

**New Beginnings: A report of practice and co-research
supporting women to reclaim friendship in the context
of intimate partner violence**

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The “New Beginnings” Project drew its name from the title of a poem written by a woman in a group session. We believe it eloquently describes the hopes that a number of women in the group had for friendship in their lives. It suggests the beginning of friendships in new ways, rather than more of the same, echoing the journey of our practice and this research.

New Beginnings

*Friendships have begun,
to blossom in the sun.
Confidences grow.
And hope still flows.*

By Theresa, 2005.

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Women.**

In our work supporting women who are reclaiming their lives from the effects of violence, we have heard of women's hopes for building connections and making friends. We have heard in detail from them about how the operations of violence and control are supported by the tactic of isolating a woman from her family and friends, and isolating her from other possibilities of connections outside of the relationship. It is a widely accepted idea that offering group work interventions to women who have lived with violence can be an important step in beginning to address isolation. One of our key intentions in offering groups for women who have lived with violence and control has been to support these women to build connections with other women. The agency's first steps in this direction happened in 2004, with the offering of the first group. The formation of women's friendships was much more complex than anticipated. Workers observed much trickiness for women attempting to build these connections. Relationships developed very rapidly between some of the participants and unravelled just as quickly. Instances of violence and abuse occurred between some of the participants. Few lasting connections between participants were built. We suspected that what we were seeing may have been the impact of the lingering effects of violence and control. Anecdotally, we were aware that we were not alone in facing these challenges.

This document provides an overview of the agency context and a brief history of our work with women reclaiming their lives after violence and control. It offers a discussion of our approach to the research, and places our work within the broader context of women's friendships in Australia. It documents the development of our practice in addressing these issues during the 2005 group. Themes from our subsequent research are detailed, and the implications for practice are discussed.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

Kyabra Community Association Inc.

Kyabra Community Association Inc. is a community organisation based in the southern suburbs of Brisbane, Queensland. It is committed to strengthening individual, family and community life. Kyabra's activities are inspired by a vision of local communities that are safe and fair for everyone and in which all people are free to be themselves, to fulfill their potentials and to achieve their goals. Work at Kyabra is based on a belief in offering respect for all people, regardless of age, race, socio-economic status, beliefs, gender, sexual orientation or past behaviour. Kyabra's vision is underpinned by social justice principles, and a belief that every person has knowledge and a range of strengths and competencies that are the most important resources in working towards goals. While Kyabra offers a range of distinct services to community members through team functions, for example, Supported Accommodation and Child and Youth Services, it has no designated team responding to issues of domestic violence. A number of the agency's teams have contact with women who have lived with or are living with violence and control, and it is these women who are offered group work interventions through the work of the Training and Development team.

The women's groups

The 'Ladies Lounge' has been operating at Kyabra since 2004¹. It brings together women who have lived with, or are currently living with violence and control. Our intentions were to support the women:

- to take a stand against the isolating effects of violence by building connections with other women;
- to further the control they have over their lives by centring their knowledge, skills, hopes and experience;

¹ For a further account of the 2004 Ladies' Lounge see: Muller, K. (2005). Journeys of freedom: Responding to the effects of domestic violence. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 3&4, pp.106-118.

- to name and step closer to the aspects of their preferred identity from which they might have been separated by the actions of control and violence;
- to locate the violence they have experienced within a broad social context;
- to have an increased awareness of the tactics of violence and control.

The work in the 'Ladies' Lounge' Project has been informed by narrative approaches to working with the stories of women's lives. Narrative approaches are based on the notion that

people make sense of the world by taking their experiences of life into narrative frames, by locating these experiences in the familiar stories of their lives. In taking these experiences of life into narrative frames they become situated in the sequences of events that are unfolding through time according to particular themes (White, 2001, p. 13).

