Your submission

Men's behaviour change programs (MBCPs) are an important form of perpetrator intervention in the domestic and family violence (DFV) context (Mackay, Gibson, Lam, & Beecham, 2015).[1] The programs were established in Australia in the 1980s (Costello, 2006; Mackay et al., 2015). MBCPs are increasingly being used as a form of community-based treatment for perpetrators of DFV (Brown, Flynn, Fernandez Arias, & Clavijo, 2016; Gleeson, 2018; Neave, Faulkner, & Nicholson, 2016). Researchers have identified a gap in knowledge in MBCPs—that is, a nuanced understanding of the client–worker relationship within these programs, and how the relationship relates to the change process (see for example Day, Chung, O'Leary, & Carson, 2009; Jewell & Wormith, 2010; Kozar & Day, 2012; Taft & Murphy, 2007).

This submission presents findings obtained from a recent study of client-worker relationships at two Australian MBCPs (Reimer, 2020). The study, *"Growing to be a better person": Exploring the client–worker relationship in men's behaviour change group work programs*, was funded by ANROWS, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. The submission extracts findings from the study which are relevant to Inquiry Term of Reference "g", which is, "That the Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs inquire into and report on… (g) the efficacy of perpetrator intervention programs and support services for men to help them change their behaviour".

The study addressed identified gaps in knowledge of the client-worker relationship in MBCPs. This occurred by exploring different perceptions of the experience of client-worker relationships, as well as the factors perceived to affect the development of the working relationship. Different perceptions were gleaned from MBCP participants, group therapy facilitators (hereafter, "facilitator/s"), facilitators' supervisors and the MBCP participants' (ex-)partners. The research explored these issues in the context of group therapy at two MBCPs in three rural and urban service delivery sites (the Men and Family Centres in Lismore and Tweed Heads, NSW, and Centacare MBCP in Southport, Queensland).

The aim of the study was to explore what multiple people involved in men's behaviour change programs (i.e. the MBCP participants, the facilitator/s, their supervisors and the MBCP participants' (ex-)partners) perceived to be the purpose, value and meaning of the client–worker relationship in terms of changing the MBCP participants' violent attitudes and behaviours towards women.

While the study did not measure change, the overarching finding of the study was that most of the facilitators built effective client–worker relationships that helped the MBCP participants work towards changing violent and coercive behaviours and attitudes towards women. The knowledge derived from this study has multiple implications, including the need for policymakers to:

- provide funding for **ongoing support** for MBCP participants who have completed the available modules, and
- use evidence on the **gendered nature of the client-worker relationship** in MBCPs when setting, and funding, practice and professional development standards for perpetrator interventions.

Methodology

The research employed qualitative research methods, informed by critical hermeneutics. The study utilised multiple triangulation methods (Denzin, 1978) during recruitment and data collection. Triangulation is useful for increasing rigor, reliability and richness, and reducing bias, in qualitative research (Denzin, 1978; Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018). Thematic analysis was undertaken to inductively interpret the meaning of the perceptions of the client–worker relationships participants discussed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Sixty-five semi-structured, conversational-style in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were designed to elicit subjective perceptions of the 32 client–worker relationships. Twenty-two male participants of MBCPs were recruited to the study. Ten facilitators, three supervisors and three current partners of the men agreed to participate, and were interviewed. Recruitment and data collection occurred from August 2017 to the end of April 2018. To maintain participant privacy and anonymity the data is presented by referring to the client–worker relationship dyads rather than using participants' names.

Findings

The overarching finding of the study was that most of the facilitators built effective client–worker relationships by relating

[1] They are also known as "batterer programs" in the United States and "domestic violence perpetrator programs" in the United Kingdom.

to the MBCP participants in a highly personalised manner (hereafter, personalised client–worker relationships). In this study, an effective client–worker relationship is defined as one that creates an environment that helps the client work towards changed violent and coercive behaviours and attitudes towards women. A personalised manner involved facilitators using the client–worker relationship to demonstrate care and support, while directly challenging participants to think and behave differently.

The MBCPs used personalised client–worker relationships to help the MBCP participants work towards changed behaviour by: assisting program engagement; creating a safe group work environment; and, facilitating a process whereby the MBCP participants worked towards learning to engage with others, especially women, in non-violent ways. Working towards change to non-violent behaviour occurred through facilitators using the client-worker relationship to challenge the MBCP participants to: learn about themselves and why they use violence in their relationships, think and act differently, and practice engaging in non-violent ways of relating (both in the group work environment, and their personal lives).

