

WHO ARE THE EXPERTS HERE?

Recognition of Aboriginal women and community workers in research and beyond

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Abstract

This paper explores how Indigenous-centred methodologies are crucial to the design and conduct of research projects that seek to have meaningful outcomes for Indigenous women and communities. We draw on experiential observations of an advisory group led by Indigenous experts that was part of the Social and Cultural Resilience and Emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal Mothers in prison (SCREAM) research project. From their experience we identify lessons for how Indigenous

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expertise can be utilized to promote mutually respectful relationships among Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, organizations and agencies. We found that the formation of an Indigenous-led advisory group from a project's inception is a powerful vehicle for informing its purposes, method and dissemination of findings back to Indigenous participants and communities. Our approach has produced a set of data on Indigenous women prisoners that prioritizes, rather than pathologizes, Indigenous standpoints, and recognizes the complex effects of colonization for these women. This paper seeks to convey the research process to inform future research that engages Indigenous participants.

Keywords

Indigenous research, Indigenous experts, Aboriginal community organizations, incarcerated Aboriginal women, Aboriginal mothers, Aboriginal imprisonment

This paper explores the Indigenous-centred methodology of the Social and Cultural Resilience and Emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal Mothers in prison (SCREAM) research project, especially its reliance on an advisory group (AG) whose membership is primarily Indigenous experts who have relationships with the Indigenous research participants, workers in Indigenous community-controlled organizations, as well as staff from government agencies. This paper is written collaboratively by the AG, the project's chief investigator and Wiradjuri woman Juanita Sherwood, and related researchers. The substantive knowledge imparted in this paper is provided by the Indigenous community experts on the AG.

The SCREAM project seeks to identify culturally safe models of healthcare required to meet the needs of Indigenous mothers in prison and for their transition back into the community. The nature of this project promotes collaboration, given the complex issues facing Indigenous mothers and their children and the relationships Indigenous mothers have with their families, communities, service providers and the justice system. The project seeks to decolonize methodologies commonly employed in studying Indigenous offenders which quantitatively calculate their risk and levels of recidivism using the expertise of statisticians (e.g. Weatherburn, 2014). By contrast, this

project adopts an Indigenous-informed conceptual framework that considers Indigenous mothers themselves, their families, communities and service providers as experts (Sherwood & Kendall, 2013, p. 86).

The Indigenous-centred research design of SCREAM sheds light on the partiality of mainstream approaches to research that rely on the methodologies and expertise of non-Indigenous researchers. These approaches are contingent on a worldview that subordinates Indigenous knowledges and objectifies Indigenous peoples. It reinforces an epistemology in which non-Indigenous knowledge is superior and Indigenous people are to be studied rather than assigned the role of the researcher. This has been institutionalized by the underfunding of Indigenous organizations and Indigenous-driven research. Indigenous-centred research design is a pressing issue for research into Indigenous prisoners, which is the focus of the SCREAM project on Indigenous mothers in prison. Indigenous people are among the most imprisoned groups in Australia. Indigenous women are almost 30 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous women and constitute a third of the women's prison population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013). This is a pattern that corresponds with other colonized nations. Furthermore, Indigenous Australian women and mothers are the fastest-growing

prison population in Australia. SCREAM demonstrates the importance of collaborative Indigenous research for exploring prison pathways and exit points through the voices of Aboriginal women experts, including women in prisons and community organizations who service them. It provides a unique contribution to prison scholarship that has been neglected by mainstream focuses on quantitative data and the expertise of academics and corrections agencies alone.

This paper outlines ways of growing *respectful* cooperative relationships between government agencies and Aboriginal community-controlled organizations, and ways of developing methods for engaging Indigenous community expertise in research in an Australian context, while also having implications for research in other contexts. The intimate knowledge of those community agencies about the issues facing Aboriginal women in prison is vital to corroborating the stories of the Aboriginal women themselves. During the AG meetings much sharing of knowledge occurred and it was decided to highlight and impart the knowledge and wisdom held in our Indigenous organizations. This article is the result of this decision and provides access to Indigenous knowledges and standpoints that are frequently unheard or unattended to in policy making or poorly documented in academic research.

