

## **Community-led sexual violence and prevention work: Utilising a Transformative Justice framework.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores community-led groups working to bring about responses to sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Three case studies are presented here to highlight the valuable work undertaken by such groups and contribute to the literature on sexual violence education and prevention. The aim is to give prominence to points of connection between those who undertake this work on a grassroots, community-led level and those within the social work profession, operating in the community welfare sector. The case studies explore how a Transformative Justice framework is utilised within community-led groups, Philly Stands Up (PSU), Transformative Justice Camp and *Undercurrent*. They reveal how the concept of Transformative Justice can provide both a theoretical and practice framework for sexual assault and intimate partner violence responses and prevention. Through the exploration of a Transformative Justice framework, this paper uncovers work by these groups to implement an alternative model of justice to the current structural response to sexualised violence. It includes a particular focus on the interconnected nature of community-led, anti-violence and prison abolition work. Due to the disproportionate rates of incarceration and the impact of interpersonal violence on Indigenous peoples in settler-colonial states, notably North America and Australia, this paper also includes an exploration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and peer-led groups engaged in this work. A Transformative Justice framework, as utilised by community-led groups whose work challenges interpersonal and state violence, endeavours to transform the conditions that create, or that allow violence to happen.

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## Introduction

Across Australia, the United States, Canada and other colonised states, there are many grassroots, community-led groups working to prevent and respond to sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Such groups, including *Undercurrent*, Education Centre Against Violence (ECAV), Philly Stands Up (PSU) and Generation FIVE, have a significant history and a far-reaching impact (A World Without Sexual Assault, 2009; Coleman, Kelly, & Squires, 2008; INCITE!, 2011 Kelly, 2011; Kershner, Haines, Harkins, Greig, Wiesner, Levy, Shah, Kim, & Carr, 2007; Lauw, Herring, McNamara, & Spangaro, 2013; MCAN, 2017; QTJ Working Group, 2008; *Undercurrent* Victoria, n.d.). Rojas Durazo, Bierria, & Kim (2011) acknowledge that many of these processes of community accountability that aim to address and prevent sexual assault and intimate partner violence, reveal themselves through storytelling and oral histories occurring ‘in intimate kitchen-table and backroom’ spaces.

This paper brings stories of the implementation of community accountability processes to another space, to find points of connection between work undertaken by grassroots, community-led groups and the broader social work profession. It begins with a discussion on the various contexts within which community-led groups take up and continue their work, followed by a discussion on what constitutes a Transformative Justice framework. The three case studies then reveal the application of a Transformative Justice framework in various community-led settings. These build upon the existing work of Campbell, Patterson, & Bybee (2011), and Kim (2011), who have examined how communities come together to prevent sexual violence. The first case study outlines a process of a community-led group adopting a Transformative Justice approach. The second explores the processes involved when those working on sexual assault and intimate partner violence response and prevention at a community level, come together to further develop their use of a Transformative Justice framework. The final and most in-depth case study centres on an interview with Vinny, a member of the *Undercurrent* collective, a community-led organisation based in Melbourne’s West. Vinny speaks

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from his experience and does not presume to represent the views of other *Undercurrent* collective members. This case study explores Vinny's practice wisdom and reveals the use of Transformative Justice as a theoretical framework that underpins the implementation of *Undercurrent's* sexual violence education and prevention program in Victorian high schools and community groups.

Case studies are a widely used tool within the field of social work, especially in practice and policy research fields. They are useful in their ability to examine situations, their context and to understand the complex processes involved in implementing interventions (Gilgun, 1994). Findings presented in a single case study can also be an effective way to examine their fit alongside other cases, theory or previous research (Gilgun, 1994). In this paper, the case studies, along with the contextual examples, are presented alongside one another to highlight how diverse community-led groups implement a Transformative Justice approach in such a way that connects the many sites of violence prevention work. Of particular focus are the connections between community accountability processes to respond to intimate partner violence and prison abolition work.

The case studies presented follow the knowledge production format of the Story Telling and Organising Project (STOP). Kim (2011), outlines the project and its aims:

This project collects and documents community accountability stories, presenting them as alternative sources of knowledge to inform communities about what people did, how they carried out interventions, and the lessons they provided. The process of story-collection, documentation, and listening is also a vehicle for organising communities to generate action and stories that build upon each other and strengthen their capacity to challenge interpersonal and state violence. Fundamental to this project is the belief that community accountability is not simply a contemporary innovation, but reflects everyday ways of thinking and doing that have been practiced within communities for generations. (p. 18).

