



# Engaging men who use violence:

Invitational narrative approaches  
*Key findings and future directions*

ANROWS

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ANROWS Research to policy and practice papers are concise papers that summarise key findings of research on violence against women and their children, including research produced under ANROWS's research program, and provide advice on the implications for policy and practice.

This is an edited summary of key findings from the ANROWS research project *Engaging men: Invitational-narrative approaches*. Please consult the ANROWS website for more information on this project and the full project report: Wendt, S., Seymour, K., Buchanan, F., Dolman, C., & Greenland, N. (2019). *Engaging men who use violence: Invitational narrative approaches* (Research report, 05/2019). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.

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ANROWS research contributes to the six *National Outcomes of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*. This research addresses National Plan Outcome 6 – Perpetrators stop their violence and are held to account.

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

ANROWS acknowledges the traditional owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders past, present, and future, and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge.

### **Acknowledgement of lived experiences of violence**

ANROWS acknowledges the lives and experiences of the women and children affected by domestic, family and sexual violence who are represented in this report. We recognise the individual stories of courage, hope and resilience that form the basis of ANROWS research.

Caution: Some people may find parts of this content confronting or distressing. Recommended support services include: 1800 RESPECT – 1800 737 732 and Lifeline – 13 11 14.

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IN BRIEF

# Engaging men who use violence: Invitational narrative approaches

## KEY FINDINGS

- Invitational narrative approaches seek to create change that is self-generated and personally meaningful, and therefore likely to be sustainable.
- A strength of invitational narrative approaches is their capacity to engage men who use violence. Invitational narrative approaches achieve this through:
  - Curious inquiry.
  - Supporting men to explore and articulate their “ethical preferences”—how they wish to live.
  - Supporting men to identify what restrains them from living in accordance with their ethical preferences.
  - Creating an environment that is non-judgemental and safe in which men can experience their shame.
- Invitational narrative approaches maintain an unrelenting focus on women’s and children’s safety and on men’s accountability to others.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Invitational narrative practitioners must be highly skilled.
- Invitational narrative approaches are readily adaptable to different intervention contexts.
- Engaging with women provides valuable perspectives on men’s progress as well as on women’s and children’s safety.

# Engaging men who use violence

Engaging men in a conversation about change is one of the key challenges for practitioners working with men who use violence. Men who use violence often minimise or justify their violent behaviour, and they can be defensive when challenged. Engagement is the first step towards attitudinal and behavioural change.

## Invitational narrative models of intervention

Narrative practice engages with people by exploring the ways in which they make sense of their lives through stories. Michael White, the Director of the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, South Australia, created narrative therapy in collaboration with David Epston, as outlined in their seminal 1990 book *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. The aim of narrative practice is to enable people to “re-author” their stories and, in doing so, enhance their sense of agency and capacity for change.

Alan Jenkins of Nada Consulting expanded upon narrative therapy concepts as he set out an “invitational practice” model that focused specifically on work with male perpetrators of violence. Jenkins outlined his approach in his 1990 book *Invitations to responsibility: The therapeutic engagement of men who are violent and abusive* and described further developments in invitational practice in his 2009 book *Becoming ethical*. Invitational practice seeks to engage men who use violence in an ethical journey toward respectful relationships, encouraging them to develop their own practice of self-confrontation and helping them to discover their own capacities for respectful ways of being.

“Invitational narrative” approaches are models of intervention that incorporate aspects of both White’s narrative therapy and Jenkins’s invitational practice. Invitational narrative approaches:

- Focus on men’s particular stories and backgrounds, rather than universally applicable generalisations.
- Seek to create change that is self-generated and personally meaningful, and therefore likely to be sustainable.
- Open up conversations through curious inquiry, rather than shutting it down through confrontational approaches.
- Maintain an unrelenting focus on women and children’s safety and on men’s accountability to others.
- Maintain a focus on social change, recognising that violence is an expression of power relations and is therefore essentially political in nature.

## Engaging men through invitational narrative approaches

Research suggests that narrative therapy offers an avenue for creating conversations that can quickly become rich, meaningful and valuable (Young & Cooper, 2008). Narrative therapy allows for multiple and contradictory stories, allowing men to explore their multiple and contradictory desires (Augusta-Scott & Dankwort, 2002). Narrative therapy is especially valuable for group work with men because its non-confrontational approach limits the opportunity for defiance and oppositional exchanges (Ricks, Kitchens, Goodrich, & Hancock, 2014). In an exploratory study of invitational narrative practices in perpetrator intervention groups, Béres and Nichols (2010, p. 60) showed that these do “in fact, result in interactions that engage”.

Given these findings that narrative and invitational narrative approaches have a strong capacity to engage, it is worth exploring how they achieve this.

