialist services were involved in designing, developing and undertaking research to explore how to define and measure outcomes from domestic and family violence (DFV) crisis intervention and support. Box 1 provides a summary of the three services. Each of the partner services developed their own research plans, although all three had similar aims and employed similar methods. The projects took nine months and involved a significant in-kind investment by the three services. Some of the budget for the larger ANROWS-funded research was provided to the services for their projects, but it did not meet all the costs associated with being involved in the project.

This paper briefly describes the partners' projects and outlines the lessons from the projects, primarily from the services' perspectives. It is mainly written for services that have an interest in refining and developing their outcome measures with input and guidance from their clients.

The key steps involved in the projects were:

- Defining rationale and aims.
- Developing approach and research design.
- Developing and trialling methods.
- Summarising findings and seeking feedback.
- Implementing the findings.

Box 1 Three partner services

Alice Springs Women's Shelter (ASWS), Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS), Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council Domestic and Family Violence Service (NPYWC DFVS).

Like other services in the sector, all three are independent, non-government organisations. Each has more than 20 years' experience of working in their local environment, are mainly staffed by women (primarily non-Aboriginal women), and are multi-component services. Their paramount aim is to help women and children to be safer.

For two of the partner services, Aboriginal women are either most or all of their clients. For the third service, Aboriginal women are a very small proportion of their crisis line clients. One service operates in a large remote area, one in a regional centre, and both are in central Australia. The third is in a large urbanised regional centre.

Although all three provide crisis and court support (along with other services), they operate in different ways and contexts. One includes a shelter, one includes a crisis telephone line and the third provides crisis and court support to more than 26 remote communities in the cross-border region of central Australia.

Because of all these factors, there were similarities but also distinctive qualities to practice across the services.

Rationale and aims

All three partner services, like many other specialist DFV services, have a history of seeking feedback from their clients. Seeking feedback is part of a commitment to improve and strengthen service delivery and to participatory evaluation, by ensuring women's voices are central to informing how services are provided. However, there is not a robust evidence base to indicate whether services are providing crisis support and intervention that results in outcomes valued by clients. The reasons for this are both practical and conceptual. The nature of DFV and the context in which crisis support occurs is a key reason. Time-limited interventions often preclude the meaningful measurement of outcomes, as the "outcomes" for the client may be some time after the service's involvement. Workers are often under pressure, client contact may be fleeting or anonymous, and what might be termed a "successful" outcome is not always self-evident (Laing, 2003).

Having experienced increasing pressure from funding agencies, and because of their genuine commitment to help and empower their clients, the three partner services saw the research project as an opportunity to explore how they could better define, measure and find outcomes of their crisis work. The focus was on seeking the views of Aboriginal women, as past research and evaluation has often been dispersed, disparate, and concerned with understanding their experiences of DFV rather than of service delivery and practice (Olsen & Lovett, 2016).

Table 1 summarises the three services' goals, the expected short-term crisis outcomes, research focus and methods.

Approach and research design

Collaboration was a cornerstone of the research activities, involving academics, researchers, service leaders and workers, and service clients and stakeholders. Collaboration was also integral to the participatory methods used in the partner projects. During the course of the workshop, a joint approach was taken to leading and guiding the partner research activities. The main way this was done was through three workshops held at the outset, midway and towards the end of the main project. Box 2 outlines what happened at and who was involved in these workshops.

The advantages of having the workshops were that:

- There was a joint sense of purpose to and understanding of the overall project as it progressed. The partner services learned about each other and shared their service experiences with each other and the research team.
- The focus of the research activities on crisis work was agreed across the three services because of their similar concerns, which ensured there was a mutual interest in the results from each of the projects.
- It provided space and time for review and reflection on the research process away from the immediate demands of work.
- Workers were directly involved in the research activities. With two partner projects, outside expertise was brought in to assist with the research. It was a collaborative research process. Box 3 gives more detail on who was involved and how the projects were done. The advantages of taking such an approach were that those who acted as researchers knew how the service worked, how to interpret files and were better placed to communicate respectfully with clients while being mindful of their safety. They often knew the women who were contacted and were trusted by them because of their employment or identity.

