



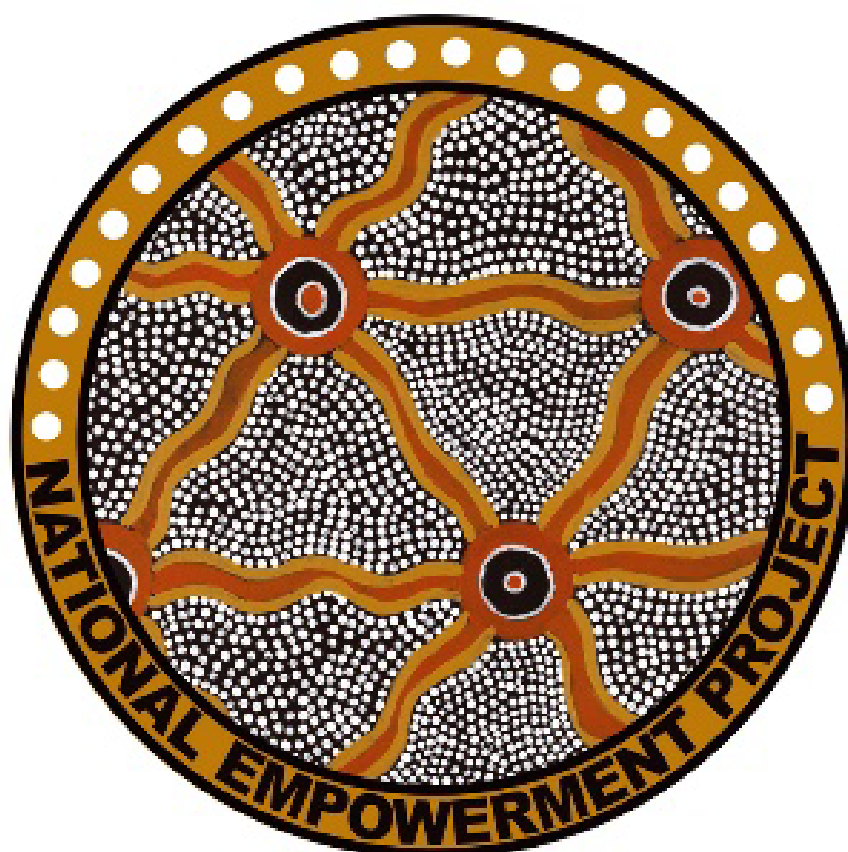
‘Speak Up and Be Strong’:
The Cultural, Social and Emotional Wellbeing Program
with Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women

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The Artwork

Tovani Cox, a Bunuba and Gija woman whose people are from the Kimberley in Western Australia, did the artwork for the National Empowerment Project. The meaning of the artwork is:

Communities coming together to share experiences and stories as a way of helping to build strong and healthy people, families and communities. The circles represent the communities across Australia and the white dots represent the people (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal).

The connecting lines represent the sharing of experiences and stories and once all the communities come together, Aboriginal Australia is united.

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Summary

The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the justice system remains unacceptably high and continues to feature prominently in government priorities and efforts to close the gap in health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The high rates of incarceration and recidivism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be attributed to a range of historical, social, economic, and systemic factors and a lack of culturally appropriate programs. The Cultural, Social and Emotional Wellbeing (CSEWB) Program is a culturally appropriate program based on the Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) model, which is a strengths-based and holistic health framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This study reports the evaluation of the first delivery of the CSEWB Program within the justice system, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at the Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women. Thematic analysis of the Stories of Most Significant Change identified themes of the impact of participation in the CSEWB Program that are aligned with the domains of the SEWB model. Participants reported significantly reduced levels of psychological distress after completing the CSEWB Program. The findings contribute to emerging evidence of the benefits of participation in the CSEWB Program and extend these findings to the justice system. We discuss the implications, limitations, and future directions of these findings.

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have great strengths and resilience and have the longest continuing culture in the world with over 65,000 years of history. However, the impact of colonisation and government policies have contributed to ongoing systemic discrimination and racism. Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to experience disadvantages across health, housing, education, employment and in the justice systems (Milroy et al., 2021). In the last 20 years, while the Australian national suicide rate has remained relatively stable, suicide rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples increased by 40% (ABS, 2021). Furthermore, 31% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples reported 'high or very high' levels of psychological distress, which is 2.3 times higher than the rate for non-Aboriginal peoples (ABS, 2019).

To address the high suicide rates and levels of psychological distress in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the National Empowerment Project (NEP) was established in 2012 as an innovative, Aboriginal-led research collaboration. The NEP adopted an Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR; Dudgeon, Bray, et al., 2020) approach by privileging the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, through extensive community consultations with 457 people in 11 communities across Australia. The aim of these consultations was to understand the challenges causing psychological distress and high suicide rates, and strengths, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The findings from the NEP revealed what communities perceived were clear protective factors associated with wellbeing and risk factors contributing to suicide. In response to the key recommendations from the NEP for a program that is community-owned, strengths-based and culturally responsive, the Cultural, Social, and Emotional Wellbeing (CSEWB) Program was developed. The aim of the CSEWB Program is to promote positive social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and mental health of individuals, families, and communities, by building resilience and enhancing protective factors that reduce psychological distress and prevent suicide. The CSEWB Program is underpinned by and acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have existing strengths and potentials which the CSEWB Program can enhance. It should also be noted that this is only one program of a suite of programs that should be available for increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' wellbeing.