### The ANROWS research project *Engaging men who use violence: Invitational narrative approaches* by Sarah Wendt, Kate Seymour, Fiona Buchanan, Chris Dolman and Natalie Greenland

This qualitative study explored how invitational narrative ways of working successfully engage men and enable behavioural and attitudinal change. The study explored the historical and philosophical foundations of invitational narrative practice and the principles and skills that practitioners use in their work.

The study was conducted in partnership with Uniting Communities in Adelaide, which has a strong, agency-wide commitment to invitational narrative practice and has maintained longstanding relationships with the Dulwich Centre. Uniting Communities works with men who use violence in men’s behaviour change groups and also in counselling. The agency also provides counselling and support to the partners/ex-partners of these men and their children.

The ANROWS research study involved two stages. Stage 1 comprised a literature review and interviews with seven experts in the field of invitational narrative approaches in South Australia.

Stage 2 comprised interviews with men who use violence, with each man’s invitational narrative practitioner, and (where consent was obtained) with each man’s partner/ex-partner. In total there were six dyads (man and practitioner) and five triads (man, practitioner and ex/partner).

Quotes from these interviews are included in this Research to Policy and Practice paper (the page references given relate to the full research report). For more detail on research methodology, see the full research report at [anrows.org.au/publication/engaging-men-who-use-violence-invitational-narrative-approaches](https://anrows.org.au/publication/engaging-men-who-use-violence-invitational-narrative-approaches).

# Key findings

## 1. How invitational narrative practice engages men who use violence.

Engagement is commonly assessed through program attendance, compliance or completion. Yet it is possible for clients to attend, comply and complete programs without having any intention to embark on a process of change. In reality, engagement involves much more than just turning up. It requires an emotional and intentional investment on the part of the client, based on their expectation that the program will be of benefit to them. Invitational narrative approaches support the development of this investment in the following ways:

### a) Respectful collaboration and a competency focused approach.

- Practitioners approach men as competent and capable of meaningful, lasting change.
- They are careful not to pre-judge men as intrinsically deficient.
- They are curious about men's stories and the contradictions within them.
- They slow down the work—emphasising depth, reflection and contemplation.

### b) Supporting men to explore and articulate their ethical preferences (how they wish to live).

- Practitioners listen for and inquire about the things that matter to the man, his core values and aspirations and the kinds of relationship he hopes for.
- Work is deliberative and iterative, focusing on meaning-making in a contextualised way.
- Men create richer stories about their lives, informed by their ethical preferences.
- The invitational narrative focus on story-telling, ethics and cultural context is especially compatible with working with Aboriginal men who use violence.
- By focusing on men's ethical preferences, practitioners work *around* resistance; reluctance is not necessarily a barrier to engagement.
- The richer stories that men create can serve as an anchor, both in terms of accountability and as the basis for sustainable, long-term change.

### c) Supporting men to identify what restrains them from living in accordance with their ethical preferences.

- Working from a position of curiosity, practitioners ask questions of men to enable them to see what is stopping them from realising their ethical preferences. For example:
  - What gets in the way of you realising your ethical preferences?

- What restrains you from choosing respectful and non-violent ways of being?
- How does the cultural context shape your individual beliefs and actions?

#### d) Supporting men in experiencing their shame in an environment that is non-judgemental and safe.

- Shame plays an important role in the process of taking responsibility.
- Practitioners slowly and sensitively engage men in conversations about their shame and other difficult feelings, in an environment that is non-judgemental and safe.
- Practitioners support men in facing their shame in a way that highlights the contradictions between their behaviour and their stated ethical preferences.

One practitioner discussed the delicacy of this work:

These are conversations most of these men have never had with anybody, and I have to try and remember that, you know? It's weird, isn't it, but lots of men I work with who have made life incredibly dangerous and painful for the people around them, require a huge sense of safety to talk about them. So that ... fascinates me, that space, the simultaneous visiting of huge trauma and hurt on others, and creating a constant atmosphere or a context of safety for them to step into, to be able to work in this space, and non-judgement. (p. 52)

#### e) Supporting men to name their violence and explore how it has affected their partners and children.

- Practitioners support men to name their violence and articulate its effects on women and children.
- The recognition of harms done to others cannot be forced; trying to rush this can lead to active resistance, avoidance or defensiveness.
- Men's capacity to offer precise and accurate descriptions of their violence and its effects is a key indicator of their readiness to change.