Table 1 Summary of partner projects: service goal, expected short-term crisis outcomes, research focus, methods

	ASWS	DVCS	NPYWC DFVS
Common overall goal of service	Women and children are safer Women are stronger		
Expected short-term outcomes from contact at times of crisis	A woman at the shelter: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feels safer and calmer inside the shelter • uses the facilities • asks for stuff Women feel/are stronger after a stay at the shelter <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • has a plan • walks out upright 	Adults and children have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • immediate safety • increased knowledge of DFV • increased awareness of options • decreased isolation 	Women to be and to feel as soon as possible: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • believed • less isolated, more connected • more supported • more capable • more in control
Area of research focus	Whether staying at the shelter makes women feel/be stronger? How do women define feel/be stronger? Can tools be developed to measure if women feel/be stronger?	Whether expected short-term outcomes corresponded to what women value at time of crisis? Can these outcomes be measured? Do Aboriginal women trust the service?	What is the proper help for Aboriginal women experiencing family and domestic violence? How can the service measure this? How can the service know and measure that in response to a crisis it has helped women so that they: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are believed • are more connected and less isolated • feel safer¹
Methods	Conversations with women in four stages File reviews	Focus groups Interviews File review	Workshop Interviews File review

¹This question was added during the analysis of the client file reviews.

Box 2 Collaborative leadership steering the project and the partner's research activities

Three two-day workshops were held during the course of the project to lead, develop, implement and review each of the partner service's own research projects. It was a three-step process which involved at least two representatives of each of the services at the meetings, the research team and, on two occasions, external advisors or experts to assist the process. Professor Patrick Kilby and Dr Joyce Wu from the Australian National University facilitated discussions on participatory research at the first workshop, and Ms Kylie Brosnan, who is undertaking a doctorate in a relevant area and has extensive experience in evaluation and research in Aboriginal communities, helped facilitate the second workshop.

The first workshop involved each partner service describing what they do, their contexts and challenges. Common practice themes were identified across the partner organisations - crisis responses, police partnerships, practical support and advocacy. Discussion then focused on the challenges of knowing what is good practice, knowing what are feasible outcomes, and developing preliminary ideas for each plan that could capture the markers of change that indicate whether women client's situations are improving.

The second workshop primarily concentrated on agreeing on the focus and approach for the partner research plans. Program logics were worked on for each of the services, with an agreed focus on crisis intervention and the challenges of measuring short-term outcomes. Draft research plans for each service were produced by the end of the workshop.

The third workshop was towards the end of the project, after most of the research activities had been completed. It was an opportunity to present what had been done, what adjustments had been made to the plans and methods, and what had been learnt. There was extensive discussion on the research outputs and what could be realistically embedded in practice in the future. There was also feedback on other aspects of the research process, and the overall impact - both positive and negative - of engagement in the project as a whole.

Box 3 Partner research projects: a collaborative research process

Within each of the partner projects there were different groupings of people who were involved and took the lead as researchers.

ASWS: A staff member was given time away from her usual work to talk with women at the shelter about their views and experiences. She and a member of the research team did the file reviews. The ASWS Aboriginal staff mentors provided helpful guidance as did the manager of the service. As is detailed in the methods, women who were residing in the shelter at the time were invited to have conversations (to “yarn”) and, at later stages, to comment on tools to enable feedback discussions with residents. Over a six-month period and during the four stages of the project, at least 20 women residents contributed to the research.

NPYWC DFVS: The first part of the project involved senior women from the NPY Lands who had already been part of an action research project run by the research team. They and the women involved in running the project held a workshop for this project. A former manager of the service, Ms Jane Lloyd, with many decades of experience living and working in central Australia was employed as a consultant by the NPYWC at the time. She was present at the workshop and in the second stage, she undertook all the research activities with women, the file reviews, and wrote up the findings. Discussions and interviews of varying length and depth were held with nine women and the researcher had a prior relationship or contact with seven of the nine women. Five of the interviewees were clients whose files were selected as sample client files to review.