While the study did not measure changed behaviour, evidence emerged of ways in which the personalised client-worker relationships were central to effective perpetrator interventions; that is, interventions that helped men change. These ideas, and the implications for policymakers, will be discussed in detail.

Facilitators' use of the client–worker relationship to assist program engagement

Overcoming initial resistance

Many MBCP participants discussed a heightened sense of vulnerability upon initially attending the program. A personalised client–worker relationship helped the MBCP participants feel less vulnerable and anxious about attending the program. This relates to the importance of the client–worker relationship for helping MBCP participants make a connection with a facilitator, in particular building trust.

This sense of vulnerability, which created either a barrier or motivation to engage in the program, emerged for the MBCP participants upon realising what coming to the program meant. Feelings included apprehension, fear, wariness, embarrassment, disappointment and shame. For example, the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 3 said:

> When you come here you go through a process of—of immense, you know, having your son and your—and your partner say to you, like, "You're freaking us out. You're really scaring us." It's—you go through a process of, like, pretty full on shame. So, you're really shamed. Then you go into, like, the guilt. Then you sort of, trying to keep on that. And the reason why we come is so that … it's like maintenance on yourself.

Some facilitators, supervisors and MBCP participants reported how, for many MBCP participants, initial feelings of anxiety and fear manifested as some form of resistance to building a client–worker relationship, which hindered their engagement with the program. The MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 5 expressed this as follows:

> There was a massive amount of resistance in me first of all to change, and to take this stuff on. Because, like, I got a lot of power. I don't want to have to give up my power. And, even though I could intellectually understand what they're talking about, my heart was like "No, fuck that" … As a man I'm superior and all this other shit, yeah, yeah. And that, not from my head but from my heart that would kick up. And I saw it happening with other people too.

Despite this resistance, the study found that when facilitators could develop a personalised client–worker relationship, the MBCP participants engaged, and remain engaged, in the highly challenging behavioural change interventions.

Regarding a 'personalised' client–worker relationship, a number of study participants discussed how the facilitators coming across in such a way that the MBCP participants could identify with the facilitator as a "person" assisted engagement. A personalised client–worker relationship was most commonly discussed as the facilitators coming across as relatable, authentic and credible, involving facilitators displaying qualities such as honesty, trustworthiness, friendliness, warmth, empathy and respect, and being non-judgemental and collaborative. In addition, MBCP participants reported that the facilitators maintained hope, optimism and expectation that the MBCP participants could and would change. Furthermore, a personalised relationship helped the MBCP participants listen to facilitators' perspectives and accept them as credible. Credibility was reported to especially occur when facilitators came across as competent facilitators with relevant life experiences, particularly personal experiences of DFV and behavioural change.

Credibility and relatability was found to be important for the MBCP participant change process, in that, facilitators speaking from experience, and sharing personal insights of a change journey, helped MBCP participants learn processes regarding how to achieve attitudinal and behavioural change. This was illustrated by the (ex-)partner of the MBCP

participant in Relationship Dyad 14:

> [The facilitator's] transparency makes him seem more human. He's not just a person on a pedestal that tells you that this is good for you. But, "Hey, I've actually been there, and I've actually experienced A, B, C, and D, and I know that it can be done if you want it, and if you work hard at it."

Facilitators' use of the client–worker relationship to create a safe group work environment

All the MBCP participants in the study referred to how the client–worker relationship contributed to them feeling safe, which helped them engage, build trust, accept challenge and work towards change. For example, some MBCP participants described the relationship with their facilitator as "nurturing", "warm" or as a "supportive mechanism".

The relationships provided a safe and nurturing space for the men to make sense of their lives and to become better able to develop healthy, safe and equal relationships. The facilitators did this in various ways, including by:

- holding the men accountable for their immediate behaviour as a way of revealing their hidden assumptions about relationships
- challenging them to think differently about their relationships, behaviours and attitudes
- supporting them to practise new behaviours in relationships.

A safe and trusting client–worker relationship created a new experience for the MBCP participants, where they could become attentive to deeply hidden preconceptions about themselves and DFV and open up about these. This was encapsulated in the following way by one supervisor from the NSW site, as follows:

> And 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.