This paper discusses how the SCREAM project employs an Indigenous holistic model called collaborative community participatory action research (CCPAR) (Sherwood, 2010; Sherwood & Kendall, 2013) in order to move away from approaches that disconnect the process of knowledge production from the actual knowledge being produced. By bringing together information on the creation of the SCREAM AG with the knowledge generated by the AG, we show how our epistemology and methodology is tied to our research outcomes. In this way the holism inherent in the building of knowledge, the relationships that enable knowledge building, and the knowledge itself

remain intact (Absolon, 2010; Grieves, 2009). What emerges in the voice of Aboriginal community non-governmental organization (NGO) workers on the AG sheds light on the current restrictions as well as the rich opportunities for sharing Indigenous community knowledge, expertise and participation with government agencies, institutions and mainstream NGOs.

We begin by briefly critiquing some of the orthodox Western ways of doing research on Indigenous communities. We then juxtapose this with a discussion of some of the features of Indigenous-centred approaches to research. The next section provides background on the SCREAM project and our process of setting up the AG and its work. Finally, we highlight the Indigenous community knowledge generated within the AG concerning the role of Indigenous community expertise and how respectful relations can develop between Indigenous experts and government agencies. Respect is an important foundational concept of Aboriginal philosophies, ethical and law systems and one that needs to ground working partnerships among Aboriginal women, families, communities, NGOs and government organizations.

Indigenous methods, knowledges and worldviews: A critical framework

Unlike mainstream criminology research, which is focused on measuring crime and criminal justice responses, Indigenous methods focus on identifying pathways for Indigenous well-being, safety and healing. They identify the historical context and impacts of colonization for Indigenous peoples. Based on this premise, Indigenous-centred approaches critically regard the role of the criminal justice system and imprisonment as threatening Indigenous well-being and seek to identify diversionary avenues or improved facilities within the system. In evaluating the criminal justice system, Indigenous methodologies draw on qualitative approaches to gauge Indigenous

perspectives. The role of storytelling, including through yarning circles (a process used by Aboriginal people for thousands of years to discuss issues in an inclusive and collaborative manner), is an important means of hearing Indigenous voices in research. The presence of Indigenous researchers and experts facilitates the free flow of information about Indigenous experiences.

Indigenous methodologies are collaborative. Research does not occur in the silos of research agencies, but in communities and with Indigenous people. The role of the SCREAM AG was to facilitate and enhance collaborations and partnerships among Indigenous communities, government agencies, non-government Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations, and academics. The process of collaboration is also part of the objective and outcome of the project. Collaborations form the basis for ongoing collective work towards justice outcomes.

Finally, Indigenous-centred research recognizes Indigenous capacity, knowledges and laws, and these inform the research design and outcomes. They also inform the project's engagement with Indigenous people as empowered people, rather than as a problem that requires a postcolonial non-Indigenous response. Such recognition broadens the scope of recommendations to include not only reform measures within the criminal justice system, but also in Indigenous communities. Indeed, the focus on community-based solutions is emphasized rather than sidelined or undermined.

In his influential article, "Indigenous World Views, Knowledge and Research", Hart (2010) conceptualized Indigenous-centred methodology according to its unique *ontology* (such as reciprocal and relational understandings of being); *epistemology* (such as knowledge being formed and transmitted through inter-generational storytelling); *methodology* (such as Indigenous researchers participating in and using new knowledge and being accountable to their community) and *axiology* (such as reciprocity, responsibility and respect for

community and relationships underpinning research ethics).

Hart provides a useful framework for delineating the contrasts with Western research that privileges quantitative data and is conducted by white outsiders who have no accountability to Indigenous communities and who experience no direct consequences from their research findings. This aligns with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) idea that Western methods need to be decolonized through engaging "a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices" (p. 20). The objective of the SCREAM AG was to invoke Indigenous worldviews to produce meaningful outcomes for Indigenous women and produce a research design that accounts for and incorporates Hart's framework. The AG also gives expression to Moreton-Robinson and Walter's (2009) observation that Indigenous methodologies involve the production of knowledge which recognizes Aboriginal worldviews and which privileges the voices and experiences of Aboriginal peoples (p. 1).

The SCREAM project

SCREAM was a research project funded through the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (Australia) over a four-year period commencing in 2010. It ran concurrently in both the states of New South Wales (NSW) and Western Australia (WA). The SCREAM (NSW) research team authored this paper and consists of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and an Indigenous-led AG including non-Indigenous members working together to grow knowledge that impacts on the health and well-being of incarcerated Aboriginal women.