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In synthesising these case studies, this paper attempts to illuminate points of connection between grassroots, community-led groups, and those within the social work profession who undertake work to address and prevent sexual assault and intimate partner violence. The work of these community-led groups should be relevant to all those involved in responding to interpersonal violence, and addressing structural violence, including community-led groups, organisations within the social services sector, and even the criminal-legal system.

### **A contextual account of sexual assault and intimate partner violence education and prevention programs.**

Across Australia and internationally, there exist grassroots, community and peer-led, feminist groups operating sexual violence education and prevention programs (Alpert, Shannon, Velonis, Georges, & Rich, 2002; Carmody et al., 2009; Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). However, as Casey & Lindhorst (2009) point out, in-depth discussions of these programs in the sexual violence education and prevention literature are conspicuously absent. It can be argued that this absence is largely due to these programs being unable to measure up to the “particular kind of scientific professionalism” (Bates, 2011, p. 146) so valued in the current neoliberal climate. Thus, in this context, many interventions are “excluded from the mainstream centre and squeezed into the periphery” (Kumsa, 2011, p. 232). However, despite the limitations of neoliberal conceptualisations of ‘evidence-based’ and rigorous evaluation methodologies, many organisations and community groups undertake a variety of strategies, to enable and continue their violence prevention work.

This is not to say that literature on these programs does not exist. It is, however, typically relegated to the margins of peer-reviewed literature and Grey Literature (i.e. literature produced outside of commercial/academic publishing channels). What work does exist in these areas, contains detailed discussions and explorations of responses to interpersonal violence. They also include insight into the interconnected nature of prison abolition activism and work to address/prevent sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Education

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and prevention programs are a significant component of these connections (Ah-fat & Thomasson, 2015; Kelly, 2011; Kim, 2011; MCAN, 2017; Rojas Durazo et al., 2011). The mainstream peer-reviewed literature on sexual violence education and prevention programs is an excellent representation of current evidence-based discourse and the pressures to evaluate (Carmody et al., 2009; Jewkes, Flood, & Lang, 2015). Pre- and post-test, and randomised control trials are considered the gold standard of evaluation methodologies (Bates, 2011). However, this literature resounds with complaints bemoaning the lack of rigorous evaluation of many programs, calling into doubt program efficacy (Fryda & Hulme 2015; Jewkes et al., 2015; Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011; Milhausen, McBride, & Jun, 2006; Taylor, Stein, Mumford, & Woods, 2013). These critiques are demonstrative, not of a lack of sexual violence education and prevention program evaluation, but the exclusivity of rigorous evaluation methods and “an overly narrow conception of what constitutes valuable knowledge for social work practice which takes place in open systems in the real world” (Hartman, 2017, p. 228).

It can also be argued, the lack of formal program evaluation using pre- and post-test, and randomised control trials is due to the perceived effort needed to undertake them. Thus, many organisations prioritise program development, securing funds, complying with funding requirements, and the recruitment and retention of volunteers, at the expense of more rigorous ‘scientific’ methods. Instead, they undertake informal, internally driven evaluations. Unless the organisation has links to a university, or their own research department, formal assessments are often triaged among these other competing priorities; all of which occur against the backdrop of their direct service provision. Carmody et al. (2009) note that community-led groups and those in the community welfare setting are adaptive in the ways they ‘weather’ their exclusion from the discursive centre, while continuing their social justice work.

Marginalisation and exclusion of the work of community-led organisations can also occur at the state-level, with current models of justice in settler-colonial states, such as Australia and the United States, “exiling, isolating and punishing” an individual who has caused harm

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(O'Brien, 2017, para. 3). Prison, the state's dominant approach to responding to those who cause harm, has a disproportionate impact on particular groups, with people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent making up over a quarter of the Australian prison population (O'Brien, 2017). The challenges of implementing alternatives to the current model of justice as a primary response to the harm caused by intimate partner violence and sexual assault, connects community-led groups involved in anti-violence work to those involved in prison abolition work. In the United States, Rojas Durazo et al. (2011), discuss the impact of the 'prison project' and the challenges it creates:

The prison project landed in communities as a pernicious force of violence, with over two million people caged. It also relentlessly inhabited imaginations, creating an epistemic occupation within feminist responses to domestic and sexual violence (or "anti-violence" activism) which shaped political priorities and marginalized dissent ... The prison project invigorated the colonial agenda of racial, classed, gendered, and sexual violence against indigenous peoples and communities of color, while attempting to stymie and redirect consciousness and social movements. (para. 3).

This complex interplay between the impacts of interpersonal violence and the sustained use of institutionalised harm, as a solution by the justice system, is the foundation for multi- rather than single-issue engagement among anti-violence and prison abolition groups. Kim (2011) points out that community-led responses "arose from a lived experience that was suspicious of police intervention and 'a pragmatic recognition' that current institutional interventions were perpetuating cycles of violence rather than counteracting them" (p. 17). This multi-issue pragmatic engagement is present in all three of the case studies.

