

Community engagement in youth justice program design

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Abstract

Aboriginal young people from rural areas in Australia are significantly over-represented in the youth justice system, and yet there is little evidence to indicate that current programs are having measurable success on rates of re-offending, suggesting alternative approaches are required. Drawing on new directions in human service policy that emphasise the importance of involving community in program design, this study reports the findings of a consultation with Aboriginal community members from one rural community to identify how the ecological validity of youth justice programs may be increased to be more responsive to local need. Eighteen Aboriginal community members from a town in Western New South Wales participated in semi-structured interviews, guided by a culturally informed research methodology. Qualitative content analysis was used to identify key themes that the community saw as important in program design, highlighting the need for consistent levels of support for local and community-driven solutions. Proposed conditions to enhance the ecological validity of programs are discussed.

Keywords

Aboriginal, community engagement, program design, rural, youth justice

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It is now well established that Aboriginal young people from rural communities are significantly over-represented across all levels of the criminal justice system in Australia, with the rate of justice system contact not declining over the last 10 years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018) despite a range of different intervention programs being implemented. These programs aim to reduce involvement with the justice system by addressing the presence or intensity of empirically derived risk factors thought to be associated with offending behaviour (Day & Fransisco, 2013; Poyton & Menendez, 2015; Stewart et al., 2014; Trimboli, 2019). However, recent evidence has shown significant differences between standardised risk profiles of Aboriginal young people who offend from rural, regional and remote areas and their metropolitan counterparts, thus drawing attention to the influence of ecology has on offending risk patterns (Butcher et al., 2019). A potential explanation for the apparent lack of progress being made in reducing over-representation is that current youth justice programs are not a sufficiently good fit to the contexts of Aboriginal rural young people, and therefore, have a low level of ecological validity (see H. Blagg, et al., 2015; Gray & Hetherington, 2007; Lavery, 2018). Programs that typically suffer from a low level of ecological validity include those that are directly imported from other areas of the country (or world) and where program theory is based upon universal and reductionist explanations of human behaviour which are divorced from context and environment, and thus, do not address the specific needs of the local population (see H. Blagg, et al., 2015; Dudgeon & Kelly, 2014; Lavery, 2018). This paper starts by considering the rationale for engaging community members when designing new programs to meet the needs of young people who offend. A study describing ways in which the ecological validity of current youth justice programs might be improved is then described, before discussing how this approach represents one way of responding to the over-representation of rural Aboriginal young people in the youth justice system.

Recently, judiciary and government have called for greater service user involvement in the design of human service programs which, in itself, could strengthen ecological validity (e.g. Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Health Council, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2017; NSW Law and Safety Committee, 2018). More specifically, in order to enhance the ecological validity of programs in an Aboriginal context, the involvement of Aboriginal community leaders and knowledge holders in the dual process of identifying the issues that affect their community and co-developing a community response is considered essential to the collection and interpretation of evidence to inform policy decisions (Gray & Hetherington, 2007; Kendall et al., 2011). This is clearly illustrated in New South Wales (NSW), where it has been recognised that the system of service delivery has historically failed to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities. For example, the Law and Safety Committee Inquiry into the Adequacy of Youth Diversionary Programs recommended the importance of ‘partnerships with the Aboriginal community in the design and delivery of diversionary programs’ (NSW Law & Safety Committee, 2018, p. 16). Similarly, significant policy changes are demonstrated in recent Out of Home Care reforms (‘Their Futures Matter’) which identify the need for support programs to be designed with local Aboriginal communities (NSW Communities And Justice, 2020). Furthermore, the Australian Fifth National Mental

Health and Suicide Prevention Plan (2018) also upholds the argument that ‘service recipients are seen as critical partners in service design, planning, implementation and evaluation’ (COAG Health Council, 2018, p. 14). Therefore, it is important to consider how the design of youth justice programs could be informed through the engagement of key stakeholders from the local community.

Approaches to community engagement

There are a number of different ways to involve communities in program design, including service user consultation, co-design and collective impact (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2017). Although some of these, such as collective impact, focus more on systems integration than on directly engaging with service users and communities (Cheverton & Janamian, 2016), such approaches have value in enabling a cross sector problem-solving process towards finding local solutions. These approaches require on-going stakeholder commitment to building relationships with community, particularly in an Aboriginal context (Demant, 2018; Sagrestano et al., 2018).