The SCREAM project had two phases: phase one was spent contacting, engaging, meeting up with and consulting those who held knowledge of Aboriginal mothers in prison, the group of women on which the research project focused. These meetings included Aboriginal

community-controlled organizations and services, government agencies, and Aboriginal community members acknowledged as stakeholders across the state. This phase importantly ran over two years to ensure adequate involvement of knowledge holders working in this area. From these consultations and the relationships that were established the NSW AG was formed, constituting a diverse group with interests and expertise in Aboriginal women in prison. From this engagement a communication strategy was developed along with research tools to be used when talking with Aboriginal women and mothers (Sherwood & Kendall, 2013).

The second phase of the project involved the interviewing of Aboriginal mothers in prison and those who undertook responsibility for their care while in the justice system, and the collection of other data and analysis. As Sherwood and Kendall (2013) note, “It is their [Aboriginal women in prison] experiences both on the way to contact with the corrections, inside the corrections system and outside the corrections system that we as researchers must listen to and learn from” (p. 86). A dissemination strategy that meets the needs of the Indigenous community as well as the scientific community is now being developed. This paper is part of that strategy.

Within the SCREAM research project Indigenous knowledge holders working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers have informed the research process at every level. Resilient and good working relationships with Indigenous knowledge holders have been nurtured and grown productively throughout this project. Sharing knowledge and being heard is important within the context of the work with the AG. However, beyond this research-orientated forum it is ethically important that Indigenous community knowledge holders have the opportunity to contribute knowledge on their own terms and in their own voice to wider audiences. This point is taken up by Fredericks et al. (2011) when they assert, “Aboriginal people cannot and will not become empowered

if Aboriginal people continue to be spoken to, spoken for and spoken about. It is only through Aboriginal people’s voices being heard and being enacted that Aboriginal people will become empowered to bring about change” (p. 12).

The SCREAM AG

The SCREAM AG was established to provide the research project with strategic and culturally appropriate direction and to contribute to the emergence of current, accurate and relevant knowledges relating to the health and social and emotional well-being of Aboriginal mothers in prison. SCREAM ran in both NSW and WA and the rationale for this approach is that each state is different in regard to criminal justice system arrangements and legislation, history, governance. Each state is also home to diverse Aboriginal Nations with discrete languages, heritages and traditions. Our approach reflects our recognition of the heterogeneity of Aboriginal Nations and the acknowledgement that the research team does not propose to speak on behalf of other Nations and states with whom we have not worked personally.

The diversity of cultures, traditions, experience among the NSW AG members and their varied community, organizational and institutional settings offered the project the advantage of many perspectives and lenses through which complex issues were viewed and discussed. Members of the AG represented diverse stakeholders including Aboriginal women’s community services and organizations, elders, mainstream NGOs, and government departments. The values of openness and respect assisted the AG to listen to the diverse and sometimes divergent voices of its members while attending to similarity of experience.

Ethics approval for this project was granted by the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW. The AG considered how the research is tracking, its practical application of ethics, and whether the research methodology

and methods were appropriate. This ensured that the project was focusing on the research that is most needed. The AG has contributed detailed and explicit knowledge of a wide range of issues impacting Aboriginal women in prison and post-release. These knowledges relate to the women's material circumstances, family considerations, health and social and emotional well-being, justice issues, systemic and institutional processes, practices and problems.

The aim of the AG

A key aim of the AG is to provide rich contextual understandings in relation to Aboriginal women in prison. Respect for each other's ways of knowing has been important to working together. In their professional lives, members of the AG who represent Aboriginal community organizations reveal that having their expertise, experience, and authority recognized can be a struggle. This problem limits the ways community workers are able to act on behalf of their clients. It has additional implications for the ways in which Aboriginal community workers are able (or less able) to contribute to knowledge production and influence policy.

This paper is specifically concerned with the ways in which Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous community expertise is important to Aboriginal mothers who are dealing with numerous government systems inside and outside prison. It does this in the voice and from the perspective of Aboriginal community workers who form part of the SCREAM AG. These community experts provide significant guidance, and vital information, that often are inadequately recorded or not recorded at all in research projects and their reports. Such knowledge can make a real difference to the lives of the Aboriginal mothers we have been working with in the SCREAM project.

