



The client–worker relationship in men’s behaviour change programs

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 "Exploring the client-worker relationship in men's behaviour change programs". Please consult the ANROWS website for more information on this project and the full project report: Reimer, E. C. (2020). "Growing to be a better person": Exploring the client-worker relationship in men's behaviour change programs (Research report, 15/2020). Sydney: 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. We are committed to standing and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, honouring the truths set out in the [Warawarni-gu Guma Statement](#).

The client–worker relationship in men’s behaviour change programs

BACKGROUND

- Men’s behaviour change programs (MBCPs) commonly employ confrontational and punitive approaches which do not encourage men to develop an intrinsic motivation to engage.
- An alternative approach is one based on a personalised client-worker relationship, characterised by empathy and trust.
- This study explored perceptions of the client-worker relationship in MBCPs, including the purpose, value and meaning of the relationship, and factors that were perceived to affect its development.

KEY FINDINGS

- Facilitators of MBCPs can build personalised client-worker relationships, using self-disclosure to forge an emotional bond and build trust with participants.
- These personalised client-worker relationships can create an environment conducive to behavioural and attitudinal change.
- There is a risk of collusion when facilitators have a strong emotional investment in participants.
- Collusion can be prevented if facilitators regularly:
 - make clear statements about the professional purpose of the relationship
 - challenge participants’ attempts to collude
 - maintain good relationships with supervisors, where the challenges of the client-worker relationship can be openly discussed.
- Maintaining personalised client-worker relationships can heighten the emotional load on facilitators and this can manifest in gendered ways.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The value of the client–worker relationship in facilitating behaviour change should be recognised by organisations and steps should be taken to help facilitators maintain personalised relationships.
- The emotional load experienced by facilitators and the gendered way this can manifest should be recognised at management and organisational levels.
- Flexibility in funding models is needed to allow participants to return to programs once they have completed the modules, to enable behaviour change to be sustained in the long term.

Approaches to the client–worker relationship in men’s behaviour change programs

Facilitators of men’s behaviour change programs (MBCPs) are usually encouraged to maintain a professional distance, and discouraged from disclosing personal information about themselves. Confrontational and punitive approaches are commonly employed in these programs, especially in correctional settings. Such approaches model abusive ways of relating: rather than encouraging participants to learn new ways of relating, they seek to coerce them to change their behaviours. Programs using such approaches generally have a high rate of attrition.

An alternative approach is to develop personalised client–worker relationships which can be more conducive to the development of men’s internal motivation to change (Wendt, Seymour, Buchanan, Dolman, & Greenland, 2019).

There are differing views about the extent to which a client–worker relationship needs to be a deeply interpersonal connection in order to be effective. The difference of opinion relates to ongoing debate about professional boundaries, what constitutes boundary violation, how these relate to collusive behaviour, and the complex nature of empathy in client–worker relationships, in particular in contexts involving statutory involvement.

THE ANROWS RESEARCH PROJECT

“Exploring the client–worker relationship in men’s behaviour change group work programs”

by Elizabeth Reimer

This qualitative study explored perceptions of the client–worker relationship, including its purpose, value and meaning. The study also explored factors perceived to affect the development of the client–worker relationship over time.

The study involved 65 semi-structured, conversational style, in-depth interviews. Interviewees included:

- 22 participants of MBCPs
- 32 facilitators of MBCPs (both male and female)
- 8 supervisors of facilitators
- 3 partners/ex-partners of participants.

The study was conducted in partnership with two MBCPs at three sites: the Men and Family Centre in Lismore and Tweed Heads, New South Wales; and Centacare in Southport, Queensland.

Quotes in this paper come from the interviews conducted with participants, facilitators, supervisors and (ex-)partners, and also appear in the full report.

See anrows.org.au for the full report, including methodological details.