The CSEWB Program is a culturally appropriate program co-developed with Aboriginal psychologists and community co-researchers based on the Social and Emotional Wellbeing

(SEWB) model (Dudgeon et al., 2013; 2017). The SEWB model is a strengths-based and holistic health framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which reflects the dynamic and complex interrelationships between the self, the seven domains of wellbeing, and the historical, political, cultural, and social determinants of health, as experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This concept of health departs from the more medicalised Western model of wellbeing, where wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is inextricably linked to connections to Country, spirit, community, culture, family, body and emotions (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015), which are the seven interrelated and overlapping domains of the SEWB model (see Figure 1; Gee et al., 2014). Due to the interconnectedness of these seven domains of wellbeing, disharmony in these relations is a risk to wellbeing. For example, the disruption to cultural continuity (strengthened cultural practices and self-determination) through colonisation has been associated with increased suicide risks in Indigenous Canadians (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).



Figure 1. Social and Emotional Wellbeing Model (adapted from Gee et al., 2014).

The CSEWB Program has been delivered with three Western Australian urban communities and two rural communities in Queensland before the current delivery and evaluation with Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women. Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women is the only dedicated minimum security facility for women in Western Australia. Participants in previous deliveries of the CSEWB Program reported reduced psychological distress, improved relationships with families and communities, strengthened social support networks, enhanced self-confidence and resilience (Dudgeon et al., 2015). These were in addition to a range of other positive outcomes including strengthening and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, learning parenting and communication skills, and feeling empowered (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022; Mia et al., 2017) based on workshops evaluating the CSEWB Program. However, prior to this current evaluation, the CSEWB Program has not been delivered nor evaluated within the justice system, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are disproportionately over-represented.

The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the justice system is an entrenched unacceptable situation and has been the topic of many reports and inquiries (ALRC, 2017). In particular, over-representation was highlighted in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Royal Commission; Commonwealth of Australia, 1991) which led to 106 recommendations addressing over-representation. Over thirty years since this Commission, the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the justice system remains a national concern and was identified as a priority in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (PM&C, 2020) which aims to improve life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Despite making up 4% of Western Australia's population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples account for 40% of Western Australia's prison population (ABS, 2021). This disparity is seen in all Australian states with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in the justice system accounting for 1.6% and 0.2% of the national Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population, respectively (ABS, 2021; 2022; Curnow & Joudo, 2009). More recently, the Pathways to Justice Report (ALRC, 2017) suggests, a) that prison programs that promote mental health, connection to culture and strengthen family relationships may address the high recidivism rates by addressing these known causes of incarceration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and b) the need for trauma-informed and culturally appropriate prison programs that are developed with, and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (recommendation 11-1). Importantly, the over-representation of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the criminal justice system can be attributed to the high recidivism rates, particularly for serious violent crimes; alarmingly, the risk of recidivism increased up to 80% with 10 previous convictions (Snowball & Weatherburn, 2006).

Western Australia has the highest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment rates at 3,598 per 100,000 adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population compared to the national adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment rate of 2,269. This is also significantly higher than Western Australia and the national total imprisonment rates of 305 and 201 per 100,000 adult population, respectively (ABS, 2022). The recidivism rate of over 58% for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is also higher than non-Aboriginal people of 45% (Sentencing Advisory Council), with 78% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners experiencing prior adult imprisonment (ABS, 2021). Of relevance, this number is even greater in national gender comparisons: 68% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female prisoners, compared to 39% of non-Aboriginal female prisoners, had a prior imprisonment (ABS, 2021). In Western Australia, these figures are more staggering: 78% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female prisoners, compared to 30% of non-Aboriginal female prisoners, had a prior imprisonment (ABS, 2021).

Furthermore, when gender, race and mental health disorders are considered simultaneously, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females are the most highly over-represented (Baldry & Cunneen, 2014; Indig et al., 2010). A study in New South Wales reported that incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females reported higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and worse outcomes on all measures of wellbeing than incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males: they were more likely to have been assessed for a mental health problem, used psychiatric medication and had a history of suicidal thoughts or attempts (Heffernan et al., 2014; Indig et al., 2010). Female recidivism has been partly attributed to restricted access to culturally appropriate medical care from Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and Aboriginal Medical Services (Plueckhahn et al., 2015). The resulting worsening medical health conditions are exacerbated by the experience of racism and discriminatory treatment from prison staff (Kendall et al., 2020).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are often the primary carer for the children of their family and sometimes children within their communities. The incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women disrupts strong kinship systems which ensure children are supported, and therefore has serious long-term consequences on these children.