The negative impact of colonization has been a key issue under discussion within the SCREAM research team. This is a valuable point of reference that often fails to be

acknowledged when exploring the barriers to accessing basic services. Indeed an appreciation of the colonial foundations of the Australian justice system, a sensitivity to the (often implicit) racism within multiple systems, and an appreciation for the marginalized voices of Aboriginal community members are invaluable to understanding and working with Aboriginal people who are imprisoned (Blagg, 2008), especially Aboriginal women (Baldry & Cunneen, 2014). Unfortunately practices that contribute to lack of social and emotional well-being and poorer outcomes continue due to a lack of cultural competencies (Wenitong & Daniels, 2003). Growing cultural competency is everybody's business. One key way of growing cultural competency is by listening and attending to what Aboriginal community workers have said about working with Aboriginal women who have prison experiences and the systems that contain them. During a number of daylong face-to-face discussions and consultations between the NSW AG and the SCREAM team as well as shorter discussions where advice was sought, members of the AG brought detailed and rich contextual and community knowledge to an understanding of Aboriginal mothers' experiences in the criminal justice system. What follows is this sharing of knowledge: Aboriginal community workers tell a valuable story about the fundamental role of community.

Respecting the Indigenous experts and knowledges

Indigenous experiences inside: A working context

Working with and living in Aboriginal communities we observed that the numbers of Aboriginal women being incarcerated are ever increasing. The AG had intimate expertise relating to the effect that this is having on communities. This knowledge is backed up by national and state criminal justice data sets

(ABS, 2013). This trend is running concurrently with dramatic increases in rates of removal of Aboriginal children from their mother's care. Aboriginal children are 11.7 times more likely to be removed from their family than non-Aboriginal children in NSW. The number of Aboriginal children removed rose 7% in the period 2010–2011 and 7.6% between 2011 and 2012 (Australian Institute Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2014). Nationally, Aboriginal children are eight times more likely to be removed by welfare services than non-Aboriginal children (AIHW, 2014). These factors, combined with severe economic hardship, structural disadvantage and racism, are having a major impact on the functioning and well-being of Aboriginal women, their families and their communities. It is clear from our work with communities that Aboriginal women are experiencing high distress and are in high need of support. We brought with us to this consultation process a sense of extreme urgency over their situations.

The SCREAM team had an inside-out understanding of the complexity and the interconnectedness of problems in the lives of Aboriginal women and the need to work in culturally appropriate ways that increase feelings of safety and decrease feelings of isolation and alienation. There was a dire need to stop the repetition of simplistic and harmful solutions. However, knowing the problems and understanding the problems are not the same as having the authority to speak to these problems recognized by those who hold power.

The lived experience of Aboriginal women tells of hardships over many generations including poverty, discrimination, institutional abuse and violence (Bamblett & Lewis, 2007; Dudgeon, Wright, Paradies, Garvey, & Walker, 2014; Sherwood, 2013). Despite this, Aboriginal women are hardy yet flexible, humorous and resilient, and have been the anchors of their families and communities through years of struggle. However, increasingly these intergenerational burdens are compounding to a point where many Aboriginal women become victims

or perpetrators of violence and have struggles with substance abuse.

The burdens of centuries of discriminatory government policy create the pathways into the criminal justice system and to imprisonment, resulting in the removal of Aboriginal women's children, disconnection from family and shame. This produces a flow-on trauma for the removed children (McCausland & Baldry, 2013). Intergenerational burdens translate into the diverse and complex needs of Aboriginal women who have been or are currently incarcerated. Aboriginal community organizations provide a vast range of services, including family-reuniting work, housing, help with filling in forms and navigating bureaucracy, court support, legal advocacy and much more. Community workers are passionate about their people and committed far beyond the scope of a nine-to-five job—they are available 24/7.

Aboriginal women and community expertise

Those of us in the AG are in large part practitioners who have been working with Aboriginal women in the community; who understand the context of Aboriginal women's, children's and family lives; and who have a deep appreciation for culturally sensitive approaches. Many of our members are Aboriginal women who have been living in, and working with and for, the community for a long time. We are often asked to advise on community issues:

It is something that happens a lot for us especially when organizations or departments are trying to take care of business, which often means ticking boxes, then disregarding the advice despite the time we have given. (Aboriginal community worker)

Getting heard or influencing outcomes in systems is tough and often frustrating because we know with the deep certainty of long experience that our knowledge is valid and we also know

how great the need of our people is. This is a story of struggle and it's also a story of resilience and hope.