DVCS: Several staff were involved, along with a member of the research team, in designing and running focus groups with women. A local Koori researcher, Ms Tracey Whetnall, who had previous and extensive experience of undertaking research on DFV with Aboriginal women, was engaged to assist the project. She participated in several focus groups, ran one on trust, and undertook several one-on-one interviews with Aboriginal women. Another member of DVCS staff was responsible for designing and conducted the research project on the domestic violence order process in courts. The women who were invited to participate in the focus groups were done so first via text messages to women who were assessed as currently safe and who had contact with the service in the preceding six months; second, through an Aboriginal community organisation and third, by asking women who were detained in the local prison.

Methods

The partner projects involved workers and researchers talking with women about their experiences of service contact at times of crisis, through interviews, focus groups, workshops and discussions. As Box 3 describes, the way this was done differed somewhat across the three projects.

In terms of defining or finding the words and language that best captured what the women had experienced and valued, the ASWS project involved more casual conversations with shelter residents. The NPYWC held a one-day workshop with senior women involved in the Uti Kulintjaku (UK) project²

and focused on words and concepts in regional Aboriginal languages. The DVCS project held a series of focus groups with women to discuss what they valued and how it could be measured, and with Aboriginal women in particular on trust in services.

All three partner services agreed that the process of identifying concepts and using appropriate language for women's experiences had been very helpful (see Box 4)

Box 4 The benefits of exploring women's concepts and language for concepts

Exploring women's concepts and language for concepts was viewed by the partner services as extremely beneficial to the research process and to services as a whole. For the NPYWC, the exploration of language in the Uti Kulintjaku project team workshop has had a value for the organisation as a whole - for example "what makes a good worker" is now used in staff inductions.

The value of having an advisory group of local Aboriginal women, such as the UK group, to help design and influence practice and evaluation was something that ASWS is going to explore. The language used in DVCS focus groups will assist in more effective communication by staff and with the wider community.

Box 5, 6 and 7 document the reflections from the workers/researchers on their respective components of the research activities. The researcher for the NPYWC project stressed how the UK workshop guided and informed the subsequent research activities - the file review and interviews. Both the ASWS and DVCS workers/researchers saw benefits to

themselves and other staff, and to women who learnt more about the service, and found that women who participated gave positive feedback. The DVCS workers/researchers called the focus groups a "therapeutic activity" that resulted in "three-way learning" between the workers, women clients or former clients, and the outsider/researcher.

Box 5 Usefulness of the NPYWC UK Project Workshop

Select words and phrases describing the feelings and experiences relating to domestic violence were useful prompts for the subsequent interviews and discussions. The UK team's descriptive and qualitative characteristics of a good worker and proper help framed and guided the client file reviews and the interviews and discussions.

(Excerpt from NPYWC project methodology report, May 2016)

²A one-day workshop was held in October 2015 and involved 15 Uti Kulintjaku (UK) project team members, all women and representative of the NPYWC's membership. UK is a special project of the Women's Council. The project team is made up of a group of senior Anangu and Yarnangu women who initially came together to work on mental health literacy, but are now working as a research group within the organisation.

Box 6 Reflections from a researcher/worker on conversations with women in the ASWS shelter

Reflecting on the experience, the researcher/worker said:

- “Women were being nice to me, generous. I was really practicing my listening”.
- “I was wanting completely to be listening, not directing, not attached to the next question or the answer. Just letting the story go.”
- “Brilliant talking with women about stuff that wasn’t case work”.

Benefits she saw from the process:

- For participants, it became “an emotional check-in occasion for women”. It was “an opportunity to discuss with me enabled them to formulate the problem, to hear themselves out loud, to have someone respond in a validating way”
- For participants, “I became an informal ombudsman, someone who was not their case worker to complain to. They felt safe as their comments were confidential, for the complaints to be taken to the boss”.
- For staff, it can be rewarding and insightful, which is “why services might make research/inquiry activities routine”.

Box 7 Reflections on the DVCS focus group process - participants and workers

Those involved in running the focus groups agreed that it was a therapeutic activity with clients which would be good to offer regularly. It was agreed it was “three-way” learning for those involved: workers, outsider scribe/researcher, and women participants. It felt like everyone was there to learn, to collaborate as co-researchers.

In individual follow-up contact after a group, women said they enjoyed meeting other women at the focus groups and had liked the opportunity to do something that will help other women. At times, old wounds had opened up but all reported being okay and some said it had made them realise how far they had come. Positive outcomes for the women included: increased confidence, opportunity to reflect on progress, feel like making a difference for others.