Since the current model of justice and institutional responses in settler-colonial states impacts Indigenous communities at such disproportionate levels, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led groups often guide the Australian prison abolition movement. One example is the Abolitionist and Transformative Justice Centre (ATJC) (n.d.), who work with imprisoned people across the

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lifespan, alongside their family and friends. The ATJC are guided in their work to dismantle the prison industrial complex as a system of oppression, inequality and violence, by the experiences of those 'inside'. The ATJC collective is made up of lawyers, social workers, activists and community organisers. They describe their work as getting to a 'decarceral future', by transforming the "reliance on violent and oppressive state-level systems" and replacing them with community empowerment (ATJC, n.d., para. 12). Another example is Shut Youth Prisons Mparntwe (Alice Springs), who describe themselves as a local action group. Their 'Kids in Country Not in Custody' campaign calls for Aboriginal community-led responses to the trauma and abuse experienced by incarcerated youth, and justice for families of those whose died at the hands of the prison system (Romuld, Ahearne, Green, Crunch & Hardin, 2017; Shut Youth Prisons Mparntwe, 2017). The campaign was set up in response to the insufficient implementation of past recommendations, and a lack of trust that the Northern Territory's Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children will address "systemic failures within the justice system and governance" in the Northern Territory (Shut Youth Prisons Mparntwe, 2017, para. 4). ATJC and Shut Youth Prisons Mparntwe work to empower communities through bringing people together to guide and participate in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led decision making. Since a Transformative Justice response to instances of intimate partner violence or sexual assault typically involves a community accountability process<sup>1</sup>, this community empowerment work is a strong connection point between those engaging in responses to and prevention of sexual assault and intimate partner violence, and by extension prison abolition activism.

<sup>1</sup> Community accountability processes are those in which a community – a group of friends, a family, a workplace, an apartment complex, a neighbourhood, etc. – work together to develop a community-based strategy, rather than a police/prison-based strategy, to address violence and/or harm that has occurred (INCITE!, 2011).

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Tolliday (2016), building on STOP's assertion that community accountability work is a reflection of daily work practised within communities for generations (Kim, 2011), published an interview between her long-time colleagues, Gomeroi woman Sigrid (Sig) Herring and Barkindji Ngayampaa woman Pam Greer. Their discussion maps out over 30 years of developments in recognition and response within Aboriginal communities to sexual violence. Greer speaks of how "we were like people split in half – needing to give voice to Aboriginal women's and children's experiences but not wanting to attack anyone in our communities because there were enough people and media doing that already" (Tolliday, 2016, p. 71). Herring spoke about how often Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people "rely on the goodwill and capacity of non-Aboriginal people to understand an Aboriginal worldview" (Tolliday, 2016, p. 75). As a result, Tolliday has argued community-led, peer education is often most useful in countering the contextual influence of dominant settler-colonial society on violence prevention work.

The Education Centre Against Violence (ECAV), of which both Herring and Greer have key roles, has been established to respond to this very issue. ECAV are committed to addressing lost opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples due to the ongoing, systemic nature of settler-colonialism and the ensuing transgenerational experiences of racism and trauma. They do this through implementing courses on response to and prevention of violence (including sexualised violence) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Lauw et al., 2013; Tolliday, 2016). Even with the work of this centre, Greer and Herring reiterate "it's still not safe to air our laundry against an ever-present backdrop of belief in the stereotypes about Aboriginal people that persist in Australia" (Tolliday, 2016, p. 71). This ever-present backdrop is evidenced by the response of Bill Leak, former editorial cartoonist for *The Australian* newspaper, to the news of his investigation by the Australian Human Rights Commission for breaching the Racial Discrimination Act. Leak stated he felt 'singled out' and 'bewildered' by this investigation, after the publication of his

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infamous cartoon perpetuating racist stereotypes of Aboriginal men (ABC Lateline, 2016). Following an independent evaluation of one of ECAV's courses, Lauw et al., (2013) found that:

It is possible to simultaneously address the personal impacts of abuse, poor previous educational experiences and the sociopolitical context of Aboriginal history ... By doing so Aboriginal workers learn to be effective at responding to the trauma burden carried by their people ... Only in this way will Aboriginal health workers become free to operate effectively and with pride in the workforce, compassionately supporting their communities. (p. C)

Neoliberal approaches to service provision, current models of justice and the racist structure of Australian settler-colonialism, are but a few of the various interlocking contexts surrounding community-led groups in this country. This consideration of the interplay between these contexts sets the scene from which to consider the case studies presented in the following section. The genuine pressure for the rigorous evaluation of program effectiveness to comply with evidence-based practice models under neoliberalism intersect with current justice models, that result in the marginalisation of community-led groups and community welfare organisations, both in Australia and overseas. This intersection creates challenges for, and connections between, community-led groups who conduct violence prevention and prison abolition work.

