

## RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE/PRACTICE INTO RESEARCH

# Front Line Research

Clinicians who have worked with Vietnam Veterans know the unique challenges these men bring to therapy. They tend to be difficult to engage and often feel that they are misunderstood. This belief has a real basis in their war service and homecoming experience and still today veterans often remain enclosed in their own strong and supportive networks, reluctant to share their experiences. Vietnam Veterans tell of countless surveys, medical and psychiatric examinations they have endured without reward. It was from this perspective that our project was born. Challenges involved both engaging the men in a new and as yet unsubstantiated program and conducting a research project with a group of people who were wary of being probed.

The idea was to develop an accredited program for anger management outside the hospital setting that could be put into manual form for trained practitioners. A formative research process regularly fed into the design of the program. A quantitative evaluation was developed, incorporating standardised questionnaires to test for program efficacy. Through engaging the participants equally in the program and in the formative research, we were able to utilise the feedback of participants to develop a method of service that integrated their life experience with our practice knowledge and theories.

For example, in working with relationship violence, we were naturally informed by a feminist theoretical perspective, that in practice involves tackling issues of power and patriarchy and advocates for male responsibility. Violence is a sensitive topic for middle aged men who are also suffering from symptoms of war related trauma, where the violent acts of war still haunt their everyday existence. Within this program, we invited partners in, and ran both separate partner sessions and couples sessions. This was already a move away from purely feminist practice, and in this sense, felt like a move out of our own comfort zone. In the couples sessions, we found that the women wanted to tell their own stories of pain and recovery from the trauma of war. The women openly talked, some for the first time, of the impact of their partner's anger and violence. They spoke of the pain of waking up in the middle of the night to their partner's screams, they spoke of the burden of silence, where they as a couple had not found a way to talk about their shared pain and grief from the war.

Emerging from this practice was a view of relationship violence that we had somewhat minimised from our original perspectives as practitioners in the areas of men's violence and from our reading of the literature in anger management programs for veterans. We were led to conclude, via the formative research process, that the language of power and control when applied to these relationships could revive images from military training, where soldiers were often abused by higher officers

asserting their power. The veterans spoke of being trained to survive, rather than being trained to be responsible, and while acknowledging the need to take more responsibility and deal with their need for power and control, they also believed that these concepts did not fully encapsulate their life experience of anger or violence.

Many couples reported that the group had saved their marriage, as they had been able to share their pain and feel affirmed. The women also evaluated their husbands as being less volatile and more open after the group experience. We had successfully engaged this group of men and women around issues of violence and trauma. Moreover, the research process had facilitated this engagement as the participants were empowered by being heard and by having an impact on the nature of the practice. This important shift could not have occurred if we had been holding tightly to a research model based on outcome indicators or our own theoretical positions.

Three facilitators and a researcher were employed to develop and evaluate this project jointly. The researcher was involved in all phases of project development, and being a veteran himself, he was able to merge practice wisdom, theory and research effectively. Patton (1990) stresses that a researcher taking a qualitative stance in understanding a phenomenon needs to be personally involved, sharing his/her own experiences and insights from a position of empathic neutrality. The personal contact of the researcher with the participants assisted their ongoing compliance in the research and also enhanced their belief in the integrity of our project.

The research was made accountable through the development of a reference group to oversee all aspects of the project. This group of key representatives from veterans services met on a monthly basis with both researcher and facilitators. At these meetings we were able to debrief on the processes occurring in the practice of the group program which allowed for further refinements in the design of both the research and the practice.

The method of exposing practice to ongoing reflection enhances change and accountability and allows for the joint goals of research, practice and theory to be served in any one activity (Fook, 1996). Upholding the relevance and rewards of the research is often a challenge. A formative research process that allows for an ongoing dialogue between research, practice and theory will ensure this end.

### References

- Fook, J., (Ed.), 1996. *The Reflective Researcher: Social Workers' Theories of Practice Research*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin.
- Patton, M., 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. 2nd edn, Newbury Park, CA, Sage.

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