The client–worker relationship provided a valuable opportunity for the men to open up in dialogue with the facilitator about what was really going on, which was important in helping the MBCP participant become more self-aware. This is illustrated in the example of one facilitator in Relationship Dyad 12:

> So, his guard was down, and he was talking about the things that were really important. It felt to me that it was [a] really strong, open and healthy working relationship. We were really making progress versus those relationships where it is quite evident that you're stuck. You are just not getting anywhere.

Making progress regarding change attitudes and behaviour towards women involved engaging in honest dialogue about alternative perspectives on the experience of abusive relationships. Honest dialogue opened up opportunities for the MBCP participants to hear new perspectives, and to be challenged to critically reflect on their preconceived ideas, personal values, and beliefs about women and acceptable ways of relating to women. It also involved being challenged to reflect critically on how they would feel if someone who purported to care for them treated them in ways they had treated the people in their lives who they purported to care for. Such open and raw discussions were not possible without the development of personalised working relationships.

Facilitators' use of the client–worker relationship to help MBCP participants work towards changed behaviour

The facilitators used the client–worker relationship to foster change by situating the relationship as a place for the MBCP participants to practice relating to people in non-violent and caring ways, even when confronted and feeling vulnerable. Sub-themes include how the client–worker relationship helped the facilitators to learn about the man and why he is violent; how facilitators used the working relationship to challenge each MBCP participant to learn about himself and why he was violent; and how facilitators used the working relationship to challenge, teach and guide the men to think and act differently.

Challenging the men to learn why he uses violence

Some facilitators, MBCP participants, supervisors and (ex-)partners reported that the client–worker relationship helped facilitators challenge the MBCP participants to develop greater, and more critical, self-awareness about their violent behaviour and the underlying reasons for this. For example, the (ex-)partner of the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad

16 said:

> The rapport that he has with [the male facilitator] he can at least see his life through someone else's eyes. He's listened to [the male facilitator's] stories and gone, "Shit, I've done that". Or he listens to other people's stories and goes, "Oh shit, I've done that too".

This idea was supported by MBCP participants, and was explained in the following way by the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 12:

> I felt very strong attachment to the facilitators. I liked being with them, talking with them … I felt that I wanted to be near them, and talk to them, because I felt that it was helping, making some change … I liked the way that they presented stuff, and I felt that inch by inch, as it were, it was helping me to unravel, and helped me to understand what's going on inside my head, so the nuts and bolts could fall together. And it did, a lot, in a lot of things. Driving all that sort of stuff, you know. It really changed my life.

In this way, the client–worker relationship was reported to provide a forum for the MBCP participants to listen to, and take notice of, outside perspectives on their violent attitudes and behaviours, and to gain insight into themselves.

The client–worker relationship was identified as a key factor in determining whether or not the MBCP participants were interested in what the facilitator had to say when discussing challenging ideas. As such, the client–worker relationship helped the MBCP participants learn new ways of thinking about their situations, including why they held attitudes that support violence and chose to engage in violent behaviour.

Furthermore, the client–worker relationship with female facilitators was particularly useful for helping the men gain awareness of, and develop insight about, their violence towards their (ex-)partners. For example, the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 15 noted:

> So [I] heard from [the female facilitator's] version. And also [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.

This MBCP participant talked about how the respect and care he had developed for the facilitator helped him take note when she spoke, and he wanted to learn from her. In his mind, this was particularly useful as he used it to try to think more deeply about the challenge she laid out and to make sense of the impact of his behaviour on other women. He argued that the client–worker relationship enhanced his capacity to understand the issues because, without it, he would not have thought about the issue in relation to other women.

Some female facilitators similarly reported how their client–worker relationships helped the MBCP participants consciously pay attention to differences between how they related to the female facilitators compared to their (ex-)partners. For example, the female facilitator in Relationship Dyad 18 reported feedback from MBCP participants about the way in which a client–worker relationship with female facilitators challenged the men to critically self-reflect:

> A number of men have said things like, "I realise how important it is to have a woman in the room, because you kind of remind me about my partner, but you're not my partner, and you're not coming across like my partner. But the way you're expressing yourself, and the way you do express yourself, I kind of wish that I could be more like I am in the group with my partner."