These intersecting contexts also hold potential connections between community-led and community welfare sector efforts at violence prevention. These include implementing alternative justice models, empowering communities, and carrying out peer education programs. All of these, in turn, operate under the legacy of work undertaken by Indigenous communities within the structures of settler-colonialism.

### **Case studies of Transformative Justice Frameworks**

The social justice work of many community-led groups is apparent in their use of Transformative Justice as one of their foundational theoretical frameworks (Coleman et al., 2008; Flat Out, n.d.; INCITE!,

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2011 Kershner et al., 2007; QTJ Working Group, 2008; *Undercurrent* Victoria, n.d.). The fundamental consideration that underpins the work of all three groups presented in these case studies, is that it is not just individual survivors and perpetrators who are impacted by sexual violence, but also the communities and networks that surround them.

Gready & Robins (2014, as cited in Boesten & Wilding, 2015) define a Transformative Justice framework as "transformative change that emphasises local agency and resources, the prioritisation of process rather than preconceived outcomes and the challenging of unequal and intersecting power relationships and structures of exclusion at both the local and the global level" (p. 77). O'Brien (2017), explains that:

A transformative justice approach asks, on both an individual and structural level: Who was harmed? How can we facilitate healing? How can we prevent further harm in the future? ... [And] focus on creating and nurturing safe and healthy communities, where members are able to hold each other accountable for any harm that occurs. (para. 5, parenthesis added).

An example of one such group that uses a Transformative Justice framework is Generation FIVE; a San Francisco based non-profit working to end child sexual abuse within five generations. Concerning their practice, Generation FIVE defines Transformative Justice as "a liberatory approach to violence...[which] seeks safety and accountability without relying on alienation, punishment, or State or systemic violence, including incarceration or policing" (Kershner et al., 2007, p. 5). Transformative Justice, according to Generation FIVE, is comprised of three core beliefs: the interdependence of individual justice and collective liberation; its operation as both a liberating politic and an approach for responding to harm; and, State and systemic responses to violence (e.g. criminal-legal system and child welfare agencies) that condone and perpetuate cycles of violence, thereby failing to bring about not only individual, but also collective social justice (Kershner et al., 2007).

The following case studies provide community practice examples of the

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application of a Transformative Justice framework in sexual violence responses, education and prevention. The first case study investigates the journey to a Transformative Justice framework made by North American, community-led, grassroots collective Philly Stands Up (PSU). PSU was chosen as a case study because of their collaborative work with Australian community-led collective *Undercurrent*, and their direct influence on *Undercurrent*'s practice. The second case study is an example of implementing programs using a Transformative Justice framework, as well as ongoing framework development in an Australian context. It presents an overview of the Transformative Justice Camp held in Melbourne in February 2017, organised by the Melbourne Community Accountability Network (MCAN). This case study demonstrates how a Transformative Justice framework enables evaluative and reflective strategies for program effectiveness that operate as a counterpoint to experimental evaluation methodologies. The final case study is drawn from research on Vinny's experience of volunteering in *Undercurrent* collective. It outlines Vinny's practice wisdom, his knowledge and the theory that underpins his work within *Undercurrent*'s community education project.

### **Case study one: Philly Stands Up (PSU)**

Kelly (2011), a core-collective member of PSU since 2004, describes the "politics and poetics of transformative justice and community accountability in sexual assault situations" (p. 44). In his article, he describes the collective and its functions:

PSU, an unincorporated, grassroots volunteer collective, has between four and eight members. It seeks to create community-based responses to sexual assault through direct involvement with those who have caused harm in those situations. Central to its organizing efforts are the needs of survivors of sexual assault, whom members believe, support, and attempt to re-empower. PSU meets face-to-face with people who have caused harm and works with them to understand and change their behavior. Much energy is dedicated to public education, with the aim of preventing future assaults, fostering a culture of sexual responsibility, and cooperating with efforts to abolish prisons.

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Our demographic profile has changed over the years. All members live and work in West Philadelphia and are primarily connected to queer, trans, and gender nonconforming communities with explicitly left politics. (p. 48).

When PSU commenced work, they operated processes of community accountability, from a position grounded in Restorative Justice. Daly (2016) acknowledges that there are over two decades of research in the field of Restorative Justice, and uses the term restorative to describe a 'justice mechanism' rather than a type of justice. Daly (2016) sees Restorative Justice operating alongside other justice mechanisms, under what she describes as "an innovative justice umbrella" (p. 15). She considers Restorative Justice as "any activity that is not concerned with prosecution or conviction, or more broadly, that does not intend to be adversarial, punitive, or a type of punishment" (Daly, 2016, p. 11).