For non-Indigenous program designers, engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can be complex, and there are varying degrees of sociopolitical negotiation that requires an adept skill and knowledge. To assist navigation of this space, the International Association for Public Participation – Australasia (2014) considers the engagement between public sphere organisations (such as government) and the community to operate on a spectrum. At the lowest level, decision-making power is situated within external parties who provide information about problems, opportunities and solutions. The next levels involve various approaches to consulting, collaborating with representatives, with the highest-level involving engagement approaches that are empowering to the community. Therefore, it is argued, higher levels of community engagement involve fuller collaboration between service systems and communities, with empowerment occurring when (a) community decisions are fully adopted in program and service responses and (b) on-going partnerships are formed and committed to ensure that community values and perspectives continue to shape the service system (Moore et al., 2016). A direct result of effective and committed community engagement is a greater sense of ownership and higher levels of participation with services that, in theory, results in programs that are better tailored to the unique context, values and ecology of the community, thus generating new types of evidence about the ways in which programs affect the interests of stakeholders (Lavery, 2018; Moore et al., 2016).

A clear example of an approach to community engagement in program design is the ‘place based’ model, where the joint action of partners seeks to address causal factors associated with entrenched social disadvantage in geographically defined areas. This approach is characterised by local decision making, organisational support, co-design of programs, and community capacity development and involvement in exploring flexible approaches to funding (Jesuit Social Services, 2017; Papatraianou et al., 2018). Place based concepts of community engagement contrast with more traditional program development models that focus on population-level change, based on program design that involves the imposition of centralised key performance indicators and prescriptive, ‘evidence-based’ program models (see Moore et al., 2016).

Cultural safety in community engagement

The Justice Reinvestment approach has been identified as a good example of a successful place based approach, where the community identified serious justice issues and led the initiative to find local solutions. The program was independently evaluated, with the authors of the evaluation concluding that justice reinvestment initiatives build local capacity and empower community to ‘develop local solutions to local issues’ (Riboldi & Hopkins, 2019, p. 50), with a consequent reduction in youth involvement with law enforcement for the Aboriginal community (KPMG, 2018). For Riboldi and Hopkins, a key learning that emerged from their evaluation was the importance the community placed on government buy in, the collaboration between the community and service providers, and the transition of power and decision making to cultural authorities as significantly contributing to the ability of the community to take on the leadership role in areas where government initiatives had previously failed.

Governments now recognise past failures and are now working in partnership with Aboriginal community leadership through successive national Indigenous reform initiatives (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019). These community transformational processes are contingent on the transition of power from government to community through culturally safe decision-making processes and environments. Cultural safety is an emerging discourse in Australian government sectors; equally, it is entrenched in practice in the Aboriginal community sector. Cultural safety is an Indigenous knowledge construct of Maori nurse Irihapeti Ramsden originating in early 1990’s New Zealand (Papps & Ramsden, 1996). Ramsden’s (2002) cultural safety model addresses issues of power, gatekeepers of power in knowledge and other related resources and inherent power relations. Ramsden hypothesised that health care provision for all human beings recognises, and works with, a person’s unique culture and ‘the way in which people measure and define their humanity’ (p. 79). Cultural safety applies to all relationships, focuses on understanding of self, the rights of others, and the legitimacy of difference, and aims to enhance service delivery through a culturally safe workforce. Cultural safety’s influence now extends beyond nursing in New Zealand, with acceptance across other research fields such as immigration, working with marginalised non-Indigenous groups and Australian Indigenous education (Baker, 2007; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Fernando & Bennett, 2019; Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018). The common ground for implementing cultural safety within other research fields focuses on equity and empowerment into marginalised communities.

Williams’ (1999) seminal appraisal on including cultural safety in Australian public health practices continues to be highly relevant for today and sheds light for a pathway forward: ‘The issue of cultural safety cannot be avoided. Programs and practices will continue to perpetuate assimilationist practices if this critical issue is not dealt with upfront’ (p. 214). The relevance of cultural safety in the Australian context is now bipartisan across governments (COAG, 2009). It is a work in progress, but by far the emerging critical discourse on cultural safety is compelling government and their service providers to reflect on their judicial culture, and its obtrusive impact on Aboriginal politics, policies and practices of the past, and in the present. This is good news, resulting in current implementation of cultural safety at national peak body levels (Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, 2020). As various government sectors engage in

culturally safe bureaucratic practice, the relationship with community begins to shift, activating a translation of power by recognising the legitimacy of Aboriginal heterogeneity, and supports the community's cultural knowledge and authority. In addition it makes space for Aboriginal people to include their unique culture and holistic ways of 'being and doing' (Martin & Miroboopa, 2003) to develop local Aboriginal community initiatives to community problems. The broadness of the cultural safety construct empowers Aboriginal community control, ensuring a safe environment of engagement for Aboriginal people to participate in collaborative pathways of shared respect, meaning, knowledge and experiences with non-Aboriginal service providers, and provides clarification of the role of non-Aboriginal people in service workspaces (see R. Williams, 1999).