#### Harry<sup>1</sup> described the process of exploring his ethical preferences:

*I'm a Christian ... exploring my own beliefs and values has been challenging because, certainly the church upholds that same hierarchical model, and dare I say it, most churches that I've been involved in uphold the stereotypical model as well, so the male is the head of the church, it can't be a woman, and that's always challenged me ... it caused me to look at the values and ideas that I'd grown up with, and that I'd learned and so in a sense caused me to, I guess, kind of unpack every part of my life. (p. 50)*

#### Bob spoke of how challenging he found the process:

*Taking ownership of the things you've done and how it made you feel, certainly doesn't sit well. When you sit back and analyse what you've done and how you've treated people, it's not really nice. (p. 57)*

## 2. How effectiveness may be evident in invitational narrative practice.

Being tailored to the individual rather than employing a standardised approach, invitational narrative practice is not readily amenable to assessment through experimental design. Rather, effectiveness is conceptualised in terms of moments, movements towards responsibility and change that are unique to men's own journeys and are evident in their articulation of key learnings. Effectiveness is also evident

<sup>1</sup> Note that all names given here are pseudonyms.



in shifts that are verifiable and confirmed by significant others, most notably women and children.

Realisations of change and expressions of accountability can be seen in:

- how men name abusive practices—especially when they can give specific details;
- how men understand the effects of abuse—especially when they can explain this in concrete terms;
- how men develop an attentiveness to other people's experiences, rather than a self-focused stance;
- how men face their shame; and
- how they engage with men's use of violence against women in a socio-political context.

### 3. Transformative social change.

- Invitational narrative approaches are directed towards social transformation, not merely personal or individual change.
- An analysis of gender-based power, privilege and entitlement (as social factors shaping men's individual choices to use violence) is foundational to invitational narrative practice.
- Invitational narrative practitioners are alert to signs that men are ready to explore gendered power relations and the ways in which media, educational, religious and political institutions "recruit" them into dominant male culture. This often occurs later in the practitioner-client engagement and a man's journey, and depends on his readiness and insight to have these conversations.

### 4. Women's and children's safety.

#### Women's accounts of men's change:

- Women's stories provide critical insight regarding men's change.
- Evident in the perspectives of the women is the incredibly complex and pervasive impact of living with violence, and hence the vastness of "change".

#### Implications of men's change for women's lives:

- In response to changes made by men, women also change.
- These changes in women's lives reflect the full impact and implications of perpetrator interventions.

Steve, who had been engaged with invitational narrative counselling for just over 2 years, was able to give specific examples of ways in which he had changed his behaviour. Referring to a recent instance in which he had said something that upset his partner, Jane, he explained that rather than getting defensive:

*In certain situations I still like to give her space but then I like to—so I apologised to her, I held her hand, I tried just reassuring her. But it was already done. I couldn't—I can't stop what she's feeling from several years ago. So and then when I explained to her what happened I think that sort of just—she realised that what I said wasn't what was intended ... (pp. 66-67)*

John's practitioner emphasised that a distinction must be made between approaches that "sort of blam[e] the individual man for this" and those that encourage a man to "take responsibility for his position" within culture—that is, recognising that while an individual is not "responsible for inventing these tactics of violence or abuse that ha[ve] been around for thousands of years", he can choose to take a position on/against it. (p. 73)

Jim's partner, June, reflected on how she perceived Jim's change:

*I guess with the group he started to recognise himself in others, through them ... I think for the first time not only seeing it but admitting it, do you know, whereas prior to this relationship there was a lot of denial and 'It's shit, it was her fault and she was a bitch'...[but] this time he is going, 'Well hang on a minute this is girlfriend number four ...'. (p. 62)*



Jane, Steve's partner, said:

That's the other thing I've really learnt—I don't need his approval—I don't need to ask him for stuff whereas before I use to—'Would it be okay if I this?' ... Yeah I'm allowed to be me. (p. 75)

### **"Women's work":**

- Women contributed significantly to the changes men made.
- Women's efforts both enabled and supplemented the formal intervention service.

John's practitioner recounted:

Largely because of the work [Linda] had probably done for years, is my hunch. In fact I'd be 99% confident that that's the case: that by the time they got here, she spent years getting him ready, I suspect, or had time to unpack this story, I think she would be figuring out very largely I would imagine. And lots of women do this, I think, over long stretches of time. (p. 75)

# Implications for policy and practice

## **Invitational narrative practitioners must be highly skilled.**

Practitioners must:

- receive ongoing training, supervision and support;
- be influenced by post-structural, feminist and intersectional thinking;
- be prepared to reflect upon their own social positioning; and
- be ready to acknowledge their work with individual men as part of a larger political project focusing on gender equality and the safety of women and their children.

## **Invitational narrative approaches are readily adaptable.**

- They can be used in different intervention contexts e.g. men's behaviour change groups and counselling.
- They are useful at different stages of a man's progress towards non-violence.

## **Engaging with women provides valuable perspectives on men's progress as well as on women's and children's safety.**

- Structures of accountability and processes for supporting women and children must be in place.
- Program funders must include partner support when funding programs for men who use violence.

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