PSU engaged in considerable critical self-reflection as a result of 'burn-out', inter-collective conflict, and the troubling realisation that the collective was perpetuating marginalisation (Kelly, 2011). It became clear, as it had become for many feminist and other radical critics (Daly, 2016; Kim, 2011) that Restorative Justice was not a good fit in the context of intimate partner violence, where 'restoring' relationships often perpetuates harm. Kelly (2011) describes how PSU shifted from a Restorative to a Transformative Justice framework through a process of considering the social conditions within which they operated. PSU asked themselves, what sort of individual, as well as community restoration they thought they were bringing about, through their engagement with people who sexually harm others? Specifically, PSU considered whether they were able to secure justice through restoration, without transforming "the same troubled, problematic world plagued with patriarchy, homophobia, fatphobia, insecurity, racism, anxiety, depression, ableism, and all of the other conditions that feed into sexualized violence in the first place" (Kelly, 2011, p. 49).

PSU discovered that Transformative Justice "offered a conceptual apparatus that directly linked our sexual assault work with the various political projects and leanings in our lives, from economic justice to radical mental health, and, most substantially, prison abolition" (Kelly,

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2011, p. 49). In line with Generation FIVE's conceptualisation of Transformative Justice (Kershner et al., 2007), this created both a liberating politic and an approach to securing justice for the collective. It enabled the possibility of transforming the crisis that often follows when someone in a community sexually harms another person, into an opportunity. That opportunity began to take the form of PSU not only engaging in accountability work with those who sexually harm others within their communities. PSU broadened their work out to "push back at the injustices inflicted by capitalism and the state, including intimate partner violence, child sexual abuse, rape, sexualized violence within incarcerated populations, and the broad spectrum of behaviors that can be understood as sexual assault" (Kelly, 2011, p. 50). Adopting a Transformative Justice framework meant these locations and intersections of injustice became points at which PSU could direct their resistance to capitalism and state-level oppression. For PSU, Transformative Justice became the framework whereby individuals, their communities and the state can be challenged and transformed (Kelly, 2011).

This case study is a practice example of the application of a Transformative Justice framework, as part of a transition from one justice mechanism to another. It demonstrates how Transformative Justice provides a 'conceptual apparatus' (Kelly, 2011) that links various forms of justice work, such as economic and health justice, to antiviolence work; but also scaffolds critical reflection on and development of, community-led accountability processes.

### **Case study Two: Transformative Justice Camp**

To explore the challenges of doing community accountability work and survivor healing within a Transformative Justice framework in an Australian context, the Melbourne Community Accountability Network came together to hold the Transformative Justice Camp in February 2017. The three-day camp was organised by a collective of seven volunteers, with Australian and international participants. Due to the complex and multi-issue nature of a Transformative Justice approach to violence prevention, the camp aimed to explore the challenges of doing community accountability work through supporting resource sharing

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and building stronger networks between people who use this framework (MCAN, 2017).

There has been considerable development of community accountability projects within the global anti-violence movement, including Australia, from the 2000s onward (Kim, 2011). In her analysis of these events, Kim (2011) remarks “many of us fashioned a critique of institutional responses to violence and then moved beyond it to establish new institutional spaces for creating and promoting community-based responses to interpersonal violence” (p. 16). The program of panels, workshops, discussions, skill building and collaborative strategising at Transformative Justice Camp, is an example of the establishment of a new space that incorporates, but also moves beyond critique.

Presenters and facilitators at Transformative Justice Camp used a range of evaluative and reflective strategies to achieve their aims. There are examples of evaluation of the direct implementation of practice, along with evaluation at a broader level of ethical principles. An example of practice evaluation includes an analysis of applying risk assessment tools to track and ‘measure’ risk of serious injury and death in the context of family and intimate partner violence, in a community-based, non-agency setting. Also, an evaluation of the application of learning and experience from facilitating mainstream Men's Behaviour Change (MBC) programs directly to community accountability settings. Specifically, the application of skills from a mainstream program to that of a community accountability initiative that directly challenges gender essentialism<sup>2</sup> in the context of intimate partner violence. An example of a broader level evaluation occurred through an exploration of ethical principles in relation to how people seek to interpret, respond to and work with conflict. This review explored the ethics of working with conflict that arises within community response collectives and also, in the process of implementing community-led interventions that respond directly to harm.

<sup>2</sup> Gender essentialism refers to the binary of gender as either woman or man; that reinforces specific, separate and rigid gender roles for which there are severe social consequences for deviation.