Cultural safety is important in relation both to individual consultation with service users and also to corporate partnerships between community members and stakeholder bodies. This helps to ensure the development of appropriate community consultation mechanisms and governance structures within each Aboriginal community (Kendall et al., 2011). It is considered to be especially important that relationships with key community members be established from the very start of service design, as the significance of establishing trust with Aboriginal communities cannot be overstated (Esgin et al., 2018; Martin, 2006; Stanton, 2014). Therefore, cultural safety practice is an essential pillar to any community engagement approach, particularly in program development with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018).

Central to culturally safe community engagement is shifting the power from hegemonic practice to privileging the position of the Aboriginal community as holders of legitimate and valuable knowledge (Rigney, 1999; Stanton, 2014). The legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge in research is now recognised in Indigenous and non-Indigenous academia, and is evidenced in the growing body of 'decolonising' research models. Smith (1999) argued that westernised models of knowledge are ethnocentric and in opposition with local Indigenous practices, moralities and sources of knowledge; this discourse now being supported and shared by other critical scholars (Gray & Hetherington, 2007; Keikelame & Schwartz, 2019; Laycock et al., 2011; Nakata & Nakata, 2009; Russel-Mundine, 2012). Decolonising research aims to counter covert assumptions that knowledge production and translation is largely owned by Western institutions and scholars where Indigenous knowledge is either ignored or discounted as unscientific, particularly in the justice space (see Tauri, 2017; Weatherburn, 2014). At its core, decolonisation seeks to be emancipatory from dominant cultural paradigms and supports social movement through 'speaking truth' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019, p. 483) about the experiences of Aboriginal people. Thus, utilisation of social justice, social movement and human rights interests to support an Indigenist research agenda also inherently leads to the politicisation of knowledge by directly challenging dominant political academic landscapes (Blagg & Anthony, 2019; Nakata & Nakata, 2011). In practice, the decolonisation paradigm requires an epistemological reframing of knowledge and ways of knowing, recognising relational models of ethics including shared data ownership and intellectual property, the utilisation of Indigenist research protocols in research design and engagement with endorsed community governance structures (Kendall et al., 2011; Martin, 2006).

Methodological approach

A participatory action research (PAR) approach was selected as a culturally responsive research methodology for this study given the emphasis on collective inquiry and the grounding of knowledge in participant experiences and social histories, and is considered a supportive decolonising framework (Baum et al., 2006; Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Madden et al., 2014; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The approach was preferred over other methodological frameworks, as PAR is typically understood as an epistemological orientation (Baum et al., 2006; Stanton, 2014), rather than a particular method of research (such as grounded theory where knowledge and expertise remain the domain of the researcher; see Hussein et al., 2014; Bainbridge et al., 2013). As PAR is not an analytic method, data analysis was performed using qualitative content analysis which was deemed appropriate as it allows analysis when little is known about a topic (in this case the paucity of the available literature about ecological validity of programs for rural Aboriginal youth), and where categories and themes are required to be completely extrapolated from the data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This is achieved through a process of inductive reasoning, allowing for the interpretation of manifest and latent meanings from verbal, visual and written data to support the development of conclusions that are linked to context and environment (Bengtsson, 2016; Graneheim et al., 2017). Qualitative content analysis further allows for the exploration of language to develop shared meaning and understandings through a meaningful process of talking and deep listening. Deep listening allows for a deeper understanding of the experiences of participations through exploring states of being and is achieved by watching, listening and acting, and an understanding that each individual belongs to the community. The importance of deep listening in Aboriginal research has been repeatedly described in the literature as central to culturally safe research design (Laycock et al., 2011).

The methodology adopted in this study was also designed to be reported in a manner that is consistent with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (Tong et al., 2007). This emphasises the importance of reflexivity by examining the 'lens' through which the researcher views the world, the research question, participants, and importantly, the data. This includes reflecting on implicit biases relevant to understanding which data and knowledge might be seen as important and how this might be analysed.