Narrative practice aims to

bring forth and thicken the stories that do not support or sustain problems. As people begin to inhabit and live out the alternative stories, the results are beyond solving problems. Within new stories, people live out new self images, new possibilities for relationships and new futures. (Freedman, J. & Combs, G., 1996, p. 16).

Narrative approaches can be particularly powerful in a group setting, as women's stories are witnessed and validated by other women who are positioned in a place of knowing from their own experience.

OUR RESEARCH WAYS

Receiving funding to further explore the issue of friendship for women who are reclaiming their lives from violence and control raised for us the question of how we should proceed with this research. Specifically, we were aware that we had

responsibilities to the women, to our agency, to the funding body and to the domestic violence sector. This led us to think about, discuss, and question how we might proceed in a way that worked ethically and respectfully with these different accountabilities. In exploring how we would do this research we kept in mind our intention to make a difference to the lives of women and to contribute to effective practice. We considered it a privilege to be funded to be doing research, and we wanted to honour this privilege by doing it well.

Given that we are practitioners, rather than researchers, it was important for us that our research methods were congruent with our practice. Each of our academic training backgrounds had prepared us more for positivist, quantifiable approaches to research, yet these approaches did not fit with our ways of working as practitioners. We were delighted to read Crockett's (2004) account of how she chose to proceed with her research in a way that was congruent with her values and her practice. Her journey resonated with us, and so did her claim that:

research practice is imbued with moral action: at every step of the process, from identifying the site of enquiry, naming the purpose of enquiry, constructing a method for enquiry, and producing an account of enquiry, research practice can be construed as ethical and relational practice and accounted for on those terms (Crockett, 2001; cited in Crockett, 2004, p. 64).

We were cognizant that the questions asked and the methods used in research influence the knowledge that is developed (Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Campbell, 2003). Also, we were mindful of Gaddis' (2004) assertion that "ideas and practices about therapy have traditionally been constructed by professionals, and not by the people who become subject to those knowledges" (p.38). Gaddis (2004) proposed that this can result in practice that, as well as not being helpful to the people subject to this practice, worse still, it could be harmful. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori researcher and writer, states that the term 'research' is "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism...[and] is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (cited in Dulwich Publications, 2004, p. 35). It was important for us to remember our positions of power and privilege as workers and as researchers.

We wanted this work to be available to other workers supporting women who are reclaiming their lives from control and violence, and we were therefore hoping it might be published in relevant journals. This had us asking the questions: *Where do we or should we want this research to be published? Given this, what are the requirements for this to be publishable, for example, the research methods we use, the language we use, etcetera?* Rivett and Rees (2004) highlighted that ideas and research may not be influential if they are published too narrowly, rendering them inaccessible to those who might find them useful. Different journals require different research methods in order to be considered for publication. We considered the implications of tailoring our research to fit other's views of what is "good research", and decided that, for us, "good research" required us to proceed in a way that was congruent with our values and our practice.

To guide us in all of this, we read extensively on how others had proceeded with research, and we discussed these issues frequently between ourselves and with colleagues. The guidance questions we kept in mind were:

- *What are the principles that will underpin our research?*
- *How will we do this research ethically?*

We began to prefer Epston's concept of 'co-research' (Epston, 2001). He asserts that co-research implies that the answer is unknown and can only be discovered by an experimental attitude, and that it is based on the belief that people can find their own solutions to some of the effects of their problems. According to Epston (2004) the process of co-research does not claim to be objective, nor does it aspire to objectivity. The process itself is inextricably entwined with its purpose, which is to generate knowledge that can influence, in preferred ways, a person's relationship with a particular issue (Epston, 2004).

It was our intention to conduct this research in ways that would be beneficial to the participants and to attempt to not infer meaning from women's stories, but to allow the

women's own meanings to stand. We were also interested in finding ways of honouring the mutuality of the research process.