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In order to achieve the aims set out by MCAN, Transformative Justice Camp also utilised a process of critical reflection and self-reflection. One example is the identification of gaps in analysis and practice, which lead to collusion, minimisation and enabling, when working with perpetrators of violence/people who cause harm. Reflexive processes were also evident in a practice-based workshop, which utilised a therapeutic, trauma-informed approach to critically reflect on the impacts of trauma on those who undertake community accountability work. A final example is the development of collaborative strategies to critically reflect upon some of the 'thorny' issues associated with community-led responses to sexual and intimate partner violence. Issues include how to 'hold' a community accountability process when a perpetrator isn't willing to be accountable for their actions. Another quandary: how to work alongside survivors framed as 'difficult' or 'crazy'. And, how to build communities capable of responding to/addressing violence, outside of/without the use/with limited use of the criminal-legal system (MCAN, 2017).

The use of these evaluative strategies and reflective skill development at Transformative Justice Camp, provide an evaluative counterpoint to the hierarchy of valued methodologies for measuring program effectiveness. They demonstrate the importance of emphasising process in the practical application of this framework (Boesten & Wilding, 2015). These examples also reveal how a Transformative Justice framework "involves problematising any given framework ... institutions or social relations, including the ones we're using" (Castellino, 2017, p. 45). The networking, mutual support, and resource sharing undertaken at Transformative Justice Camp represents more than 'weathering' marginalisation. They are an example of the long-term, committed application and ongoing development of the core beliefs that are an inherent part of a Transformative Justice framework.

### **Case study Three: Vinny's *Undercurrent* practice wisdom**

This final case study emerges from the analysis of data collected from an in-depth interview with *Undercurrent* collective member and

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volunteer, Vinny. It is an example of an intimate, 'kitchen-table' process of community accountability storytelling about work to prevent sexual assault and intimate partner violence (Rojas Durazo et al, 2011). It explores the utilisation of a Transformative Justice framework in *Undercurrent's* sexual violence education and prevention program. *Undercurrent* (<http://www.undercurrentvic.com/>) is a non-profit volunteer-run, and community-led organisation based in Melbourne's Western suburbs.

Of the many programs, projects and initiatives *Undercurrent* (n.d.) undertakes, the development and implementation of discussion-based workshops within high schools and community groups, were the focus of this research and this case study. *Undercurrent's* workshops cover issues of healthy relationships, domestic violence and sexual assault, gender and sexuality, consent and communication. They emphasise challenging both the beliefs and actions that enable interpersonal and gendered violence; and are informed by an analysis of how these also occur within the context of LGBTQ+ relationships (Ah-fat & Thomasson, 2015; Undercurrent, n.d.).

The research upon which this case study has been developed draws influence from Michael White's reflexive use of Bateson's 'double description' (Furlong, 2008), along with Geertz's (1973) 'thick description' conceptualisation of ethnographic reporting. These concepts shift analysis beyond the often 'thin' descriptions associated with outcome-oriented research (Gilgun, 1994). The presentation of the research findings as a case study mirrors the work of STOP in that Vinny's practice wisdom, knowledge and theory base - his own community accountability story - is presented as a source of knowledge (Kim, 2011).

The interview, conducted in the participant's home in Footscray, Melbourne occurred in September 2016, with the transcription of the 1½-hour audio recording made by the researcher. The researcher followed ethical practices consistent with those outlined for use by the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. Written permission to participate in the study was obtained from the

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participant, as was permission to use his name in the findings. Upon being given the opportunity to publish results from the research publicly, permission was again sought and received from Vinny. As a member of the collective, Vinny made contact with *Undercurrent* and obtained permission to use his name. However, permission was not granted to publish the names or details of any other member of the collective, aside from Vinny's. The researcher also consulted directly with members of the *Undercurrent* collective for an informal peer-review process. The research explored Vinny's experience (i.e. perspective, understanding and attitudes) of volunteering in *Undercurrent* collective. The *Undercurrent* collective is an expression of the work of a core few of incredibly passionate and driven people amid a large and active group of volunteers from within and across a variety of interconnected communities in Melbourne, Victoria.

*Undercurrent* is, in essence, a political project (Ah-fat & Thomasson, 2015). Vinny echoes this assertion through his comment that *Undercurrent* is "completely DIY [Do It Yourself]. Completely not affiliated. We fund ourselves. We purposefully don't get funding. We're completely non-commercial". Vinny goes on to say, that in his opinion:

The decision to be completely not affiliated with anything is because it means that we don't have to answer to a governing body. I guess, partly it means on a collective level or whatever, we get to develop our politics and we don't have to get approval. We have a lot more freedom and a lot more freedom to be flexible and to grow.