At the time of this study, the lead researcher and interviewer was a 33-year-old, non-Indigenous male who had spent two years living in this particular community, and visited at least weekly for eight subsequent years. He was employed for a large not-for-profit organisation that provides human services across Western NSW, including a range of Youth Justice funded contracts. As a result, he had spent a significant amount of time establishing relationships with some members of the community and maintained these throughout and after this study (consistent with the advice of Madden et al., 2014). He had been trained as an undergraduate in psychology but, as a non-Aboriginal researcher, aimed to ensure that the knowledge imparted from participants was not displaced through a 'white' frame of reference. Christie (2006) cautions

non-Indigenous academics who seek to engage with Indigenous research knowledge in the following way:

It is important to be clear about Indigenous knowledge and academic research, because much is at stake for Indigenous people whose knowledge traditions continue to be colonised, appropriated and marginalised by academic research traditions. Non-Indigenous academics can ignore, smooth over or blur the fundamental differences between knowledge systems, or make claims to which they have no right. (p. 78)

To ensure that the gathering, collection and analysis of the data was culturally and locally informed, a local cultural mentor was engaged to provide advice on appropriate consultation mechanisms and to support critical reflection on the research process. This included providing support to the lead researcher in navigating community governance structures, identifying potential participants, assisting in data interpretation and the appropriateness of any conclusions or interpretations that followed so as not to displace Aboriginal perspectives. Importantly, as a non-Aboriginal researcher, it was evident that the political processes and benefits associated with decolonising research were unlikely to be fully achieved.

A list of semi-structured research questions was developed to explore three broad topics of: (a) the circumstances in which people live, grow and work; (b) factors within these circumstances which may disproportionately affect Aboriginal people and (c) the availability of resources to support Aboriginal young people. The questions were reviewed and approved by the cultural mentor before being used to guide a series of interviews using a narrative interviewing approach. The narrative interviewing process involves engaging with people's stories about their experiences and is useful in understanding individual's life path, by attempting to understand the participants' words, rather than predicting or explaining them (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2015; Giovanna et al., 2019). This approach allows for the exploration of experiences and situations to uncover new meanings for the interviewer and participant (Hickson, 2016). The narrative interviewing approach was informed by the interviewer's understanding of 'yarning', described by other researchers as a culturally responsive and rigorous methodology. Although the term 'yarning' has been previously used by non-Indigenous researchers to share power; respect ways of knowing, being and doing; and to ensure accountability and responsibility to research participants (e.g. Leeson et al., 2016; Tubex et al., 2020), we prefer to describe the approach used here as a form of critical narrative interviewing (Hickson, 2016).

Procedure

This study was approved by a university Human Ethics Research Committee and the NSW Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council Human Ethics Research Committee. Prior to data collection commencing, meetings took place with key governance groups that were recognised as such within the community (Martin, 2006). Research participants were identified through these groups, and from the lead

researcher's personal and professional relationships (and their relationships, as described by Miller et al., 2015). Research participants were also invited to identify others who might be interested in the study (a form of snowball sampling; see Kumar, 2014). In some situations, this included the participants 'vouching' for the lead researcher: a process where an Aboriginal person provides positive (or negative) impressions of a non-Aboriginal person to other members of the community (see Westerman, 2004).

A total of 18 Aboriginal people over the age of 18 (6 male and 12 female) living in, and members of, the community volunteered to participate in the study. Two of the participants had lived experience of the youth justice system and all of the participants had cultural connections across Western and Far Western NSW (numerous traditional cultural groups were represented including Wiradjuri (the country in which the interviews took place), Gomeroi, Ngiyampaa and Barkindji (Paakantyi)). Each interview commenced with a social conversation to develop rapport between participants, followed by informed consent to start the research. Each participant was asked to provide a perspective as a community member, rather than as a member of a service delivery agency if s/he was employed as such. An office space was provided to host the interviews and catering was provided in recognition of the time that the community members took to participate in the research. Interviews were also conducted over the telephone, at the participant's request ($n = 5$). Each participant was asked about their willingness to meet again to discuss the findings, and regular updates provided to participants via email, conversation or text messages. The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed and field notes also taken. The average length of the interviews was 42 minutes.