The struggle of Aboriginal mothers in prison is also our struggle; our struggles are connected. To understand this story we need to begin with Aboriginal mothers and the battles they have faced, often intergenerationally, to keep their families together, the children at home and a roof over their heads. Through the many years of dispossession, reserve living (see AIATSIS, n.d.), stolen children (see Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997) up to and including today many Aboriginal women have been on a knife-edge between survival and the disintegration of their families.

This story is an old story; it is not new to us. Practices of intergenerational child removal (the Stolen Generations) are estimated to have impacted more than half of all Aboriginal people living in Australia today (Kelly, Dudgeon, Gee, & Glaskin, 2009). The effects of this form of violence and injury to Aboriginal children and their mothers are evident in our communities and this has very real implications for the symptomology (Silburn et al., 2006) and incarceration that is evidenced in women (Lawrie, 2003). Today more Aboriginal children than ever are being removed from their families (Chadwick, 2013). On 13 February 2008 the then prime minister, the Hon. Kevin Rudd MP, moved a motion of apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples with specific reference to the Stolen Generations. But Rudd's saying sorry on behalf of the Australian nation has not stemmed the tide of removal, loss and grief for Aboriginal mothers and children (Healey, 2009; Libesman, 2014; Short, 2012, pp. 296–300; Tilbury, 2009).

Since the very beginning of colonization in Australia Aboriginal women have been viewed negatively and not been considered good enough mothers. We have been stripped of our rights to know what is best for our children, been disempowered from decision making and had our confidence eroded. Recently Kelly Briggs

(2014), an Aboriginal mother from Lightning Ridge, NSW, wrote in the *Guardian* (Australia):

Aboriginal women have been told for the better part of two centuries that they are neglectful and not fit to raise children. Policy after policy, we have borne the brunt of racist and cruel initiatives enacted purely out of ignorance and the unwillingness of decision makers to listen to what Aboriginal women think is best for their very own children. (n.p.)

Where our childrearing practices have differed from colonizing Western norms we have been repudiated as harmful or neglectful mothers and many Aboriginal women have and still do live in the fear that their children will be removed by the state (Geia, 2012). Our practices and "parenting discourses" may differ in some respects from the "normative". We raise our children in ways that grow them strong and keep them connected to family and culture (see Kruske, Belton, Wardaguga, & Narjic, 2012). We raise them the way that we know ourselves and indeed how we raise our children has not been a matter of our own representation but rather what others have said about us (Morten-Robinson, 1998). They have become the experts, as Irene Watson (2009) elaborates:

The state becomes the knower of what is Aboriginal culture while Aboriginal peoples and communities are positioned as mere actors, acting out a deemed and 'known' cultural practice. The state as knower of 'objectionable practices' has power to construct what Aboriginal culture is and to analyse, vilify, and ultimately undermine the right of peoples to self-determination. (p. 4)

Consequently, Australian institutions denigrate both Aboriginal women and their experiences. We have continuously experienced that they fail to listen to our expertise as mothers, community workers and Elders. We ask: Who are

the experts in determining what is right and just for Aboriginal children and families? We answer: We are.

Postcolonial practices of excluding Indigenous NGOs

Despite our expertise in addressing Aboriginal women's issues, often we and our organizations are systemically excluded, our authority negated, and our full participation with Aboriginal women clients stifled. There are three main ways that this happens: 1) Aboriginal knowledges and values are denigrated; 2) authority is maintained within the dominant societal structures; and 3) funding is diverted away from Aboriginal community organizations. The subversion of Indigenous knowledges contributes to "The Great Australian Silence" (Stanner, 2011) and leads to everyday "practices of silencing" (Rodríguez-Silvap, 2012, p. 222). This systemic silencing of Aboriginal experts, especially Aboriginal women, has been experienced since colonization. Colonization is not just an historical fact; it is a current strategy to exclude Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing from mainstream institutions (Bennett, Green, Gilbert, & Bessarab, 2012). The exclusion is currently felt most acutely by Aboriginal women in relation to government decisions on welfare, child welfare, housing, education, health and criminal justice.