Nevertheless, there were challenges encountered during the research process. Box 9 describes the difficulties DVCS had in making contact with women, and Box 8 describes how the NPYWC researcher found it was not always possible to interview women as they were in the process of getting help and/or dealing with more immediate needs.

Across the partner projects, it was found that not many women responded to invitations to participate in interviews. This is not surprising, given the subject matter and the fact that their lives may have changed since they had contact

with the service. The main implication is that expectations of participation rates have to be realistic. It was also found that some women, instead of interviews, preferred to participate in a group discussion, such as the UK team workshop and the DVCS focus groups, or in more informal, open-ended conversations.

Box 8 Challenges of conducting face-to-face interviews with NPYWC DFVS clients

The initial research plan proposed to consult a sample group of 20 younger women under the age of 30 through interviews and discussions. It was envisaged that opportunistic contact with women of this age range would present. The research did not achieve the proposed demographic sample. Fewer interview and discussion opportunities arose during the research period and very few with women in the proposed sample age range. A couple of interviews and discussions were attempted with clients when an opportunity arose but they did not eventuate because the client was in the process of getting help and/or dealing with other more immediate needs [emphasis added].

As the sample client file reviews revealed, the majority of contact between the service and the clients was initiated by the clients through telephone contact. This meant that very few opportunities arose to hold a face-to-face discussion or interview with a client in Alice Springs, especially as they generally required an introduction and/or a prior relationship between the interviewer and the client.

(Excerpt from NPYWC project methodology report, May 2016)

Box 9 Few women responded to invitations to participate in face-to-face interviews in all three partner projects.

Across the projects, there were low response rates and very real challenges in engaging clients or ex-clients in face-to-face interviews. In many instances, the reasons for non-response were not known.

With recruitment for the DVCS community-based “what is valued” focus groups, when the SMS texts were sent out to women inviting them to focus groups, many never answered. When there was a positive response, women were given the option of having a one-on-one interview with an Aboriginal or a non-Aboriginal researcher. A similar offer was made to the women who actually attended the focus groups. In both circumstances, no-one took up the opportunity. The two Aboriginal women who did agree to face-to-face interviews were known to the Aboriginal researcher and not contacted via a DVCS worker.

With the DVCS sub-project on domestic violence orders, only two women out of the many who were contacted via SMS after their court matter, agreed to an interview with the worker/researcher. Instead the project relied on the file review, which did not proceed quite as envisaged.

With the NPYWC DFVS project, the number of interviews and the sampling frame had to be changed and reduced. However, at least there was a sufficient number of women who engaged in conversations with the researcher to enable some conclusions to be drawn. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether most of these interviews would have been possible without the researcher already having personal connections to the women prior to the approach for an interview, and the researcher being involved in some case management work for the service.

Using and developing visual aids

There were a range of visual aids employed in the research activities with women:

- To capture or prompt conversations about feelings
- To measure the extent or scale of satisfaction with services/amenities or feelings
- To summarise feedback during focus groups and the UK workshop.

Visual cards are a long-standing resource tool in many disciplines and areas. Two sets of image cards were used in the research—Yarnabout Cards³ and Picture This⁴ cards. In the DVCS focus groups the cards were used at the outset and at several junctures during the discussion. Participants were asked to select a number of cards that for them represented or indicated how they had felt before and after contact with the crisis service. Box 10 summarises the participants' views of the cards.

Box 10 Reflections on visual aids - DVCS focus group participants

Participants agreed it was easier to say how they were feeling. It was more direct than the images. Several participants did not like using the pictures, but the majority said they were useful especially for discussing how they were feeling after contact and may feel confused. The images were described as a "visual prompt", as a "starting point".

The photo cards were also used in conversations with the Aboriginal women resident at ASWS. Paper-based forms had not worked well, as "white paper" aroused suspicion and had negative associations with work and research. Although women found the pictures engaging, they did not work well as a measurement tool. As a result, women were asked to indicate by drawing in a sandbox how they felt and for feedback about aspects of the shelter experience. Women were more prepared to discuss their feelings using the sandbox, and it was then easier for the researcher/worker to engage them in the paper feedback tool (see Box 11).