We planned to do in-depth qualitative research with a small number of participants. We restricted the research participants to women with whom we were already working, because we wanted to have a window into where our previous work had taken the women we were supporting. These five women were all living in the community at the time of interview. Some were still living in situations of violence and control, others had left. Some of the women had spent time in a women's shelter, others had not. A majority of the women had also experienced abuse in contexts other than intimate partner relationships, for example, childhood sexual abuse. Two of the research participants identified as indigenous. All of the women self-selected to participate in the research.

In preparing to interview these women we compiled some questions based on narrative ideas (see Appendix). We used these questions as a guide only, allowing women to direct the conversation where their interest and passion took them. Most often the guiding questions were used to bring the conversation back on track when we were lost. During the interview one of us would take the role of interviewer and the other would sit in the 'listening position' (Russell & Carey, 2005). Witnessing the women's interviews proved a powerful experience for us because their stories often resonated with the stories of our own lives. To acknowledge this transport, we would offer a personal reflection to the women as part of the process of the interview. This reflection process followed 'outsider witness group' practices (Russell & Carey, 2005).

With the women's permission, each of the one to two hour interviews was recorded on video. These were then transcribed. We had noticed that in our early note writing records of interviews with women we sometimes differed in each of our "direct quotes" of women's words, both in content and meaning. Although the transcribing was time-consuming, it was an expression of our commitment to keep the women's meaning for their lives centred in this co-research.

In our consideration of the themes and issues from the women's interviews, we constantly referred back to the transcripts during our discussions. We did this to make sure we had not misinterpreted or misremembered the meanings that the women had offered. We also invited our supervisor to read through the interview transcripts to see what issues and themes stood out for him. We believe that what 'catches our hearts and minds' from the women's stories will be in some way connected to our own lived experience. On reflection, and given additional time, it would have been useful to extend this process of inviting other people to view and respond to the transcripts, and to create a process for these people to offer their acknowledgements to the women. In writing the section "Themes From the Co-research" we have drawn extensively from the interview transcripts. In describing our practice in the section entitled "Our Response" we have also drawn on the women's words from our group work document archives.

As a team, we have been using an underlying process of action research (Grundy, 1995). For each project, we start with a statement of intention and a project plan. We act on this plan, notice what happens, and then reflect on what worked well and what we might do differently. These ideas inform our next steps. Although team members bring various levels of experience and different perspectives to these collaborative reflections on practice, privilege is not given to seniority or experience (Grundy, 1995). This allows for fresh perspectives and new learning to occur, and provides a supportive environment for practice development. Although we are not always 'perfect' in this process, we have a commitment to this way of working. We used this approach both in the 'Ladies' Lounge' group and the 'New Beginnings' project.

SETTING THE SCENE: WHY IS THERE OFTEN 'TRICKINESS FOR FRIENDSHIP'?

As mentioned previously, during the 2004 Ladies' Lounge there was a rapid development of trickiness in relationships. Some participants spent time together outside of group

sessions. Conflict arising out of this led to an episode of physical violence occurring within a session. Reflecting on this alerted us to the possibility that the effects of violence and control might continue to impact on women's friendships even after a woman has left a violent relationship.

The Context of the Effects of Violence and Control

Themes and trends from domestic violence literature

In domestic violence literature there is much to support the notion that living with violence and control impacts on women's emotional and mental health (Goodman & Epstein, 2005; Levendosky et al., 2004; Taft, 2003). Women who have experienced partner violence report that the emotional effects of violence and control can be more damaging than the physical effects (Taft, 2003). A concern for support services is that these emotional effects, such as shame and self-blame, can be augmented by the way in which services interact with women (Hegarty & Taft, 2001). A woman's mental health issues plus her wider experiences of disadvantage, such as transience and poverty, are sometimes accounted for as being intrinsic to the woman, rather than being an outcome of the abuse and violence that she has experienced. This perspective further perpetrates violence upon women (Laing, 2000; Taft, 2003).