These consequences include an increased risk of children coming into contact with child protection system and youth justice system, and higher risks of children developing depression, trust and self-esteem issues (Quilty et al., 2004), which exacerbates the psychological distress of incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are already over-represented in out-of-home care, prompting fears of another ‘stolen generation’ (O’Donnell et al, 2019). All these factors further perpetuate the systemic disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and highlight the urgent need for trauma-informed and culturally appropriate prison programs to be made available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (ALRC, 2017).

The high rates of incarceration and recidivism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be attributed to a range of historical, social, economic and systemic factors such as dispossession of land, the Stolen Generations, disrupted cultural continuity, intergenerational trauma and grief, and disadvantages across health, education and employment (ALRC, 2017; Commonwealth of Australia, 1991; Dudgeon, Bray et al., 2022; Edwige & Gray, 2021; Hunter, 2001; Weatherburn et al., 2008), and lack of culturally appropriate programs and services (Meachim, 2020). Furthermore, to reduce recidivism, programs need to focus on psycho-social healing, enhancing empowerment and self-determination, in addition to culturally responsive counselling, education and rehabilitation; to be effective, these programs need to embed the principles of Indigenous governance and operate within a cultural framework (Edwige & Gray, 2021; Hovane et al., 2014). This includes an understanding of the historical determinants of health and wellbeing which have disproportionately impacted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and contributed to the ‘deculturation, separation, displacement, discrimination and disconnection from heritage among Indigenous persons’ (Queensland Corrective Services, 2010).

To be effective, trauma-informed and culturally appropriate pre- and post-release programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women should be developed with and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (ALRC, 2017). These programs and services would ideally recognise and be informed by the SEWB model as a mental health framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Such a holistic approach to supporting wellbeing may address and reduce recidivism as psychological distress and poor mental health are associated with recidivism (ALRC, 2017; Shepherd, Ogloff, & Thomas, 2016).

Although most post-release programs and services for women provide temporary housing and relief from domestic violence (Tubex et al., 2020), they do not always address the

fundamental issues to empower women to increase agency in their lives. It is proposed that participation in the CSEWB Program may be effective in reducing psychological distress and enhancing social and emotional wellbeing which may address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the justice system.

This Study reports the evaluation of the first delivery of the CSEWB Program within the justice system, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at the Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women. The aim is to evaluate if the positive impacts reported by community participants of the CSEWB Program (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022) may be replicated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in pre-release settings. We hypothesised that participation in the CSEWB Program would reduce psychological distress and enhance the social and emotional wellbeing of pre-release Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, which in turn may reduce the likelihood of re-offending.

Method

Participants

In response to promotional flyers and an information session, 14 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents from the Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women volunteered to participate in the CSEWB Program. Participants provided written informed consent and where necessary, staff provided support to residents who had lower literacy levels. Of the 12 participants who completed and graduated from the CSEWB Program, 10 participants ($M_{age} = 37.2$ years, $SD = 7.8$) completed the evaluation described in the present study. This research has been approved by the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee, HREC Reference 875, the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Western Australia, RA/4/1/5299, and Research Application and Advisory Committee at the WA Department of Justice, Project ID 474.

Process

This research adopted an Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR; Dudgeon, Bray, et al., 2020) methodology. The APAR is a strengths-based and culturally appropriate approach that privileges participation by the relevant community, based on their collective experience and social history. The APAR approach enables research participants to be involved in research processes as partners and consequently, the research becomes more

responsive to community needs. The CSEWB Program had been co-designed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and refined as it was delivered, in response to the needs and priorities of local communities.

The CSEWB Program consists of 12 modules, delivered two days per week over a six-week period, by two Aboriginal facilitators who had previously completed the CSEWB Program as participants and who undertook facilitation training or have experience as facilitators. It is an interactive program involving activities and discussions designed to encourage self-reflections and illustrate the importance of three topics: (1) Self; to understand self in the context of colonisation and to increase self-awareness and self-esteem, (2) Family; to understand the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family structures and kinship, and to learn life skills including interpersonal and conflict resolution skills, and parenting skills and (3) Community; to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and understand self-determination at the individual and community level. Counsellors who were culturally responsive were present to support participants throughout program delivery. On completion of the 12-sessions, participants embarked on a community art project that was designed and developed collectively. Participants who attended all sessions (or made up for missed sessions in their own time) of the CSEWB Program attended a graduation ceremony attended by their families, staff of Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women, representatives of WA Department of Justice and the City of Gosnells, CSEWB Program facilitators, and the research team from the University of Western Australia.

Measures

Stories of Most Significant Change (SMSC)

The SMSC technique, adapted from Davies and Dart's (2005) Most Significant Change, was used to assess the outcomes of the CSEWB Program from the individual's perspective.