Key findings

Facilitators can build personalised client-worker relationships using self-disclosure to forge an emotional bond and build trust with participants

Men's behaviour change program participants spoke of how facilitators displayed their personal or human side when engaging with participants. Some participants and facilitators called this "being real" in the relationship. Facilitators disclosed a range of personal details, ranging from interests similar to those of participants (surfing, music), to personal challenges and vulnerabilities (child abuse, drug or alcohol misuse), to having used, or experienced, domestic and family violence. Some participants described how this disclosure helped them to participate fully in the program.

One of [the facilitator's] main things is he's really open ... So he leads the way ... He spills what his history involves ... all the way back to his childhood traumas ... It just helps, because it's encouraging. You know, you can see someone who has ... changed incredibly. You know, for me to see that, and then for him to sort of really humbly open up to a group of men, and lead the way that—I don't know, it's just inspiring. It just makes you feel safe. It makes you feel safe to have someone lead the way ... I don't know why it makes a difference. I think it's just that human connection thing ... just to feel trusted, to feel trusted—to trust someone else, and I mean trusted, that's not the right word. But safe ... you trust the situation enough to be safe enough to be vulnerable. (Participant)

By contrast, some participants reported how they usually experienced professional power as surveillance, control and regulation of their behaviour, which created a barrier to being open and honest with the facilitator.

Personalised client-worker relationships create an environment conducive to behavioural and attitudinal change

Facilitators used the client-worker relationship to demonstrate care and support, while directly challenging participants to think and behave differently. The client-worker relationship was a key factor in whether or not participants were interested in what the facilitator had to say when discussing challenging ideas.

Personalised client-worker relationships were found to:

- assist participants to engage, and to remain engaged, in highly challenging behavioural change interventions
- help create a safe and nurturing group work environment, where men felt safe enough to open up and make themselves vulnerable
- create opportunities for facilitators to learn about men and why they were violent, and

for men to learn about themselves and why they were violent

- provide opportunities for participants to see good relationships in action, for example when the male facilitator and the female facilitator modelled respectful ways of disagreeing
- enable change, through creating a space where participants could practice relating in non-violent and caring ways—even when confronted and feeling vulnerable
- provide an experiential opportunity (through participants' relationship with the female facilitator) to practice relating to women in an equal and non-violent way.

Building up the relationship is about building up a relationship that he may never have experienced before, which is a relationship of trust where he feels safe in a way, and that he's having to go places emotionally. That he's come to an understanding that he has an inner life, which a lot of men don't. I mean, masculinity generally doesn't value the kind of inner life ... So, once you start to value your own inner life, you start to see other people have got inner lives. But also, the fact that if you hurt someone, it actually causes you pain now. So, it's not just about giving them information. It's not just some kind of CBT [cognitive behaviour therapy] sort of thing. (Supervisor)

I'm not like a psychologist or whatever, but I feel like [the male facilitator] was almost like a ... well, he is, he's a positive male role model in Paul's life, and his father wasn't that, and his uncles weren't that. ([Ex-]partner)

[The female facilitator] can stay in there and say, "Oh I feel all right now, uncomfortable or a little bit hurt. Not really want to be here right now" ... Sometimes I don't understand, when I try to go back and analyse the whole situation, what we could have done to—or what I could have done to make her feel uncomfortable. And that's just what I try with my partner as well and other females as well ... She definitely gets me to the point where I think about how I react when another woman is around ... Yeah, different perspective ... she definitely challenged me on this point. (Participant)

There is a risk of collusion when facilitators have a strong emotional investment in participants

Collusion undermines the primary purpose of men's behaviour change work, which is to support men to take responsibility for their use of violence. When facilitators collude with participants they are no longer in a position to hold men accountable for their use of violence.

Facilitators, supervisors and (ex-)partners interviewed in this research provided examples of situations in which collusion *could* occur, such as when participants:

- spoke about women in dehumanising, disrespectful or abusive ways
- resisted the challenge to change
- tried to maintain a notion of themselves as victims, and convince others of this, for

example, by trying to recruit others to agree that it was trauma and distress that was the problem, not their violent attitudes and behaviours towards women.