In discussing the responses by health services globally, including mental health services, Taft (2003) claimed that these services can often be "uninformed and inappropriate. At worst, these services can re-traumatise, re-victimise, stigmatise, or be unwittingly drawn in to the abuser's web of control, further harming the woman's emotional self" (p. 1). Our hope for our own practice is to stand against these tendencies. One way of doing this is to contextualise the challenges that women experience in friendship; as such, to locate these challenges within the context of the lingering effects of violence and control, rather than seeing them as failings of the women.

In contrast to contemporary practice in the United States, in which the focus is on criminal justice approaches to dealing with perpetrators of intimate-partner violence, Goodman and Epstein (2005) argued that a better strategy for keeping women safe would

be to provide women-centred, flexible services that are responsive to women's needs. These services would include advocacy and broad social support. In order to "fight against domestic abuse" Goodman and Epstein (2005, p. 485) recommended that researchers, activists and policy makers refocus on the individual experiences of women. We have been attempting to do this through our group work and our co-research.

Violence in intimate relationships has been found to correlate with social isolation and/or impaired social support (El-Bassel, Gilbert, Rajah, Folleno, & Frye, 2001; Hage, 2006; Levondosky et al., 2004). Although social support has long been considered to be a helpful factor for women who are living with partner violence, recent research has begun to examine what aspects of social support make the difference for women. Goodkind, Gillum, Bybee, and Sullivan (2003) found it was "the combination of offering emotional and tangible support *without judgement or other negative reactions* [italics ours] that is important in promoting women's well-being" (p. 369). Their research also found that the reactions of a woman's family and friends depended on contextual factors such as the legal status of the women's relationship, the number of children she had, and whether or not the family and friends were being directly threatened (Goodkind, Gillum, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003).

These findings are congruent with those of Levondosky et al. (2003). In a community study where they interviewed pregnant women, they found that a woman experiencing violence was more likely to disclose this to other women who had experienced violence. However, she was also more likely to receive criticism from these women, and less likely to receive criticism from women who had not experienced violence. Given that criticism is related to negative mental health, Levondosky et al. (2004) concluded that women who have lived with violence may not be best supported by other women of similar experience. Rather, Levondosky et al. (2004) suggested these women would be better supported by advocates, or by women who have not lived with violence. They recommended that support agencies provide advocates, practical support, and opportunities for women who have experienced violence to meet with other women who have not had similar experience.

“Claiming Back Community”, an extensive report into the personal networks of women in Australia who were experiencing domestic violence found mixed results: “family and friendship networks could be as unhelpful as previous research describes them, *and* could significantly challenge previous findings. Effective and informed support [from family and friends] can be critically important for enabling those experiencing family violence to survive.” (CultureShift, 2001, p.3). This is echoed by the work of Morse and Morgan (2003), and Hage (2006). Morse and Morgan (2003), in their work facilitating groups for women who have experienced violence, found that the effects of abuse are more likely to be challenged by “the presence of ‘a community’ of others who have some personal understanding of these experiences. Bringing women together poses a direct challenge to isolation and to women defining themselves as ‘flawed’ and ‘different’ and alone” (p. 41). Hage (2006) found that social support was one of the active strategies that women used to preserve their sense of self-agency within the conditions of violence.

Congruent with these authors, Budde and Schene (2004) suggested that “informal social support interventions clearly offer potential that should be tapped” (p. 347). However, they stated that at this stage it is unclear how informal social support interventions contribute to keeping women safe. They also stated “there are critical gaps in our understanding of how to design, implement, sustain, and expand effective [informal social support] interventions” (Budde & Schene, 2004, p. 347). We hope that the documentation of our practice and the discussion of the themes from our co-research can help to contribute to narrowing these critical gaps.

Professional Language

A search of the literature revealed little written directly on the topic of women’s friendships in the context of intimate partner violence. It was only through widening the search to include terms like “social support” that we were able to identify relevant literature. As practioners we were drawn towards adopting this language ourselves in describing our work and thoughts. Notions of ‘professional language’, and the idea that there might be a ‘right’ choice of terms, invited us to consider a change. However, we refrained for two reasons.