Participants were encouraged to write the most significant change that they had experienced from participation in the CSEWB Program, explain why it was significant, and provide a title for their story.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the SMSC was conducted to understand the success factors and mechanisms of change of the CSEWB Program. Reflexive thematic analysis is a type of thematic analysis where codes or themes are not determined beforehand. Instead, it is

inductive, where codes or themes are extracted from the qualitative data by coders (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method of thematic analysis differs from other types of thematic analysis where the codes are determined beforehand. A benefit of conducting reflexive thematic analysis is that coders reflect upon the data and are not constrained by pre-determined themes, reducing the influence of confirmation bias. Furthermore, we adopted a constructionist, experiential approach towards analysing the SMSC where coders sought to understand the story from the participants' perspective and allow the participant to "de-code" their story (Bryne, 2022).

For this reflexive thematic analysis, coders followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the data was read multiple times by the coders to get a sense of the data. Second, coders identified interesting and/or repeated ideas in each element of the SMSC (i.e., title, story, and the "why") for each participant, to develop first level codes of these themes. These codes represent 'the most basic segment or element, of the raw data' (Boyatzis, 1998). Each interesting and/or repeated idea may be given more than one code. Third, coders merged first level codes of similar essence to potential themes. At this point, codes were either: (a) categorized into a theme/sub-theme, (b) categorized under a 'miscellaneous' theme, or (c) discarded, and overarching themes were developed. Fourth, coders developed a thematic map. At this stage, coders re-examined the first level codes to ensure that they accurately represent and substantiate each theme. Subsequently, coders discarded themes that did not have sufficient responses or re-categorized the first level codes. Fifth, coders finalised the thematic map, and created names and definitions that accurately capture each theme. This manuscript presents and describes the overarching themes developed at the last stage of the reflexive analysis.

Two independent thematic analyses were conducted by four coders working in pairs, to ensure rigour during the reflexive thematic analysis. A pair of non-Aboriginal coders are researchers from the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP) under the supervision of Aboriginal Director at the CBPATSISP. The other pair of coders are an Aboriginal facilitator and an administrative support of the CSEWB Program who were present during the CSEWB Program delivery at Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women. The final thematic map was developed after agreement among the four coders.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-5; Kessler et al., 2007) was used as a measure of assessing participants' levels of psychological distress pre- and post-participation in the CSEWB Program. The K-5 scale has been validated for use in Aboriginal communities and is a culturally appropriate measure of psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2007, Brinckley et al., 2021). It consists of five items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = None of the time" to "5 = All of the time" that measure the frequency that participants experience psychological distress in the last four weeks. A total score of all items ranging from 5 to 11 represents moderate levels of psychological distress, while a score from 12 to 25 represents high levels of psychological distress. Participants with high K-5 scores were provided with one-on-one support.

Results

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of the SMSC revealed four overarching themes with ten sub-themes as shown in Figure 2. The size of each slice of the pie chart represents the number of participants who endorsed each theme and sub-theme.