Female facilitators also discussed the way in which the client–worker relationship between MBCP participants and female facilitators contributed to challenging the men to better understand themselves, including their values, beliefs and assumptions about violence and their violent behaviour. For example, the female facilitator in Relationship Dyad 16 said:

> I'm in a space where it's unique. I'm the only woman in there and the expectation that they respect me is actually really not fair. They don't respect their partner. There's something in their value system that says women are less than them. So, me expecting respect in there is almost unfair, yet I will get it, even on a superficial level. I will get it because of all the things that support them to be violent at home. Their value system might say I can't be disrespectful in this room. Just like I can't at the bank, or at the coffee shop, or wherever I am when someone's done something to piss me off. But I can at home because my value system says that when she does that, I can … It takes it from the superficial to the core. So, if a man can genuinely respect me and understand what that feels

> like as a human being—be challenged by me, have fun with me, do whatever we do in our relationship—then my belief and my hope I guess, is that he takes that into his relationship with his partner. Where he can have genuine respect for her which eliminates the possibility of abuse … So, it's about his experience, and being able to relate it to something. His experience of that, and whether that happens or not, I hope that it does, but I can't work with him on any other level other than on a genuine personal level. And if we can get to that, and he experiences that from a woman, and for all those reasons I talked about, then there is potential for him to have that at home, and respect her.

This facilitator argued that the client–worker relationship with a female facilitator supports challenge and change at a deep level, because it taps into what having a personal connection with another human being means. She argued that through this relationship (where the man learns to relate to the female facilitator as another human being, not as a female), the facilitator challenges the man to reflect critically on the kind of values he holds that allow him to be abusive to his female partner but not to women in a professional context. This facilitator reported how she is conscious about how she uses the personal connection with the man through the client–worker relationship to challenge this paradoxical set of values and behaviour. As such, a reported value in the client–worker relationship lies in the concrete experience of being in a respectful and equal, yet challenging, relationship with a woman, rather than merely teaching concepts about respect and non-violence towards women.

Challenging the man to think and act differently

The client–worker relationships helped the MBCP participants to think differently about their existing attitudes and behaviours regarding the use of violence and control in their relationships, and to challenge normative ideas on men, women, and power. The facilitators used the client–worker relationship to challenge the men to raise their self-awareness about how their behaviour was not safe for other people, in particular their (ex-)partners. This was illustrated by the male facilitator in Relationship Dyad 16:

> We're here to learn how to be safe and respectful. Really, that's the bottom line. So, we can say all these other words about not controlling, and non-violent, and not abusive, all of that sort of stuff. But we're really here to learn how to be safe and respectful 100 percent of the time, regardless of what's happening … They can't do that stuff without some form of relationship, like without them knowing that I'm not just some bullshit artist, or without them having some faith that what I'm telling them is real, yeah, and that they can trust that. But they can also challenge it.

This involved using the experience of safety within the client–worker relationship to guide the MBCP participants to reflect critically on their behaviour, and to work towards becoming men who created safety in their relationships.

Furthermore, some MBCP participants and facilitators reported how learning empathy was a crucial facet in the change process, and that facilitators used empathy to teach MBCP participants what it feels like to care for another person. For example, the female facilitator in Relationship Dyad 9 reported how she used the empathy developed through the client–worker relationship to provide MBCP participants with a challenging insight into what it may be like for the women and children who are on the receiving end of their abusive attitudes and behaviours. The power of this lay in an MBCP participant feeling empathy for a woman he had come to care for, in this case the female facilitator. Another female facilitator in Relationship Dyad 9 used this type of approach to challenge the men to make a similar connection regarding their partners:

> I remember just sitting with this level of frustration to the point that I couldn't anymore and I just said, "I'd just like to invite everybody to stand up" and then I did and, you know, I'm only a very little person, and I don't think that really—well, it is more effective, I have to say. But just me being in a room of 14 men standing, and I said, "This is what I look at every day and my partner is not abusive. So, I'd just like you to think about what that's like for [your partner]. You're not at imminent threat from her, and she's responding to your abuse. She's doing what she has to. But you're not unsafe. I'm actually unsafe just here doing this" and [the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 9] responded to that. He said, "That was amazing. That really did something for me."