How does exclusion occur? Practices of exclusion are rife, especially at the lower levels of institutional systems like justice and social welfare. It is not uncommon, for example, for an Aboriginal community worker to be told by a Community Services (CS) worker with NSW's Family and Community Services that he or she cannot enter a court hearing, despite being physically present with the Aboriginal woman at the courtroom door. Judges often make the commonsense decision to overrule the CS and admit the worker. However, having to struggle against discrimination to be able to provide support is harmful to both community

workers and our clients. Our authority to know and to enact this knowing through supporting Aboriginal women is diminished within these systems.

We are also faced with indirect discrimination in the form of being given a mere trickle of funding for our Aboriginal community organizations that does not give us sufficient capacity to provide a full range of services. We are constantly overstretched, and sometimes in crisis mode. The cascading effect of lack of funding leads to the marginalization of Aboriginal community services and an increasing burden of stress on Aboriginal community workers, which promotes the further marginalization of already vulnerable Aboriginal women clients who may not be able to access a full range of community services. Given that funding is tied to the provision of services as defined and designated by government departments whether these meet the needs of Aboriginal community members or not (De Ishtar, 2005), our services, while culturally legitimate and effective, are not necessarily legitimated by government departments. When our services do not fit preconceived bureaucratic categories, the result is the inability to obtain funding.

For our organizations, sustaining funding is equally as challenging as undertaking reporting, assessment and review. It is not the inherent nature of these steps that presents the difficulty; rather, the mandated processes are problematic because of the worldview and values which inform them and which are seldom transparent or open to challenge. In practice the criterion used to define a desired outcome may not be appropriate in the first place (Biddle, 2012). We know we are benefiting women, families and community but rarely are our programs properly evaluated, and often statistical approaches that are not suitable to measuring our work are used (Walter, 2010). Our story comes full circle here: we are not consulted about the means to access the well-being of Aboriginal women or what good outcomes look like, and our views about what actually works for Aboriginal

women, their children and families are not enacted.

We not only understand the needs of Aboriginal women but actively work towards creating positive practical change on the ground which directly targets and impacts conditions for Aboriginal women, including those who have been incarcerated. This can involve long and frustrating engagement in work which is often knocked back despite our expert advice, research evidence, and the dissemination of reports detailing specific problems as well as providing practical recommendations and solutions. Generating funding that would enable more effective and culturally appropriate services has proven almost impossible.

Being locked out of courtrooms, not being consulted at critical times in our clients' processes and having our research ignored are all examples of the practices of silencing that are so widespread and so damaging. Shutting down our perspectives and ignoring our expertise might provide a feeling of temporary security within institutions and government departments, the feeling of business as usual, but in the end it is Aboriginal women who suffer the consequences.

The need to develop a holistic picture

At times when we speak, our authority is not respected or is simply disregarded. This can happen when court testimony is required and we are subpoenaed to give evidence or when we are required to "tick the box" of an organization's exterior consultation process. In many instances we are "experts" when it is convenient but true partnerships in which we work together, share our expertise, shape change and receive recognition for our expertise, work and time are seldom established. We are usually "experts" under duress and for the benefit of agendas other than our own. These forms of positioning are disrespectful and continually disempowering.

The positioning assigned to us by privileged

authorities does not define who we are or what we do. When Aboriginal women are having difficulty as prisoners post-release, with housing or with their children, Aboriginal community organizations know how to engage them in a way that creates enhancement and benefits and respects their lives. It is our experience that too often mainstream organizations perpetuate practices within systems that increasingly isolate and alienate Aboriginal women. These create further disengagement from official processes that women need to undertake such as court hearings to determine custody of children, and distance them from supports in their culture and community.

By contrast, Aboriginal community organizations provide safety, respect, and cultural ways of knowing with the flexibility of working across interdepartmental boundaries that is not available elsewhere. Where there are inherent systemic limitations within dominant systems Aboriginal community organizations are well positioned (though currently underfunded) to bridge the gap. Beyond systemic considerations it has been shown that for Aboriginal peoples, connection to cultural identity protects against the development of negative psychiatric symptoms (Castellano, 2006). Our continued working together, in groups such as the SCREAM AG is vital to generating knowledge and practical outcomes that will make a difference. It gives meaning to the message of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (2002), Dr William Jonas: links must be drawn and holistic models developed and supported which address the connections between culture, drug use, alcohol use, separation from family, violence, poverty, spiritual needs, housing, health, boredom, race discrimination and gender discrimination (pp. 165–166).