Firstly, we noticed that the terms that appeared in the literature were not words or phrases that women used in talking about their lives. They used the word ‘friendship’ in talking about their experiences of wanting friendship, of trickiness in friendship, their preferences about how they wanted to do friendship, their desire for company and fun, and a multitude of other issues, ideas and hopes. The terms “social support” and “support networks” describe a narrower range of issues than those of interest to us. Friendship provides a lot more than “social support”. It also provides affection, enjoyment, understanding, companionship and counsel (Adams & Blieszner, 1996).

Secondly, we were concerned that if we used terms like “social support”, our thinking and practice might have been influenced in ways we did not prefer. For example, we might have been invited to construct particular ideas about the identities of women who have lived with violence and control. These terms in the literature seemed to invite a construction of identities of women as ‘needy’, and having nothing to offer. This is not our experience of women working to reclaim friendship after living with violence and control. Their stories and actions, hopes and intentions speak of their sense of identity as vital members of living communities, of individuals with commitments to principles such as fairness, equality and mutuality in friendships.

With the focus of the literature on social supports rather than the broader arena of friendship, it was at times challenging not to be pulled off course with our own discussion and thinking as co-writers. We attempted to remain focused on our curiosity about the ways that the effects of violence and control could create problematic contexts for women in their attempts to reclaim friendship after violence.

For these reasons we have held on to the phrase “supporting women to reclaim friendship after experiences of violence and control” in describing this area of our practice and co-research. Our choice of this term fits with our intentions to find a place for the women’s voices in relation to this issue, and to support them to step closer to their preferred identities rather than be pulled towards more deficit-laden notions inferred by other terms. Holding on to this term also fits with our understandings that friendship is something from which women have been separated by the tactics of violence and control.

The Context of Friendship in Australia

White (2004) observed that

in the recent history of western culture, it has been the heterosexual married couple that is privileged over all other relational forms. Not only is this privileged as the ideal relational form, but many other relational forms have been consistently downgraded, discouraged, marginalised, disqualified, and punished (p. 8).

Consistent with this, in Australia there are formal support structures and rituals around heterosexual couple relationships. For example, there are ceremonies to honour public commitments to these relationships, with entire businesses devoted to such events. These commitments carry legal rights and obligations. Some legal rights and obligations are also extended to heterosexual couple relationships in which there has been no formal, legal or public commitment, but in which partners are cohabiting. Couple anniversaries are marked by celebrations, gifts, greeting cards, etcetera. There are even greeting cards available to mark the official ending of couple relationships. Dedicated counselling services are provided by government, community, and private sector agencies in order to provide support for couple relationships. In summary, Australian culture institutionalises heterosexual couple relationships, providing structure and support for these to occur.

In contrast with this, non-couple friendships tend to 'just happen'. Australian culture does not prescribe ritual, formal or legal supports for their existence. Anniversaries are not usually marked or celebrated, and when things go wrong in friendships, there are no dedicated counselling or support services, or ways of marking the ending of such a relationship. Other cultures have recognised and marked friendships differently. For example, Adams and Blieszner (1996) describe Piker's (1968) writings about special friendships in Thai society. These are "formally initiated by a ritual in which the participants pledge mutual devotion and unconditional loyalty. Sacred power can be invoked whenever a party violates the vows" (Adams and Blieszner, 1996, p.341).

We were conscious of the broader context of how little friendships are explicitly discussed in Australia, as well as the possibility that the lingering effects of violence and control might impact on women's friendships. Therefore we provided women attending the Ladies' Lounge 2005 with an opportunity to clarify for themselves their hopes and intentions for friendship, and for these hopes and intentions to be made public to the group. Our hope was to render more conscious the women's journeys into new friendships.