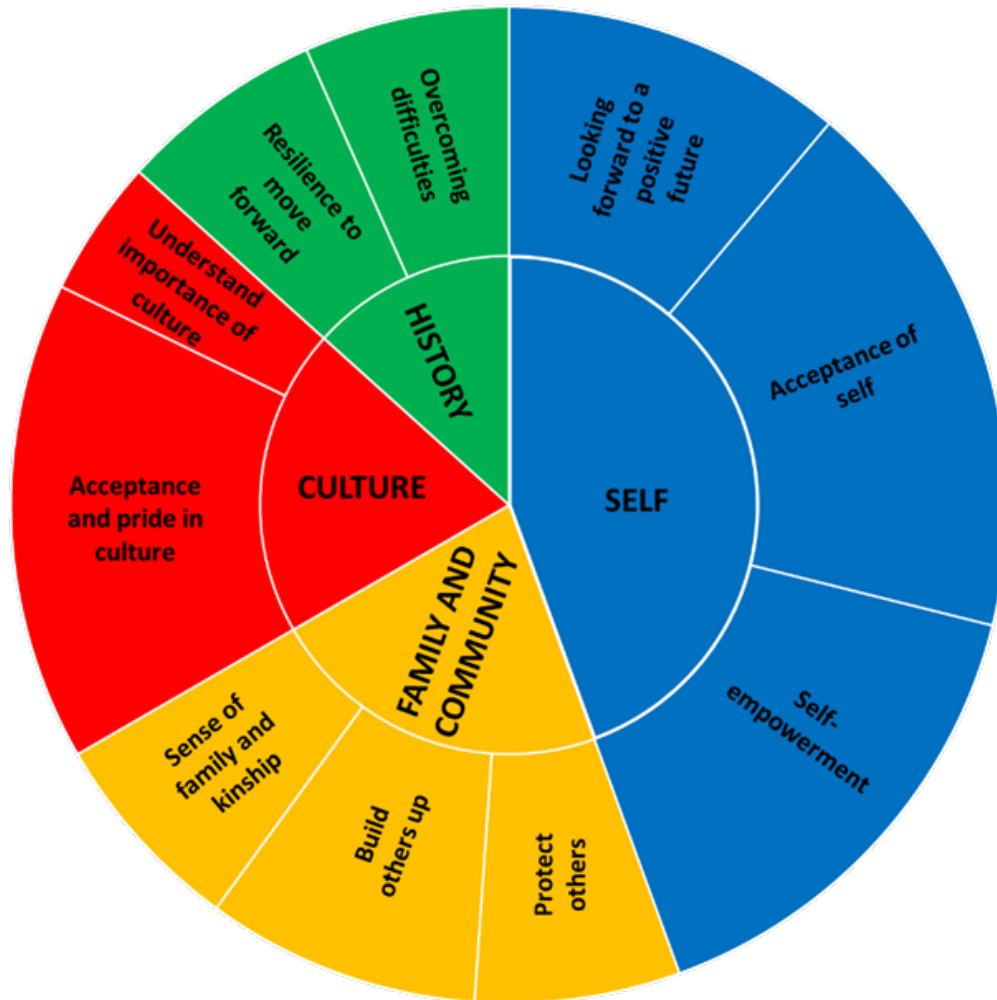


Figure 2. Thematic map of Stories of Most Significant Change.

Theme 1: History

The overarching theme of ‘history’ has two sub-themes, namely, ‘overcoming difficulties’ and ‘resilience to move forward’. Participants reflected on their life journey and recognised how they were able to move forward despite experiencing difficulties in their past. Due to their challenging pasts, several participants mentioned how difficult it was to move on. One participant mentioned how she did not know *“how to stand up for myself”* and *“let my partner bully me telling (me) how to live my life”*, while another recounted how she *“always give up”* and *“feel sorry for myself”*. One participant clearly stated that *“it was hard to move on in the future because (of) the past was holding me back.”*. While reflecting on their challenging and difficult history and pasts, participants expressed a desire to move forward in their lives. This is clearly articulated by one participant, who expressed that *“I do not want to find my family as I was taken when I was a baby”*, and *“I struggle(d) through 21 years of DV”*

(domestic violence). *A considerable amount to much lateral violence*”, and then went on to proclaim that she is “*a survivor*”, that the program ‘*has inspired me not to give up*’ and that she can ‘*rise to have an amazing lifestyle with resilience, determination, pride*’. These reflections describe her willingness to accept the past and heal, and a desire to have agency over her life, as opposed to a reluctance or refusal to heal.

This theme reflects the courage necessary to acknowledge and own the challenges and difficulties that participants experienced. The two sub-themes of ‘overcoming difficulties’ and ‘resilience to move forward’ align with the ‘social dimension’ of the ‘Dance of Life’ model of health and wellbeing from an Aboriginal perspective, reflecting the simultaneous focus on the past and the future (Milroy, 2006) and findings from the evaluation workshops of the CSEWB Program (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022). While understanding one’s history does not directly enhance one’s wellbeing, the recognition and internalising of one’s history and past is necessary for healing and recovery (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022), and highlights the strengths and resilience demonstrated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout history. One participant sums it up best: “*I’m my own story and it made me who I am today*”, demonstrating great strengths in acknowledging that her past does not determine nor define her future and agency over her life. Participants also reported self-confidence, overcoming self-doubt, and being empowered to change their lives and make it better. This was in keeping with previous findings on the evaluation of the CSEWB Program (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022). Quite simply, participants wanted to “*forget(ting) our past that has hurt us*”, which was also reflected in the subsequent theme of ‘self’ demonstrating that participants were optimistic about their future which may have enhanced their empowerment and self-determination.

Theme 2: Self

Three sub-themes were identified under the theme of ‘self’, namely, ‘acceptance of self’, ‘looking forward to a positive future’, and ‘self-empowerment’. Despite their traumatic and challenging pasts, participants described a renewed anticipation for their future as they begin to feel empowered through participation in the CSEWB Program. Participants reported a newfound acceptance of themselves: one participant stated, “*this is who I am and always will be*”. As mentioned, another found strength and pride in her life story as she stated, “*I am my own story and it made me who I am today.*” Participants were also empowered from the skills

that they learnt from the CSEWB Program seen in a participant's reflection that the program taught her to "*speak up and be strong*".

With these positive changes in their self-esteem and feelings of empowerment, most participants felt a sense of excitement and optimism towards their future. The participant who declared that she could "*rise to have an amazing lifestyle with resilience, determination, pride*" also expressed that she was now equipped to "*move on to be a greater mother, nana and human being*". Several participants attributed their change specifically to the CSEWB Program, reflecting that the program had given them the "*confidence to make positive change in my life*", and '*inspired me to educate myself with Aboriginal history*'; one participant even demonstrated positive behavioural change as she had "*since been to the library to get 2 books on Aboriginal history and will continue to read books on our past to educate myself and others in the future*".