Some facilitators discussed using the emotional investment the MBCP participants had developed with female facilitators to confront the men to critically reflect on how they chose to be violent towards some women, but not others. When the MBCP participants responded in respectful and non-violent ways, the facilitators would challenge the MBCP participants to question themselves about why they could do this with the female facilitators who they had an emotional connection with, but not their (ex-)partners.

Furthermore, a primary purpose of the client–worker relationship was helping the MBCP participant understand that the process of change is difficult but imperative to involvement in the MBCP. This involved the facilitators establishing expectations about the men's involvement in the MBCP, and holding the men accountable to engage actively in the work of behaviour change. Facilitators, MBCP participants and supervisors reported how facilitators needed to challenge and confront the men, albeit in a caring and supportive way, when their behaviour or attitude did not align with the purpose of the work. This specifically involved encouraging the MBCP participants to engage in a safe, respectful and equal manner with the women and children with whom they were connected and recognising when they demonstrated positive change. The client–worker relationship was considered central to this learning process.

A role model for different ways of being in a relationship

Many MBCP participants and facilitators reported how the client–worker relationship provided opportunities to role model and practise what safer, healthier and more beneficial relationships looked and felt like. This is illustrated through discussion with the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 5.

> [Researcher:] So overall, how do you think that connection with the worker, the connection with [the male facilitator], just overall changed your behaviour?
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> [MBCP participant:] Totally man, totally, 100 percent, chalk and cheese. Like I've done some anger management stuff through some drug rehab or some shit like that, and some clinicians coming up, and they've got a slide show, and you're all sitting down, and … No connection. And no change. Whereas you walk in with [the male facilitator], there's that self-disclosure, the guy's got a fair bit of wisdom outside of this stuff, and that really opened me up to want to change …
>
> [Researcher:] So, he was a role model?
>
> [MBCP participant:] A little bit, yeah. I'd definitely say that, I'd go as far as to say that.

This conception of the facilitator as role model was supported by the (ex-)partner of the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 14:

> 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 [the MBCP participant's] life, and his father wasn't that, and his uncles weren't that.

MBCP participants learned new ways of behaving in relationships by having a space to see good relationships in action. This included how men and women can safely and respectfully disagree, as noted by the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 15:

> So, it's not just [the male facilitator] talking about things. Then also [the female facilitator] comes [in] on a certain point, "I agree with all … he is saying, but this part is wrong, and I think you have to see it more from this side." Yeah, the main thing is she just brings this—they're good at what they're doing.

The client–worker relationship also created a culture in which the MBCP participants could participate in new ways of relating with men and women that they could then take into their personal relationships. Through engaging with male and female facilitators and observing the client–worker relationship between facilitators, the MBCP participants experienced the client–worker relationship as a model of relationships where men and women were equal, and that were not violent or coercive. This direct experience of being in relationships with women who expected respect and equal standing was key to challenging the men to unpack their values and assumptions about women.

Through personalised, and caring, working relationships, the MBCP participants got to actually experience, rather than just hear about, concepts about how to behave differently in relationships. For example, when the facilitators confronted and challenged the MBCP participants, it was usually done with care, through adopting a guidance/teaching approach, rather than berating the MBCP participants. As such, the client–worker relationship provided an experience of being in a respectful relationship that involved a caring response to conflict. This was noted as follows by the female facilitator in Relationship Dyad 12:

> The guys have got to call their partners by their first name. Not "she" … So, we get a sense of who that person is as well and I challenge them all the time if they call them something else. "What's her name?" [The MBCP participant] made the point of making a little dig … about it. He wouldn't call her by her name, and he wouldn't call her anything, and it was a real problem. Then I could see that he was pressing my boundary around that, and I

> thought I'm not going to push you on that. I'm just going to keep reminding you. What I do normally is if somebody does the opposite in a group I'll just say "I love how you use such-and-such's name, I appreciate that." I just role model it from other people without kind of pinpointing him and saying "Why won't you call her name?" I don't make an issue out of it … No one's actually kind of role modelled them respectful communication.

Furthermore, some facilitators and MBCP participants reported that the client–worker relationship provided an opportunity for the MBCP participants to see alternative, non-violent ways to react when they may not know the answers, or when they made a mistake. The facilitator in Relationship Dyad 14 illustrated this:

> Yeah, not knowing is actually part of being alive. This is one of the things that, as boys, or men … we're taught not to not know. If we don't know, we've failed. Whereas in actual fact, if we don't know, that's really authentic and genuine and it's a great way for us to learn, to find out … They've met all these experts, yeah. If they've come through Corrections [Corrective Services] or they've come through solicitors, or they've come through the courts in some way, or the police. They haven't met anyone yet who has said to them, geez, I'm actually a bit baffled.

The MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 10 explained this further, arguing that the client–worker relationship was a factor in learning new ways of communicating. When discussing this idea, he reported that he had not grown up with the kind of language he was now learning was necessary to engage in healthy relationships. He discussed how, by hearing the facilitator admit that he did not know the answer, it changed his thinking:

> I love the way [the facilitator] talks in group all the time … he voices not being able to express what's happening to him, but he knows something's happening, you know. I suppose, that's the thing, is when you've got, you know, long-term behaviours that've been dysfunctional that you don't really know how to deal with, instead of acting out and, you know, being negative about it, to be able to actually go, "I don't know what's going on, I'm scared about this, I need to talk to you about this, but I don't know how to talk about it."

He discussed learning safer, more appropriate and respectful ways of engaging in situations where he felt vulnerable and where conflict was present. In particular, he discussed having increased self-awareness about feeling vulnerable and learning to express what is actually going on for him, rather than behaving violently. As such, he discussed learning how to become more open in his relationships with others.

A place to practise non-violent ways of relating

The client–worker relationships provided the MBCP participants with an experience of relating to male and female facilitators in a way that, for most, was positively different to other relationships in their lives. Many MBCP participants discussed how the client–worker relationship provided opportunities to practise being in relationships quite different to the violent ones they were used to. For example, the facilitator in Relationship Dyad 1 identified that an underlying reason men need to attend the intervention relates to a paucity of relationships where men can learn to be, and practise being, the kind of men they want to be—for this facilitator, the client–worker relationship is a central "vehicle" for change:

> What I am trying to do is provide some of that connection, some of that space of, "I don't know how to live in a society, and be the man that I think is decent, respectful, worthwhile, powerful, passionate, all of the nice things that we want me to be, on my own" … I think that's true for all men. And so how do we connect each other through some form of relationship? And this has been the vehicle for me.

Similarly, the male facilitator in Relationship Dyad 18 discussed how the facilitators use the client–worker relationship as a tool for the men to practise a change:

> … so, him seeing that I don't respond violently, or in a way that's controlling, when there's difficulty in the relationship, whether it's with him or another group member. He sees me just consistently coming back to a non-violent way of engaging in [the] relationship. The way that the relationship supports that when he escalates in [the] group is sometimes … actually by just naming it, saying that what's going on right here is relational, you're escalating because of what is going on between you and I, a question I've asked or something I've challenged you on. So, let's see if we can, you know, if you can manage yourself, you know, so you don't start blaming others, or start to get threatening or whatever. Like, I wouldn't say that overtly, but it's actually a thing saying right now, right here, the way that you engage in this relationship is being tested … So, you're using the relationship in that moment by almost naming it as the thing that's on the table you know.

The quote illustrates how facilitators used the client–worker relationship to demonstrate a different way of communicating between men. The facilitator used the client–worker relationship to challenge the MBCP participants to learn to do the same, and build an expectation and belief in the man that he can change, and become more able to

express himself in this more respectful way.

In this kind of way, the client–worker relationship supported the MBCP participants to reflect critically on their violent attitudes and behaviours, and ways in which they hold power over other people, in particular women. It provided an environment where the MBCP participants were challenged to engage in dialogue with alternative perspectives on power and violence, including from facilitators who may have experienced either being an abuser or being abused. From within the client–worker relationship dyads, the MBCP participants learned respectful and non-violent alternatives, and practised these in safety.

Some MBCP participants talked about how they were using the techniques and knowledge in how they related to other people in their lives. For example, in the case of the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 10, with his children:

> I suppose that's the language that [the facilitator] uses on a regular basis that I'm starting to use … yeah just being able to express something that you can't express … Yeah, it's awesome, it's working with my kids and everything, that's really changed a lot.