To understand Aboriginal mothers' needs in prison and post-release it is important to develop a holistic picture of women's lives. Very often government agencies focus their attention on one aspect, such as the crime committed,

or specific conditions that must be met for parole or the reuniting of families, without taking into account the whole lives of women and the cultural and social contexts in which they are embedded. It takes explicit cultural and social expertise to understand the context of Aboriginal women's lives and to make sense of that which is unique and that which is common to many in each woman's story. In our work we assist that woman in a holistic way while being cognizant of all these factors. When Aboriginal women prisoners are treated as "cases" instead of Aboriginal women and Aboriginal community organizations are not included in their care, well-being suffers and the women's outcomes are negatively impacted. (It should be noted here that case management is a common strategy for coordination and service delivery across a number of sectors. The use of the term "cases" to represent individuals is not specific to Aboriginal women but applied more broadly to people who come into contact with such services.)

Working together with respect

Respect is at the very foundation of functional, responsive relationships (Sherwood, 2010). Respect is a concept fundamentally important in the worldview and everyday lives of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. The emphasis on respect is special to the cultures of Aboriginal peoples but is a concept that everyone can understand and a way of living that everyone can participate in.

Respectful engagement requires collaborative partnerships that are necessary at many different levels to promote the health and well-being of Aboriginal women clients (Osborne, Baum, & Brown, 2013). These may be partnerships between Aboriginal community organizations and mainstream social service providers, partnerships with non-Indigenous social workers, or partnerships with government departments.

Government departments and mainstream

organizations can enact this respect by acknowledging the expertise and authority of Aboriginal women and Aboriginal women community leaders. This requires the inclusion of Aboriginal voices and worldviews in processes which affect Aboriginal women, such as child removal, housing and post-prison care. Inclusion recognizes the value of Aboriginal workers' expertise and enacts this through participation in two-way dialoguing and participation in decision making, especially in matters requiring cultural sensitivity and solutions that demand cultural competence.

When respect is present appropriate interventions are negotiated with community workers, not dictated to them, and take into account cultural factors, whole families, the needs of women clients and the available resources. Everyone benefits when respect is at the heart of the interactions. Respectfully informed processes benefit from the Aboriginal community workers' expertise and experience in the shaping of culturally appropriate responses and solutions. Aboriginal women who are imprisoned or who have been imprisoned feel less isolated, become less afraid, and feel less subjected to discrimination. These factors help them to engage and participate in systemic processes in more constructive ways.

With respect comes recognition of the importance and value of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing and also importantly sharing—the sharing of knowledges as well as the sharing of resources. Partnering means that Aboriginal community organizations give time, knowledge and expertise and reciprocally receive access to information they require, knowledge about external departmental processes, and the resources of mainstream organizations.

Equitable partnering requires mainstream organizations and government departments to make consultation and discussion a priority, take the initiative to organize meetings, and set aside sufficient time to collaborate with Aboriginal community organizations. Relationships work best where there is ongoing connection and

sharing. Government and mainstream services can do this by providing regular email updates on their services, inviting Aboriginal community workers to events, and organizing general discussion meetings that are not only concerned with crisis management. Many Aboriginal staff in service organizations are stretched to the limit owing to lack of funding. Respect can be enacted in the relationship by requesting times for meeting that are convenient to community workers and by holding meetings at a community organization or a place nominated by the community worker.

Partnering with respect begins when government departments and mainstream NGOs critically reflect on their practices of exclusion and consider what hurdles and limitations they place on the participation and authority of Aboriginal workers and Aboriginal community organizations. Working with respect and in collaboration grows when true working partnerships are established. This approach has the potential to build and restore relationships between organizations who are responsible for the health and well-being of Aboriginal women.

Conclusion

Within social research, rich opportunities are opening up for working with Aboriginal community expertise holders in ways that encompass the values of sharing, respect and mutual benefit. Advisory groups such as that drawn together for the SCREAM research project are one way of providing the platform for drawing on Indigenous epistemologies and building a plurality of knowledges in areas of mutual concern to Aboriginal community expertise holders and other stakeholders, as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous academy-based researchers. Aboriginal community experts have advised the SCREAM research team that while there are substantial barriers, there are also many valuable possibilities for working together with government systems and mainstream NGOs. These ways of working promote respect, engagement and the improvement of the health and emotional and social well-being of Aboriginal women in prison and post-prison.

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