The transcribed interviews and field notes were uploaded on the NVivo software for content analysis by the lead researcher. The analysis started with *open coding*, which included writing thoughts and reflections that supported familiarisation with the text (see Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Following this, the transcripts were *condensed* using unique nodes in NVivo that shortened the version of the text, but still conveyed the essential meanings. The condensed units were then grouped into *meaning codes*, which identified connections between the condensed units by assigning one or two words denoting what the condensed unit is about. For example, the text 'And I think we've created, we've got that westernised framework, and so then we've tried to adapt it to make them that Aboriginal way' was condensed to 'Trying to adopt a westernised framework to work in the Aboriginal way', which forms a meaning code of 'programs based on Aboriginal knowledge'. Meaning codes were then sorted into *categories* of who/what/when/where, which were short and factual (see Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017) from which themes were abstracted. Finally, these data were collated into coding tables which were then reviewed and approved by the research supervisors and the cultural mentor for triangulation and attempt to strengthen confidence in the analytic method (Bengtsson, 2016).

Analysis

A total of 78 condensed units were identified from comments relevant to program design, which were then abstracted into the following meaning codes: short time frames for community engagement, local responses and programs based on Aboriginal knowledge. These were placed in a superordinate category labelled

‘Design Orientation’. Additional meaning codes of social and emotional wellbeing, healing and finding identity were placed into another category of ‘What Does Therapeutic Mean for Aboriginal People’.

Category: Design orientation

Short time frames for community engagement. Most of the participants highlighted the challenges that service providers and community members face in building relationships. These typically arose in a context characterised by high levels of distrust resulting from the community’s previous experiences with government and human service providers. Building trust with the community was paramount, and community engagement was inhibited by service providers working to short time frames to demonstrate that their programs were effective. These were seen by participants as not respectful of the trust building process required to engage and work within these communities:

You could go into some communities that you need to work with for 12 months before you’re fully operational, because you need to get the trust and the respect of the community. You need to get out who you are... That’s where you have to build that trust and that respect foundation of having them be able to come to you. Where a lot of services, they’ve only got a three to six-month time limit to show that it’s working. Then they’re – that time limit needs to be extended to 12 to 24 months because a lot of other communities, they take a long time to get into, and that’s because there’s a distrust of government and other services who have previously screwed them over, and that’s just a reality. (Participant 2, female)

Another participant commented: ‘And we don’t give people time, you know? Healing takes time, and engaging and having really good relationships with someone takes time, and we don’t recognise that from a contract management perspective, or program delivery’ (Participant 3, female).

Many participants also described the need for trust and relationship building in reference to the on-going impact of the stolen generation, reflecting on their own experiences growing up either seeing family members or friends being removed or having been told by family members to run if they saw service providers in town. For example, one participant commented:

Mum always taught us – so, when we seen strangers we’d take off and run because that’s what you had to do. So this big black car pulled up... and we all bolted and ran for the bushes, but he too slow so they got him and took him away. (Participant 1, male)

Similarly, several of the participants spoke about the frustration of government and human service providers when Aboriginal services set the engagement and program delivery agenda. The participants felt that engagement with Aboriginal communities was often viewed as ‘unproductive’ by government agencies. Another participant

discussed how place based programs were not providing immediate results, and that time was required given the context of 230 years of colonisation:

Through Maranguka [Justice Reinvestment] and things like that they're trying to do some of that, and it frustrates a lot of people because they're not seeing the results immediately, but I don't think we're giving them the time that's required to do it. We're expecting miracles overnight, and let's face it, it took 230 years to get in this mess. (Participant 3, female)

Local responses. The need for local responses to local problems was emphasised, with community members highlighting the importance of viewing rural communities as heterogeneous, each with their own strengths, needs and cultures, despite at times being in close proximity to one another. The participants were unanimous about the need of program designers to understand local issues and local context when designing youth justice programs. Likewise, members also commented that the importation of programs from other broader population-level areas such as rural, urban, western and north western locales had little ecological validity:

A policy that works in Dubbo isn't going to work in Narromine, I can tell you that. And Narromine is 35kms from Dubbo! So, it's true that it's going to work in Dubbo, they'll work out of Wilcannia, they'll work out of Broken Hill, or work up in Walgett. But that's what I'm saying. You need to start looking at the communities as individuals. So if you can look at a community as an individual, and sort out a case plan for that community, you're going to be fine. But don't force a program from south Sydney, metropolitan area, onto an outreach location, because they are very, very different issues, and they are different communities. Don't see them or label them as one. That's basically the point, or that – out of everything, that's what I want you to take away most from this conversation. (Participant 2, female)