This overarching theme corresponds with the theme of 'self' reported in the CSEWB Program evaluation workshops (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022). In the present study, participants expressed a desire to "*educate myself*" and a confidence to "*make positive change to myself*" and an excitement towards "*a new chapter of my life and I can't wait to start*". This overarching theme emerged the strongest, where all participants report an 'increasing acceptance of self', 'looking forward to a positive future', and/or 'self-empowerment', with eight participants endorsing at least two of these three sub-themes. These results suggest that the CSEWB Program was effective in empowering and enhancing self-determination which may have contributed to the reported reduction in levels of psychological distress by enhancing their self-esteem and identity. This sense of empowerment motivated participants to experience a desire to (re)connect with families, communities, and their culture, reflecting a natural motivation and desire for cultural continuity (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

Theme 3: Culture

The strongest theme that was unequivocally identified by all coders was the theme of 'culture' with two sub-themes, 'acceptance and pride in culture' and 'understanding the importance of culture'. Participants appeared to go through a journey of healing, from expressing an acceptance of and pride in their culture, to owning and internalising their Aboriginality, as one participant reflected that she is "*proud of our culture and being an Aboriginal woman*". In addition, participants experienced a renewed desire to reconnect with

their Aboriginal heritage and to “*learn about my culture and the lives my people lived before colonisation and after*”.

The importance of connection to culture is an outcome of the National Empowerment Project, from which the CSEWB Program was developed (Abdullah & Coyne, 2018, 2019; Dudgeon et al., 2015) and a recurring theme in reports and research on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (ALRC, 2017; Edwige & Gray, 2021; Dudgeon, Bray et al., 2022; Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022). This theme was also identified from the thematic analysis in the present study. The concept of ‘cultural continuity’ has been defined as the maintenance of cultural identity through mechanisms in which cultural practices are maintained and practiced by the members of its community (Auger, 2016). For Indigenous peoples, cultural continuity has been suggested to be a strengths-based approach towards protecting against uncertainty by grounding individuals in an identity that consists of long standing meaningful cultural practices and rich history, and providing guidelines for navigating the world (Arabena, 2020, p. 4). Indeed, past research has found that strengthening cultural identity has been a protective factor against psychological distress, suicide risks, and promotes social and emotional wellbeing across Indigenous groups and ages (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Currie et al., 2019; 2020; Gibson et al., 2021; Hallet et al., 2007; LaFromboise et al., 2006). Furthermore, connection to culture through participating in cultural activities and speaking language has been associated with reduced suicide rates in Indigenous Canadians (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Hallet et al., 2007) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia (Gibson et al., 2021). It has also been found to predict positive social outcomes in American Indian youths (LaFromboise et al., 2006) and ground Indigenous adolescents during a period of change amidst the search for identity (Ball & Chandler, 1989), contributing to reduced suicide risks (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008).

Specifically, cultural continuity has been particularly useful as a protective strategy for Indigenous peoples who have been directly impacted by colonisation where children have been taken from parents under the guise of cultural assimilation (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997; Gray & Cote, 2019; Stuart & Jose, 2014). Therefore, remaining connected to culture is a useful strengths-based approach that promotes social and emotional wellbeing, reduces psychological distress across Indigenous groups and ages, especially for Indigenous peoples who were directly impacted by colonisation and forcibly removed from their home (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997) which disrupted their connection to family and community.

Theme 4: Family and Community

The overarching theme of ‘family and community’ had three sub-themes, namely, ‘a sense of family and kinship’, ‘build others up’ and ‘protect others’. One of the impacts of having been empowered themselves was that participants became aware of their roles in the family and community (e.g., as parents) and their desire to fulfil their roles by passing down cultural knowledge, teaching life lessons, and protecting their children. This includes their knowledge about “*rights, culture, maturity, legislation, parenthood, respecting Elders*”. One participant mentioned how she had learnt “*how to speak up and be strong*” through the CSEWB Program and that she would do so from now on “*not for only me but for my children*”. Another participant expressed that the CSEWB Program had helped her to “*see what is most important to me in life and that is knowledge I can pass down to my daughter*”. Throughout the CSEWB Program, participants developed a bond with each other and identified the benefits of being connected to community. One participant noticed “*how well we all came together*” and “*helped each other learn*”. Another participant had simply enjoyed being with others, “*working out in community*” and “*talking and getting on with everyone*”.

This theme corresponds with two domains of the SEWB model of health framework, namely, family and community, reflecting the collectivist perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Dudgeon et al., 2017). Participants acknowledged their roles in the family and community—as parents to not only their own children, but children in the community—and expressed a strong desire to fulfil their duties by passing on cultural knowledge and life lessons, particularly to their children. Connections to family and community underpins social and emotional wellbeing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture (Gee et al., 2014). Culture is a source of resilience as this relational structure maintains cultural traditions and creates a safe and supportive network for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which may have been disrupted by the forced removal of children from their families (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997; Dudgeon et al., 2021; Dudgeon, Bray et al., 2022; Milroy, 2006). A healthy and strong connection to family and community has also been found to foster a greater sense of self and resilience, which contributes to improved outcomes across other determinants of health such as education, employment and increased community

safety, as highlighted in the Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013–2023 (Department of Health, 2015).