Vinny's standpoint mirrors *Undercurrent's* articulation of the desire for their "politics to be forever evolving and changing" while at the same time being clear "there are underlying frameworks that are fundamental to our beliefs" (Ah-fat & Thomasson, 2015, p. 1). During the interview, Vinny described the context surrounding his understanding and use of these underlying frameworks, of which Transformative Justice is most influential. For Vinny, Transformative Justice cannot occur alongside the existence of police, prisons and the criminal-legal system (which he believes is about proving innocence). Vinny sees the criminal-legal system as having severe consequences in that it renders individuals, and

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communities, unable to hold themselves accountable for their own behaviour and heal from the trauma of experiencing violence. Saying, “I feel that it’s to disconnect people from their emotions. Which we know that the whole patriarchal prison state or whatever, is to disconnect people from their emotions and create more entitlement”. Vinny’s statement further highlights how a Transformative Justice framework connects those engaged in violence prevention work with those who undertake prison abolition work.

Remaining financially independent and DIY frees *Undercurrent* from many funding constraints; especially funding that is tied to specific geographic areas. *Undercurrent*’s independence in this way enables the collective to respond to schools that make contact and ask for them to run workshops with their students. In the interview, Vinny spoke about *Undercurrent*’s ability to prioritise schools with limited resources, such as those in regional Victoria and also Melbourne’s West, whose student cohorts are marginalised and often criminalised. *Undercurrent* possesses an artful ability to navigate their simultaneous holding of radical political positions, such as police and prison abolition, alongside their positioning as an experienced and credible volunteer community organisation. *Undercurrent* navigates these standpoints, and the spaces in between, to remain accessible to schools and community centres in the otherwise constrained education system and community welfare sector.

Much of *Undercurrent*’s position navigation is strategic and indirect. Vinny’s contribution to *Undercurrent* comes through the examples he gives of work he performs to establish clear roles within the collective, and his maintenance of communication processes with fellow volunteers, schools and organisations. Vinny provided examples of his contribution to development and facilitation of workshop content that maintains radical political positions while remaining credible and accessible. These include challenging myths about sexual violence and stereotypes of marginalised communities; sharing research findings with young people in ways that are accessible to those of diverse genders and sexualities, which do not perpetuate erasure found in cis- and hetero-centric<sup>3</sup> research. Vinny also contributes through his critical reflection

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Vinny is a fiction writer and has a background in the child care and service sectors. It is a testament to the amount of self-directed research, peer learning and critical self-reflection Vinny engages in, that he uses the phrase 'my practice' to conceptualise his work in *Undercurrent*. At the time of the interview, Vinny estimated he had co-facilitated 45 workshops, primarily with groups of high school boys. Vinny highlighted the influence of local, as well as international programs similar to *Undercurrent*. This influence, along with his processes of critical analysis and critical self-reflection, and the extensive contribution of Vinny's lived experience, are the components Vinny identified as making up his practice. Throughout the interview, Vinny also referred to how much his practice continuously improves and how it is shaped by his close working relationship with his co-facilitator, and through challenging experiences.

The most challenging situation that Vinny described was in relation to the reason he became involved with *Undercurrent*. Prior to volunteering in *Undercurrent*, Vinny, alongside his peers, worked within his community to address situations where intimate partner violence and sexual assault had occurred. These experiences led him to the conclusion that "adults aren't ready [to be doing the work of] transforming ideas about what are the conditions that create violence or allow violence to happen and keep happening in relationships and friendship groups and community groups".

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<sup>3</sup> Cis is a Latin prefix that means on the same side of. In the context of gender, the prefix cis (i.e. cisgender) refers to people whose gender identity corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth. Cis-centric and hetero-centric refers to pervasive practices, both socially and systemically, that centre cisgender and heterosexual needs and identities, thus excluding people with gender and sexuality identities that sit outside these norms. An example of such a practice is a University level subject on Violence Against Women that acknowledges that trans and gender diverse people and those in same sex attracted relationships experience of intimate partner violence, yet does not include class content that teaches about the specific issues experienced by these populations.

Another way Vinny has been challenged by his work is through interactions with students who read or engage with his gender presentation in ways that other, cisgender *Undercurrent* facilitators, do not experience. But when Vinny was asked to give examples of times when he was 'astonished' by things young people did in the workshops, he remarked how good it felt that he didn't need to think too hard to come up with positive examples:

Because my practice has improved so much, I get to have actually meaningful interactions and connections with teenage boys, and I get to watch them support each other to not participate in harmful behaviours in ways that actually, even if they don't know it, challenge patriarchy.