Community members also raised the challenges of delivering services and programs in a 'top-down' manner particularly where set funding contracts specified prescriptive program models and pre-determined key performance indicators, rather than relying on a 'bottom-up' place based approach which focuses on identifying problems and solutions jointly:

"We've got a program that fits to the kid and not makes the kid fit to the program," and they're like, "Alright, what's the KPIs?" And we're like, "We don't know yet. We've got to wait until we see the kids." "Alright, if we don't know what your KPIs are – next submission. Sorry." Straight away. So, we've got the people that are going to be able to help us do this i.e. funders. The government orgs that fund our different programs that we tender for and submit for. They want to see rock-solid, yes/no, black and white answers straightaway. (Participant 5, male)

Programs based on Aboriginal knowledge. Developing an evidence base founded on Aboriginal knowledge was identified as key for effective programs. Community members found the importation of westernised programs frustrating and

poorly adapted for use in an Aboriginal context. To illustrate, one community member felt that Aboriginal people were better off when they were connected and were part of family and community. The perceived importance of designing programs based on Aboriginal knowledge is highlighted in the following quote:

And I think we've created, we've got that westernised framework, and so then we've tried to adapt it to make them that Aboriginal way, where in reality we should have just turned it up on its head and just wiped the slate clean. This is what will work, and I think it doesn't help from a – like, as a contract manager, that we have, we're really descriptive in our contracts, and we keep going to these evidence-based models. I'll argue the point every day, like, don't get me wrong, most of those evidence based programs are built from other countries, and we're not building our own evidence base, and I say to people, you know, as long as it's underpinned by evidence, like, we know that young people, or Aboriginal people, feel connected, are part of, and all of that, the evidence tells us that you're better off, and so I'm saying create something using our own evidence but having it underpinned by a strong body of research. It doesn't have to be a prescribed program that's been developed in America or in Canada or something. (Participant 3, female)

Interviewees generally maintained that programs developed with local Aboriginal knowledge provided a more therapeutic framework for service delivery through embedding cultural connectedness for young people.

Category: What does therapeutic mean for Aboriginal young people?

The second theme that emerged was how the community understood the meaning of the term 'therapeutic' for Aboriginal young people and, importantly, the meaning and understanding of social and emotional wellbeing within this particular community.

Social and emotional wellbeing. Community members were clear on their understanding of social and emotional wellbeing from an Aboriginal context, which was in stark contrast to the Western biomedical, psychological model that rely on clinical treatment expertise. In the quote below Participant 6 expresses his understanding of Western interventionist models, suggesting that Aboriginal people are looking for models that maintain meanings of connection to culture and identity and being healthy in terms of spirituality: aspects that were considered to be often overlooked or even dismissed in a Westernised program models:

But I think when we're talking about therapies, we talk about intervention, we talk about political intervention, we talk about social interventions, like social housing, all of those things. Aboriginal people, in my opinion, we understand that, we understand what it is. We're saying, a lot of the time, 'We don't need that. We're not looking for that.' 'But who's the first point of call when you're feeling unwell? We all go and see a GP. Generally the GPs are non-indigenous GP that rarely – and the AMS' [Aboriginal Medical Services] was set up to combat this. I'm not sure that it has done that particularly well. Again, because it is controlled by government – is the notion of what is social/emotional wellbeing about against being clinically unwell. So you never go to a GP and say, 'Look, I think you've

really got some – my concerns are more around your social/emotional wellbeing, your connectedness to community?’ They won’t, they will say, ‘I think you need to see a counsellor or a psychologist’. And when you access them, having trust in it, and ensuring that you get the right support. And I think it’s still seen as gobbledygook; cultural identity, culturally spirituality is still seen by non-Aboriginal doctors, particularly white Australian doctors more so. (Participant 6, male)

For this interviewee, the importance of having a role within community, and having connection to country and land, was considered paramount to any form of effective programming. Another participant made specific reference to the existence of these resources prior to colonisation:

You think about before white man came here and it was just Aboriginal people. We had social workers and psychologists and all those things. They didn’t have a doctorate. They didn’t have a bachelor’s degree, but everybody had a role mate. Everybody had a role and those people lived and existed in our communities back then, surely. And they had the tools that worked, and they had the tools that worked without universities and it was connectivity to their country and land and understanding what that meant. (Participant 7, male)