Some study participants also reported a sense of the wider sphere of influence of the MBCP work. Some facilitators and MBCP participants discussed the value of the client–worker relationship as a starting point for men to build networks with other men who want relationships that are safe and respectful of men and women. This was encapsulated by the facilitator in Relationship Dyad 1:

> … [trying] to support [the men] towards conversation. So, to be able to support them when they're sitting at the footy club just talking about women in a certain way to be able to engage in that conversation in a way that's supporting this work, and helping to alter that work. But without making a pariah of themselves or without out-casting themselves, those sorts of things.

By this, the facilitator meant that the client–worker relationship created opportunities for change that extended beyond the men with whom a working relationship was directly made. This amounted to a perception of how the client–worker relationship makes it possible to vicariously influence the lives of many other people with whom MBCP participants have interpersonal relationships. This was noted by the male facilitator in Relationship Dyad 21:

> I will give him information to keep him safe. Primarily because this is the guy I'm talking to. But also, if I can convince him to change a little bit of his life before he leaves that room. I'm also starting that, I've lit the blowtorch paper of this firework where he will get the message, and it is going to help somebody else. If he's got a partner, kids, grandkids or the next-door neighbour.

This was supported by participants across all four cohorts (MBCP participants, (ex-)partners, facilitators and supervisors). For example, the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 23 reported that he now sees opportunities for change among his network of friends:

> Well, most of my friends I've known for a long time. They know how cranky I can be. They know how frustrated I can be and yet they're still here. If they can see that I'm making progress then, you know, hopefully they can see that they can make progress too.

This type of idea was also supported by the (ex-)partner of the MBCP participant in Relationship Dyad 14. She noted that the client–worker relationship made men accountable for learning how to challenge other men in their networks to behave in a more respectful and less violent way:

> And that's been the biggest thing for [MBCP participant], which is what I was saying before, was that he was taught this, and he was taught that maybe you should be pulling up the men in your life who say these kinds of things, or behave in that kind of way. Because it's reminding them from another man who they respect, or whatever, that, "Hey man, it's probably not cool."

Through engaging in open dialogue with the facilitators, and being challenged to consciously apply new perspectives to their own lives, the client–worker relationship helped facilitate a reflexive process for the MBCP participants. This helped the MBCP participants to challenge themselves and raise their self-awareness about their violent attitudes and behaviours. In particular, the experience of being in relationships with women who expected respect and equal standing was key in challenging the men to unpack their values and assumptions about, and change their attitudes and behaviour towards, women.

Discussion

The findings support other research in an offender context which has found catalysts that can increase motivation and readiness to change, and desistance from violence, include offenders experiencing strong negative emotions such as guilt, shame and fear (LeBel, et al., 2008; Leibrich, 1996; Vlais et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2017). This study demonstrated how facilitators use the care and empathy MBCP participants develop for them through the client–worker relationship to build an empathetic, caring and nurturing relational environment where MBCP participants feel safe to open up honestly about their guilt, shame and fear.

Using the client-worker relationship to experience and learn empathy

An effective client–worker relationship was enabled through the nurturing, empathetic and supportive approach the facilitators took towards the MBCP participants. Workers adopting an empathetic stance has previously been found to be important in research in an offender context (Kozar & Day, 2017; Marshall et al., 2003; Serran et al., 2003). This includes workers adopting a nurturing approach, which has previously been found to increase motivation in clients to engage in interventions with workers (Ormston et al., 2016; Stosny, 1994; Taft et al., 2001; Tolman & Bhosley, 1990). In this study, the facilitators used care and empathy for the MBCP participants to provide an alternative perspective on what nurturing relationships and empathetic relationships feel like, and to support the MBCP participants through the difficult change journey. Through this experience, the MBCP participants learned empathy and how to be empathetic towards others.

In particular, the client–worker relationships helped the experience of genuine care in relationships become real for the men when they felt empathy for the female facilitators with whom they had developed emotional connections, and when they became emotionally invested. The emotional investment the MBCP participants developed in the facilitators became important for determining whether the MBCP participants were interested in what the facilitators had to say. In this way, the client–worker relationship helped the MBCP participants learn new ways of thinking about their situations, including why they held attitudes that perpetuate violence and chose to engage in violent behaviour.

The findings show the relationships facilitated an environment in which the MBCP participants felt safe enough to accept being challenged. As safe environments, the relationships created opportunities for the MBCP participants to engage in dialogue with male and female facilitators and with other participants. This facilitated the participants hearing alternative perspectives of themselves and their behaviours. It also provided opportunities for the participants to be challenged to critically reflect on their preconceived ideas, personal values and beliefs about women and acceptable behaviour towards women. This occurred through the caring and supportive relationships with facilitators, and other men in the group who had similar experinces of coercive and violent behaviour and who had developed mutual trust.