Experiences such as this enable Vinny to connect young people to the skills needed to transform the conditions that create and allow violence to happen, and continue to happen. Vinny identified how his practice has also enabled him to achieve personal gain through overcoming quite significant issues associated with his own experiences of violence. Vinny puts this down to the opportunity to work with groups of young people, who demonstrate their readiness and ability to transform harmful behaviours.

Through the process of content analysis of the interview, a clear distinction between the verb transforming and the adjective transformative emerged. The verb transforming conveys the complexities of Vinny's social justice work with *Undercurrent*, the breadth of the theoretical underpinnings of his practice, as well as those of *Undercurrent* as a whole. The idea, beautifully stated by Land (2015), is that for some people, their involvement in community work associated with struggles for justice manages to "reconstruct their subjectivity. This can be permanent, such that a new sense of self makes it impossible not to remain committed to supporting struggles for justice ... where turning away from activist involvements is no longer viable" (p. 223).

*Undercurrent's* theoretical underpinnings of Transformative Justice, an intersectional Feminist approach, and Anti-Oppressive Practice are named by Vinny in the interview. Again, it is important to note that the

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majority of these theoretical frameworks have been developed by communities of colour and Indigenous peoples, both in Australia and globally, in resistance to the oppression and violence they experience as a result of their social positioning under settler-colonialism. Transformative Justice is undoubtedly the foundational theory that grounds both *Undercurrent* and Vinny. For Vinny, the transformation originates from a 'community standpoint' and extends from the grounded theoretical concept to be present across multiple levels and expressions. Transformation also occurs at the peer education level; and is evidenced by facilitator observations of participants, and participants' own feedback. It is also present for volunteers, evidenced through critical reflection, workshop development and regular professional development held by *Undercurrent* for its facilitators. It is present for *Undercurrent* as a community-led violence prevention organisation, through its continued and growing, program implementation.

## Conclusion

The discussion and case studies within this paper have brought to light, potential points of connection between the accountability processes of grassroots, community-led groups and the broader social work profession. The passion so typical in community-led grassroots groups, alongside their use of theoretical frameworks, is one such connection point. These elements combine to enable people to undertake the long-term, challenging and intricate healing work (Kelly, 2011) of responding to and preventing sexual violence. Passion and a clearly articulated theoretical framework are two of many factors that come into play, whether people are operating within the community welfare sector, or implementing community-led processes of accountability using a Transformative Justice framework.

Implementing community-led processes using a Transformative Justice approach is achieved through centring the autonomy of survivors and holding accountable those who harm others; highlighting and redistributing power dynamics in ways that do not collude with systemic violence; and, acknowledging the interconnectedness of liberatory movements, (A World Without Sexual Assault, 2009; Baines, 2017;

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Coleman et al., 2008; Flat Out, n.d.; INCITE!, 2003; INCITE!, 2011; Kelly, 2011; Kershner et al., 2007; QTJ Working Group, 2008). An active connection to, and often participation in, a variety of social justice and activist projects such as prison abolition work that also utilise a Transformative Justice framework, are also a key part of sustaining this kind of long-term movement-building passion (Ah-fat & Thomasson, 2015; Kelly, 2011; Undercurrent, n.d.).

Groups like Generation FIVE, Abolitionist and Transformative Justice Centre, the Education Centre Against Violence, Philly Stands Up, *Undercurrent* and those in the Melbourne Community Accountability Network, recognise the structural marginalisation their program participants experience, as well as the intersecting contexts in which their programs sit. This recognition and the work to address state-level marginalisation and harm, are a further point of connection between community-led groups and the broader social work profession. The case studies presented here, show that transformative change occurs through not only emphasising, but also nourishing local agency, process, reflection, critique and community action. The variety of components within the Transformative Justice framework, are pivotal in allowing these groups to incorporate into their education programs, strategies that enable participants to contribute to making their communities safer (Jewkes et al., 2015; Miller, Das, Tancredi, McCauley, Virata, Nettiksimmons, & Verma, 2014).

This exploration of the components of Transformative Justice as a theoretical framework, aims to step through, humbly and with respect, the 'portal' created by community-led groups, "for critique, analysis, and new visions for change"; while also "contributing energy ... to building on-the-ground alternative responses to violence" (Rojas Durazo et al., 2011, para 5). There exist connection points between those who implement responses to and prevention of, sexual assault and intimate partner violence in community-led as well as welfare agency settings. These connections can be built upon, developed and reinforced until they become inextricably intertwined. Vinny's reflection provides a concise conclusion:

I definitely think that the work that I do with *Undercurrent* is part

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of transformative justice work in that it is work that chips away, or that it endeavours to transform the conditions that create, or that allow violence to happen. Or to be excused, especially.

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