Healing. Healing was also identified as an important component of any wellbeing model, with many participants discussing the importance of programs having a healing orientation that extended to culture as well as contemporary understandings. Interviewees spoke of the importance of community leaders taking responsibility for educating young Aboriginal people about their culture and lore, and highlighted the healing that was needed in this space:

But there’s also a fractured element to all of that too, in terms of Aboriginal communities can sometimes be divided by what that actually mean, what culture is and what it means to them, things like lore, L-O-R-E is. There’s a lot of healing to be done in that space as well. And Aboriginal people . . . we need to take some responsibility as well for doing that, providing that platform for our children. (Participant 6, male)

Finding identity. Providing a platform for the young people was deemed an important process that was central to meeting the need for young people to realise their Aboriginal identity through their culture both, on an individual level, and within family and community.

And in my research, in my lived experience, and in my professional experience, it’s really clear that that’s the most important thing for Aboriginal people, and particularly for young people, because that’s when we’re developing, that’s when we’re establishing identity, who we are and where we sit in society. But there’s also what is more dominant than pathological illnesses, is the notion of social and emotional wellbeing. People often use that term and don’t really understand what it means. It’s understanding of who you are and where you’re from, and that’s the basis for their identity. (Participant 6, male)

Similarly, another participant highlighted the therapeutic benefit of connecting with cultural leaders or knowledge holders and being attached to culture:

I can see as someone who actively connects with cultural lore-man in my community and goes bush with those guys, I understand that that's the story we're telling out there. These kids need to get out, they need to be attached to this stuff. This is the stuff that works for us. You can't write it in a book either. It just doesn't work like that. (Participant 5, male)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify how the ecological validity of youth justice programs might be enhanced for Aboriginal young people from rural communities. It was clear from the analysis that the Aboriginal community members who participated in this study are cognisant of the current Western frameworks and the challenges these present to building strong relationships and partnerships with the community. However, the analysis also demonstrates the community's tenacity in working within these non-Indigenous program models and bringing their voice to the fore, merging their unique Indigenous knowledge in seeking a more appropriate way of meeting the needs of the young people. Specifically, it was suggested that new approaches to program design that involve extensive consultation with community members are required.

Three main conclusions can be drawn. First, the community participants were unanimous in their desire for longer term, meaningful engagement. This was seen as critical to the development of trust between the community and potential service providers, in a context in which high levels of distrust have existed. Second, this particular community saw little validity in approaches to the planning of services and programs that relied on broader population-level data. This was because each rural community was regarded as unique with its own challenges and history of service delivery. As such, a centralised program response which overlooks local factors was considered to be unlikely to lead to any significant changes for the community. This speaks to the need for effective community engagement in order to understand how each unique community's ecology influences program design and effectiveness. Third, and related to this point, participants felt strongly that programs should be built on Aboriginal knowledge, supported by a strong research base, rather than the importation of 'evidence-based' programs. This included making use of existing research that highlights the importance of connection for Aboriginal people's social and emotional wellbeing, with connectedness relating to culture, to spirituality, to cultural roles and to the past, aligning with descriptions of cultural safety in services. Importantly, community members also argued that many of the resources to support young people in their social and emotional wellbeing were already available in the community and could be accessed through the engagement of lore-men and community leaders.

From these findings, we suggest that efforts to increase the ecological validity of programs for Aboriginal young people who offend should involve five components: (i) long term community engagement; (ii) trust; (iii) knowledge sharing from knowledge holders within the community; (iv) community defined targets and performance indicators; and (v) the utilisation of community skills, capacity and assets in program delivery.

Each component is identified as a critical success factor in a context in which there is increased demand from funders and government agencies for programs to be effective even though a large proportion of Aboriginal programs have either yet to be evaluated or there is little evidence of their effectiveness (see Hudson, 2017; Williams, 2018) and the limited progress that has been made in reducing levels of Aboriginal youth contact with the justice system in rural areas of Australia.

This study, in our view, illustrates the importance of community engagement in uncovering new learnings about how to meet the needs of Aboriginal rural young people who offend. Future approaches might build on this work by considering the range of factors that influence the effective implementation of youth justice programs. However, an important next step will be to formulate a community-driven program theory and program logic model that can be used to guide the selection of key program activities and outcomes that address the needs of justice involved young people.

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