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale

The 10 participants reported reduced levels of psychological distress, as measured by the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-5; Kessler et al., 2007), after participation in the six-week CSEWB Program ($M = 9.0$, $SD = 3.5$) as compared to before the program ($M = 11.3$, $SD = 3.3$).

A paired samples *t*-test of K-5 scores revealed that this difference was significant, $t(9) = 1.87$, $p = .047$, Cohen's $d = 0.59$, which is a medium effect size. However, given the small sample of participants, this result should be interpreted with caution. Pearson's correlation between pre- and post-program K-5 scores of $r = .35$, was not significant, $p = .326$. See below for a discussion on the limitations of the K-5 scale.

Discussion

The aim of the present study is to evaluate the delivery of the CSEWB Program with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at the Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women. To achieve the National Agreement on Closing the Gap target to address the disproportionate over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the justice system, culturally appropriate programs are urgently needed to reduce recidivism. Such a program would adopt a holistic approach to reduce recidivism by supporting the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as poor mental health is common within the justice system (Heffernan et al., 2014) and is associated with recidivism (Shepherd, Ogloff & Thomas, 2016).

The Stories of Most Significant Change (SMSC) was included in previous evaluations to internalise the gains derived from participation in the CSEWB Program. The SMSC has been found to be a culturally appropriate evaluation methodology, as it is appropriate for the storytelling or yarning nature of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In this safe space created, partly due to spending 12 sessions over six weeks exploring deep and personal issues, learning and starting a journey of healing together, participants were

encouraged to share thoughts and experiences on their participation in the CSEWB Program. An unintended outcome of the SMSC was a rich source of qualitative data.

Overall, the four overarching themes identified from the thematic analysis of participants' SMSC appear to conform to a pattern that follows a chronological progression which may symbolise participants' increased awareness and commitment to a journey of healing and empowerment, to (re)connection to culture, family and community. Specifically, participants demonstrated strengths and resilience in acknowledging and embracing their history and difficult pasts, which allowed them to heal and move forward. This newfound empowerment and self-determination motivated participants to focus on growth and development of the 'self' through reading and educating themselves on their Aboriginal history. This learning enhanced their knowledge about their culture which facilitated their (re)connection to culture and ignited a pride in being an Aboriginal woman. Finally, the strong bond developed through participation in the group discussions and activities in the CSEWB Program over six weeks instilled a strong sense of connection to family and community, which reflects the kinship system and collectivist perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Taken together, these overarching themes correspond with the domains of the SEWB model (connection to self, culture, family, and community), thereby enhancing the social and emotional wellbeing of participants, which may account for the reduction in the reported levels of psychological distress.

This reported reduction in levels of psychological distress, together with evidence of enhanced social and emotional wellbeing and empowerment may partly account for the commencement of a process and journey of healing for participants as revealed from the SMSC, extending the findings of the evaluation workshops of the CSEWB Program with communities (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022) to a prison setting. Interestingly, while the evaluation workshops specifically asked participants about SEWB, the SEWB model and its congruence with the CSEWB Program (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022), the present study did not ask participants about these concepts; yet the four themes identified in the present study aligns with four of the six themes identified in the evaluation workshops, with clear overlaps with the SEWB model. This suggests the relevance and importance of the SEWB model as a health framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

However, while the overarching themes identified in the present study aligns with those identified in the evaluation workshops of the CSEWB Program (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022), there were some disparities in the emphasis and prominence with which the themes

were expressed in both studies. Specifically, the theme of culture was the prominent theme in previous evaluations in urban community samples (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022). In the present study, the self, reflecting ‘empowerment and self-determination’ came through the strongest, with every participant endorsing this theme. This may partly be due to the characteristics of the participants in the present study being in a pre-release centre, where a sense of disempowerment and lack of agency over their lives is inevitable with strict schedules and routines in the prison. Indeed, promoting agency in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the justice system has been articulated as a way to ‘de-colonise’ the justice system (Blagg, 2016; Grace et al., 2011). The findings in the present study reiterated the importance of enhancing self-esteem and self-identity in this cohort, in addition to strengthening the other domains of the SEWB model of health framework, that may enhance resilience and protective factors. For example, focusing on the connection to community by encouraging interactions to increase social support among the women at the Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women may especially benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women given the impacts that connection to community have on their social and emotional wellbeing and resilience.