Although written summaries of research findings were given to participants, a more immediate way of conveying feedback during the DVCS focus groups and the UK workshop was through the use of a whiteboard. This was an important way to check with the participants that their views and input had been adequately captured and agreed. Table 2 is an example of what was summarised during a DVCS focus group on what was valued from the service at the time of crisis. Three columns listed the feelings before and after a crisis, while the central column summarises what was most valued from the service at the time of crisis contact⁵.

³The Yarning Cards are an initiative of the Nungeena Aboriginal Corporation for Women's Business in the Glass House Mountains area of Queensland. For further information, contact nungeena@harboursat.com.au

⁴The Picture This card-set was first launched in 2007 and consists of photographs of people and places that are aimed to stimulate the imagination, memory and emotions. According to the website "they can be powerful catalysts for storytelling, writing and reflection about our values and priorities". Retrieved 16 September 2016, <http://innovativeresources.org/resources/card-sets/picture-this/>

⁵Very positive comments were also made about DVCS court support but they are not included here, as the focus was on times of immediate crisis.

Box 11 ASWS trial continuum for feelings - represented as scales on paper



Table 2 DVCS focus groups- whiteboard summary of what was valued at time of crisis

Feelings before	What was most valued at the time of crisis	Feelings after – in the short term	Feelings after – in the longer term
Alone/isolated Trapped Depressed Scared A mess/shredded Indecisive/hesitant	Active listening Expertise and knowledge translated into practical help and plain English	No longer alone/isolated People on my team Relief Not judged Reassured Heard	Connected to the community Free Having life back Have friends Hope (light at the end of the tunnel)

File reviews

All three partner projects involved reviewing their files. So much information is kept in files and the services believed they could potentially indicate if there had been changes over time in service practice and in outcomes for individual women. The aims and size of the samples differed somewhat, but there were lessons learnt common to all the reviews. They were time and resource intensive, only partly answered the research questions, and often revealed more about record keeping than about practice and client outcomes. Boxes 12 and 13 summarises the worker/researcher reflections on what was learnt. The review of a sample NPYWC DFVS files did address most of the key research questions, but took much longer than originally envisaged.

The key implication from this experience was that the first step should be a pilot that involves selecting a small sample of files to test whether reviewing the records will assist in answering the research questions. It may have the additional benefit of assessing the quality and consistency of information and the ease of retrieval.

Box 12 ASWS file reviews - worker/researchers' reflections on record keeping

The researchers, when pondering the exercise, how it went and what was found in the files, concluded that there were a number of adjustments that could be made to ease the burden of record keeping and generally improve information collection and retrieval processes. These suggestions which included templates and tally/check sheets, and an investment in electronic data management across the ASWS services were passed to the ASWS manager.

Box 13 NPYWC DFVS project - researcher reflections: what did the client file review tell us?

The client file review not only captured the kinds or categories of contact but what kind of help the client sought when they initiated the contact, and the kind of help or actions NPYWC DFVS provided when the client initiated and made contact with the service. That is, what was the nature of the contact and how that can be used as tool to capture and measure the "what". The review also recorded, where possible, information about where the client was when direct contact occurred and indicated the kinds of non-crisis help or contact that the women seek.

The case file review and sample frame as a tool answered the first three questions about women's willingness to engage with the service and share their story, partially answered case workers verifying their story and indicated what the service did with the information. Information varied in relation to answering the second part about what protection was put in place, where did the women go and who was there that cared and whether she stayed in contact.

(Excerpt from NPYWC project methodology report, May 2016)

Findings

Table 3 summarises the methods that were employed in the partner projects, and the main findings, and outputs from the projects. At a broad level, key findings across the projects were that:

- Key short-term outcomes valued by women align across the projects and with services' expectations of what they should strive to achieve in crisis responses.
- There are locally-informed and appropriate ways of eliciting client feedback and perspectives on crisis responses.
- Methods and tools do not always work well, may require adaption, and can be resource intensive.