Using client–worker relationships to enable change

Central to the work of MBCPs is that participants cease violent and aggressive attitudes and behaviours towards women. Similar to other studies conducted in a DFV context, this study found that an effective client–worker relationship creates motivation to change (Brown & O'Leary, 2000; Taft et al., 2001). For the MBCP participants in this study, engaging in client–worker relationships with the facilitators provided an opportunity to hear alternative perspectives on acceptable behaviour towards women. Being in a situation where they heard alternative perspectives—in particular, when reinforcing the perspectives of loved ones—became important for some MBCP participants' early critical analysis of pre-understanding about their own attitudes and behaviours towards women. Upon realising alternative representations that others (particularly loved ones) had of them, and consciously paying attention to these, some MBCP participants were prepared to challenge the representations they had of themselves as behaving in socially acceptable ways. In this way, the client–worker relationship was reported to provide an important opportunity for the MBCP participants to become aware of outside perspectives on their violent attitudes and behaviours, and to consciously work towards gaining insight into self and challenging their preconceived ideas about acceptable ways for men to relate to others, especially women.

Furthermore, the client–worker relationship created an experiential opportunity for the MBCP participants, where the interaction with the facilitators, in particular female facilitators, came to embody exactly what the facilitators were trying to teach the MBCP participants. Through engaging with male and female facilitators and observing the relationship between the two facilitators leading the program, the MBCP participants experienced the client–worker relationship as a model of relationships where men and women were equal and men were not violent or coercive. The client–worker relationships provided new experiences of power and opportunities for facilitators to challenge the MBCP participants to reflect critically on their pre-understanding about men and women, build self-awareness and learn different values and ways of behaving.

Additionally, this research has shown that building a client–worker relationship that creates motivation to change requires

patience and flexibility at a number of levels—that is, among facilitators, supervisors, organisations, policymakers and program funders. This may involve allowing facilitators and organisations to engage with MBCP participants beyond the time limitations of structured programs.

Implications and recommendations

The knowledge derived from this study has multiple implications, including the need for policymakers to:

- provide funding for **ongoing support** for MBCP participants who have completed the available modules, and
- use evidence on the **gendered nature of the client-worker relationship** in MBCPs when setting, and funding, practice and professional development standards for perpetrator interventions.

Ongoing support

Behaviour change takes a long time, and it is challenging to maintain the values, attitudes and behaviour change learned during the MBCP process without the support of others who understand the process and issues particular to your social welfare situation. Based on the study, it is recommended that policymakers provide flexible options for MBCP participants to continue to access supported groups once they have completed the modules available. New initiatives will require additional funding for DFV programs to provide ongoing intervention, where MBCP participants can continue to be supported in the kinds of relationships they experienced in the MBCP. It might also involve developing new models of support (along the lines of peer-to-peer models, such as Alcoholics Anonymous), where MBCP participants can engage with alumni of such programs in less formalised settings. However, no new programs should come at the expense of funding for perpetrator interventions, programs and supports, or for interventions, programs and supports for women who have experienced DFV.

Gendered nature of the client-worker relationship

Secondly, implications emerging from this study for policy makers include the different role of the working relationship across gender lines, where the working relationship with male and female facilitators helped motivate and challenge the participants in different ways to change their values, attitudes and behaviours. Recommendations for policy makers emerging from this study are for them to take greater consideration of the findings of this, and other research on the gendered nature of work in perpetrator interventions, when setting practice standards, and funding, related to MBCPs. In particular, this relates to ensuring the presence of male and female facilitators in group programs, and potentially increasing the number of female facilitators per group as a way to reduce the emotional load on female facilitators created by being the only woman in the room. This also includes ensuring facilitators working in the area of perpetrator interventions receive specialist professional development and support related to the importance and role of female facilitators for client change. Again, no new programs should come at the expense of funding for perpetrator interventions, programs and supports, or for interventions, programs and supports for women who have experienced DFV. Additionally, it is recommended that policymakers engage women who have experienced DFV in developing new perpetrator interventions of this kind.

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