Interviewees identified that collusion *does* occur when a facilitator does not quickly move to shut down the attempt to collude by challenging the man on these issues. When there is a strong emotional bond, there is a risk that facilitators won't challenge participants, for fear of spoiling the relationship. A strong bond might also mean that facilitators do not urge men to take responsibility for transferring their changed behaviour to their home environment.

Collusion also creates an unsafe work environment for female facilitators.

It's slippery work, because you're kind of wanting to create that really safe place that is compassionate and respectful, and nurturing. And yet, at the same time, be really alert to any of the stuff that's going to slip them away back into that space, or create an environment where they're colluding together, where it gets really difficult to do the work. And the levels of honesty drop, and the levels of self-disclosure drop, and they get caught in blaming everyone else ... (Female facilitator)

We know that if we really like a client compared to a client that we sort of stay a little bit more removed from it's tricky. It gets a little bit—we start to wonder what in terms of judgement or ... how much of our want to keep going is because we really enjoy their company and how much of it's because they need the work done and all that sort of stuff. (Supervisor)

Collusion can be prevented if facilitators communicate clearly about the purpose of the relationship, challenge participants' attempts to collude, and maintain good relationships with peers and supervisors

Facilitators and supervisors emphasised the importance of being explicit about the nature of the client–worker relationship, stating that it is not a friendship but a professional relationship with the goal of change. Some participants described the relationship as similar to an apprenticeship, where they could learn from people who knew what they were talking about because they had been through a similar process.

And I was pretty sure from the first start I don't have to be your mate. It was one of [the facilitator's] first sentences. Then actually, yeah, it's a little bit like my apprenticeship ... My boss went from this whole thing from the start, "So you might hate me in this time, because I will drag you through shit. When you fuck up I will tell you you fucked up." Yeah, it's pretty much like your apprenticeship on a certain point. (Participant)

I think we build it into the relationship from the start. So, certainly, at intake the message that [the male facilitator] tried to give is that "I'm here to support you, I'm

here to help you, sometimes that help is not going to look like what you think it looks like. I'm here, I'm going to keep you accountable to help keep a woman safe, and to help you to change." That's always on the table from the start. Even though he may not grasp it. Then, it's just kept on the table all the time... making that boundary really, really clear from the start, but, also holding all the way through. (Supervisor)

Participants, (ex-)partners, facilitators and supervisors reported that collusion could be prevented or stopped by having facilitators quickly, openly and unequivocally challenge participants' attempts to collude. When facilitators challenged participants, it created an opportunity for men to experience being confronted in a safe and positive way. Participants reported that it was the personalised client-worker relationship that allowed this confrontation to take place effectively, in a way that could lead to change rather than to defensiveness.

Employing women as group facilitators can also be a strategy for preventing and managing collusion, because female facilitators provide alternative perspectives about female power, male privilege and male entitlement. It is important that male facilitators respond alongside female facilitators as a united front when collusion occurs. This involves male facilitators being alert to female facilitators' discomfort and challenging participants together with them.

Supervisors can support facilitators to avoid and manage collusion through maintaining an honest, open, trusting, respectful and caring professional relationship with their staff.

Every now and again a worker will say to me, "I really like this guy" and I go, "Okay that's great" because firstly—it's almost like they're acknowledging it for the purpose of saying, "that's having an impact on my work with him". It's just good for me to go, "Okay this guy's got whatever that is that we talk about amongst these fellows sometimes." (Supervisor)

However, some facilitators reported they had difficulty bringing details about close client-worker relationships to supervisors, feeling that the supervisors would not be able to relate to their experience.

One facilitator spoke of the need for workers to challenge other professionals in the sector on their assumptions regarding personalised client-worker relationships in MBCPs:

The fear that we will collude in the violence as opposed to supporting men to collude in the change is so big. It's really challenging ... But I was friendly with [group participants]. I was kind to them. I had compassion for them. I treated them with respect. I don't think that's collusion.