At the final workshop for the project, the partner services discussed how they could build on their research activities and use the findings and the tools in the future. As managers, they were cautious in their plans for future evaluation and feedback activity within their services, but saw opportunities to continue to develop and strategically employ facets of their research activities, such as the focus group and workshop models, and key concepts to seek feedback on. All three services expressed a continued commitment to engage with clients and former clients to review progress and elicit feedback.

Table 3 Partners' projects: methods, findings, outputs

	ASWS	DVCS	NPYWC DFVS
Methods	<p>Conversations with women in four stages</p> <p>File reviews</p>	<p>Focus groups</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>File review</p>	<p>Workshop</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>File review</p>
Findings	<p>Key short-term outcomes that re-focus away from the concept “stronger” to other concepts that capture how women are and may change as a result of being in the shelter</p> <p>Key feedback items that centre on material and practical help to check with women about their stay in the shelter</p>	<p>Key short term outcomes valued by women align across groupings</p> <p>What is valued is both about the nature of contact and what is offered</p> <p>What happens to and about children as a result of crisis contact is of crucial importance to Aboriginal women</p> <p>Aboriginal women’s trust in a service/worker is most important for longer term contact</p>	<p>Key concepts derived from local understandings languages of “proper help” and a “good worker”</p> <p>How such concepts can contribute to monitoring and evaluating practice and outcomes</p> <p>What women value as proper help includes assertive outreach and advocacy by workers</p> <p>The value of case studies in highlighting the specificities of women’s circumstances and context, and the challenges of crisis support</p>
Key findings	<p>Key short term outcomes valued by women align across the projects and services’ expectations of what they should strive to achieve in crisis responses</p> <p>There are locally informed and appropriate ways of eliciting client feedback and perspectives on crisis responses</p> <p>Methods and tools do not always work well, may require adaption, and can be resource intensive</p>		
Outputs	<p>Key items to focus on for feedback and to underpin evaluations</p> <p>Approach to seeking feedback</p> <p>Check-lists and ways to improve record keeping</p>	<p>Focus group review model</p> <p>Feedback methods</p> <p>Approach to asking about cultural identity</p>	<p>Workshop model: senior Aboriginal women advising on language/concepts</p> <p>Select sampling of women to review progress and outcomes</p> <p>Building in reviews of practice for all NPYWC services as well as the DFVS based on the project findings</p>
Key outputs	<p>A cluster of short-term outcomes from crisis responses that reflect what women value from services</p> <p>Tested ways of eliciting Aboriginal women’s feedback and views that can inform reviews and evaluations</p> <p>Guides and resources for other women’s specialist DFV services</p>		

Reflections on researcher and service collaborations

Research collaborations can be extremely rich in producing a range of data and contextualised analysis (Sullivan, Price, McPartland, Hunter, & Fisher, 2016). For researchers, they can potentially facilitate access to populations that are hard-to-reach and marginalised. For services, they can enable opportunities for intense reflection, and enhance understanding and ways of doing.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women service users and community members who participated in the partners' research projects demonstrated the power of deliberate and careful engagements with them as knowledge producers even in such a sensitive area as DFV. The research did not ask them their experiences of abuse and other painful topics (though stories were shared). Rather, it asked for their insights on definitions, concepts, meaning, priority and measurement.

However, research such as this project will raise questions about its ethics and the nature of the findings (to name just two). Some of the tensions that emerged were:

- First, most research is designed with particular questions and an assumption of linear progression. Participatory research is not like this. There is a lot of uncertainty – both researchers and services have to let go a degree of control. Trust, mutual regard and careful communication are critical. It also takes time and considerable ongoing support from services.
- Second, it is important to limit claims about equality in collaboration and participatory research. Co-research, co-production and co-design are attractive concepts and approaches with considerable potential but are not always fully realised. For example, while service partners have had a role in shaping the final report for the overall research, none of the workers or the service users or other participants had the opportunity to do so. Furthermore, none of us – researchers, service providers and service users – may have the necessary influence or control over the context or conditions to which research findings are put.

Having said all that, it is important not to lose sight of what was gained from all participants in the partner research projects. The research process was for many a rewarding and helpful exercise. Examining questions about whether a crisis service is meeting the needs of those who it has contact with is always worthwhile. Identifying certain methods and tools, and improved language to evaluate women's service experiences that are based upon what Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women say is a very practical outcome that services value from the research.

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