The present study adds to the emerging evidence of the transformational benefits of participating in the CSEWB Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Dudgeon, Derry et al., 2022) and suggests that extending the delivery of the CSEWB Program with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in both pre- and post-release settings may reap similar benefits, given that the post-release setting is the transition between a pre-release setting and the community, where these benefits were reported. Furthermore, making trauma-informed and culturally appropriate programs such as the CSEWB Program available in the prisons is in keeping with the recommendations of the Pathways to Justice Report (ALRC, 2017).

Taken together, the overarching themes that were identified from the thematic analysis are consistent with the findings of the ATSISEEP (Dudgeon et al., 2016) and the National Empowerment Project (Abdullah & Coyne, 2018, 2019) which found that the principles of empowerment and self-determination, connection to culture, family and community are crucial to the success of solutions that work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, reflecting the strengths and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These themes also align with several of the domains of the SEWB model and add to emerging

evidence supporting the SEWB model as an appropriate mental health framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Dudgeon et al., 2013; Gee et al., 2014).

The themes identified from the thematic analysis of the SMSC reflect the positive impact of participation in the CSEWB Program and provide preliminary evidence of the mechanisms of change, which may have bi-directional effects on the reported reduction in levels of psychological distress, as assessed with the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-5). However, given the small sample size, these results should be replicated with a larger sample. Despite the significant positive impact of participation in the CSEWB Program, both pre- and post-program K-5 scores were in the 'moderate' range. This points to the need for ongoing therapeutic care and support both during incarceration and post-release to enhance the social and emotional wellbeing which may address the high recidivism rates.

While the K-5 scores provide an assessment of the levels of psychological distress, there are some limitations with the use of this scale. These scores may be influenced by temporal and recent negative life events such as a diagnosis of a terminal illness or death of a family member. Future research will benefit from assessing the levels of psychological distress at various time points and/or obtaining additional qualitative data on significant recent life events. The Here and Now Aboriginal Assessment (HANAA; Janca et al., 2015) is a culturally appropriate tool for assessing the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The HANAA may provide further insights into the factors accounting for the reported levels of psychological distress and complement the SMSC.

Implications

The present study provides preliminary evidence of the effectiveness of the CSEWB Program in empowering a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in a pre-release setting and has practical implications. Firstly, the project addresses a high-priority justice issue. Further, two targets of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap are considered, namely, the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the criminal justice system and the need to enhance the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In addressing the social and emotional wellbeing, other Closing the Gap targets may also be indirectly addressed, including education, housing, and employment, given the bi-directional effects of these factors.

Second, the findings provide preliminary evidence of the potential of the CSEWB Program in addressing multiple recommendations of the Pathways to Justice Report (ALRC, 2017).

Specifically, the CSEWB Program is a ‘trauma-informed and culturally appropriate’ program that is ‘developed with and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women’ that may reduce recidivism (recommendation 11-1) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The program may be offered as a pre- and/or post-release program to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to facilitate reintegration (recommendation 9-1), and/or as a parole condition in place of short sentences to maximise the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners released on parole (recommendation 9-2). Further research is necessary to build the evidence base of the effectiveness of the CSEWB Program in facilitating the reintegration of pre- and post-release Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their community and reduce recidivism in the longer-term by reducing levels of psychological distress, enhancing social and emotional wellbeing, and addressing the social and cultural determinants of health. The present findings highlight the importance of culturally appropriate programs developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples adopting best practice principles that acknowledge the Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Limitations and Future Directions

Due to the small number of participants in the present study who completed and evaluated the CSEWB Program and given that participants at the Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women may not be representative of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of mainstream prisons, the findings in this study may not be generalised to other justice settings. Furthermore, the findings of reduced levels of psychological distress in the present study should be interpreted with caution; the K-5 scale is time sensitive and may be influenced by temporal and recent negative (or positive) life events. While this finding is encouraging, it may be suggested that participants may experience reduced psychological distress as their release dates were approaching, although it should be noted that some participants had over 12 months remaining on their sentences. This highlights the need for future research to include a longitudinal element to understand if the reported reduced levels of psychological distress and positive outcomes including sense of empowerment and self-determination, and (re)connection to culture, family and community, may be sustained beyond the six-week program participation. Future research would benefit from data on social determinants such as housing, education, employment, relationships and support within family and community, to illuminate the roles that other protective or risk factors may contribute to the social and emotional wellbeing, psychological distress, suicide risks, and recidivism of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander peoples. Finally, evaluations on the effectiveness of programs and services with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would also benefit from broadening the outcomes of assessment and going beyond the evidence-deficit narratives by embedding culturally appropriate assessment tools and methodologies (Dudgeon, Bray et al., 2021) such as the HANAA (Janca et al., 2015).

In summary, this is the first evaluation of the National Empowerment Project's CSEWB Program delivered within a justice system. The findings are promising and provide preliminary evidence of the effectiveness of the CSEWB Program in enhancing protective factors that promotes social and emotional wellbeing, and reducing psychological distress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the justice system. Future research with a longitudinal element would add to the emerging evidence of the effectiveness of trauma-informed and culturally appropriate programs in addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the justice system.

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