Agreeing with the behaviour or accepting the behaviour. Or doing that thing where he's saying, "Everything that I'm accused of doing is what she was doing", and saying, "You poor thing" [would make a relationship one of collusion]. If I were to say "You poor thing", that would need to then be followed by, however, "Let's have a look at what your actual choices were and what you chose to do and all of that blame stuff."

It's never stopped being purposeful for me. I know what I'm doing here. Without a doubt, what I'm doing here is I'm attempting to support men to change their behaviour, and that means their violence whether it's physical or emotional or spiritual or mental, they're abusive, they're controlling, any use of intimidation or dominance, any form of power over. And I'm really clear about that. I don't have any qualms about that. But I don't believe for a second that that's possible to be done without an understanding of their position. You have to get to know them. You have to form a relationship with them.

Maintaining personalised client-worker relationships can heighten the emotional load on facilitators, and this can manifest in gendered ways

Maintaining personalised client-worker relationships can heighten the emotional load for facilitators, and can affect male and female facilitators differently. For example, upon learning that a participant had used violence again, some male facilitators reported a tendency to feel let down and disappointed, while some female facilitators said that it triggered a reminder of their own experiences of domestic and family violence. Some female facilitators felt unsafe to continue working with MBCP participants.

I think it has a different impact on men and women [facilitators]. I think on the men there's a disappointment [and] a bit more acceptance. It's like, this hasn't gone well but I guess they probably expect based on their own experience that there's going to be relapses, and there's lots of stuff-ups, and the process is really slow. Whereas I find the women perhaps are a little bit more attached to "this needs to happen this week because there's a woman that's not safe and that is just not okay ..." (Supervisor)

Recommendations for policymakers and practitioners

The value of the client-worker relationship in facilitating behaviour change should be recognised by organisations and steps should be taken to help facilitators maintain personalised relationships

- Organisations and facilitators should be aware of the potential for MBCP participants to experience grief and loss when client-worker relationships end prematurely.
- Facilitators should be assigned to run an entire module of an MBCP, to maintain consistency for participants.
- If a facilitator has to change roles, there should be a prolonged handover phase to allow participants to build a relationship with the new facilitator.
- Alternatively (and where relevant), offer flexibility so that participants can follow the facilitator to their new role.

The emotional load experienced by facilitators and the gendered way this can manifest should be recognised at management and organisational levels

Managers and organisations can support supervisors and facilitators by:

- developing clear policies throughout the workplace about physical and emotional safety, in particular for women
- developing a collegial workplace environment where staff are encouraged to support each other to report instances where people feel unsafe
- ensuring adequate time is available in supervisors' and facilitators' workloads for regular formal supervision
- developing policies for supervision, and training for supervisors, to ensure they strike a balance between showing empathy and support for facilitators and challenging them to engage in critical reflection regarding their client-worker relationships, particularly when discussing potential collusion.

For behaviour change to be sustained in the long term, flexibility in funding models is needed to allow participants to return to programs once they have completed the modules

- Additional funding should be provided to allow for ongoing interventions, where men can continue to be supported in the kinds of relationships they experienced as participants in the MBCP to sustain their attitudinal and behavioural change.
- Consideration should be given to new models of support (such as peer-to-peer models) where participants can engage with alumni of such programs in less formalised settings.
- No new program should be implemented at the expense of funding for interventions, programs and supports for women who have experienced domestic and family violence. It is also recommended that women who have experienced domestic and family violence be engaged in the development of new programs for men.

References

Wendt, S., Seymour, K., Buchanan, F., Dolman, C., & Greenland, N. (2019). *Engaging men who use violence: Invitational narrative approaches* (Research report, 05/2019). Sydney: ANROWS.

Further reading

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2019). [*Engaging men who use violence: Invitational narrative approaches*](#) (Research to policy and practice, 05/2019). Sydney: ANROWS.

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2019). [*Men's behaviour change programs: Measuring outcomes and improving program quality: Key findings and future directions*](#) (Research to policy and practice, 01/2019). Sydney: ANROWS.

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