OUR RESPONSE

Getting Ready for the 2005 Group

In response to the trickiness that occurred in some of the relationships in the 2004 group, especially the abuse that occurred between some of the participants, we wanted to carefully reconsider our intentions. While holding on to the broader intentions for this group, we wanted to give a more prominent place to our intention to take a stand against isolation, by offering an opportunity for women to come together. In doing this we wanted to centre the *women's* knowledge, skills, experience and hopes about friendships; and we wanted to support the women in their preferences for how they wanted to do friendships. Also, given the extent of the trauma and violence that the women had experienced, we did not want to contribute to the possibility of further exposure to violence and control. We aimed to create a safe space, emotionally and physically, for participants and workers alike, without being dominating or directive.

We were curious about how we might act proactively in supporting the directions that the women in the group might choose for friendships in their lives. We began our journey with care by considering our positioning as facilitators. This was particularly important because we had not worked together as co-facilitators before. Each of us desired a sense of clarity about our positions in relation to abusive behaviour that might happen in the group context. We were clear that we wanted to work proactively to reduce the risk of abusive behaviour occurring between participants and to take a clear stand against it

should it eventuate. We were also clear that we did not want to unwittingly create another context in which women might experience a sense of failure in relation to their plans and hopes about friendship. This had us stating clearly to potential participants in pre-group contact that we would not condone abusive behaviour. We explicitly checked with women about whether a physically and emotionally safe space in this potential group was something that was important to them, and something to which they wanted to make a commitment. We were also keen to hear from them about the things that would support them to remain connected to this commitment. From these conversations we decided that women should feel free to stay away from the group on days when they felt it would be difficult for them to hold onto this commitment.

Our intentions to work proactively in relation to the issue of potential trickiness in the relationships between participants had us listening in pre-group interviews for stories connected to this theme. Four of the nine women interviewed shared stories of concerns and hopes about current and potential friendships. They reminded us that experiences of violence, control and isolation can create complexity for women to form and maintain friendships. They shared with us some of their learning and challenges from recent friendship experiences. In particular, one of the women from the 2004 Ladies' Lounge Project highlighted how the controlling tactics of "isolation" and "put downs" can work in alliance. She told us about how the tactic of "isolation" separates women from opportunities for friendship, and the tactic of "put downs" has women believing they are unworthy of friendship.

We heard further stories of the workings of control, for example, increasing isolation by undermining friendships through such tactics as "putting down friends" ("she's no good", "she's a loser", "don't know why you hang around with her") and being called repeatedly on a mobile phone when visiting friends. In the face of these tactics, it did not surprise us that forming and maintaining friendships can be tricky work for women seeking to reclaim their lives from the effects of violence and control.

The 2005 Group: Our New Practice Approaches

(a) Putting friendship on the group's agenda from the outset

The topic of friendship was only one of a number of issues we hoped to open up for discussion during the 2005 'Ladies' Lounge' Project. In planning for our sessions we needed to find space to address a number of hopes and intentions. These included: getting to know each other; co-constructing an agreement about shared responsibility for creating and maintaining a safe and beneficial shared space; providing an opportunity to locate the women's experiences of violence within a broader socio-cultural context; and beginning a process in which the women could begin to name some of their personal experiences of violence and control. In the previous group issues of friendship had developed between Weeks One and Two so we decided that leaving the topic of friendship until Week Three was too late. To introduce the topic into the group sessions, we spoke to this issue at the very end of the first session. This resonated with most of the women as being a 'hot topic'. We offered a handout which located the issue and gave some 'homework' questions for the women to reflect on between the first and second sessions. Our intention in doing so was to bring into forethought women's ideas, hopes and past learning about friendship. The handout was as follows:

OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW FRIENDSHIPS

(Prepared for the Ladies' Lounge, 2005 by Liz Price and Jan Gilchrist)

We have heard from many women in our work about the effects of control on friendship. The isolation that comes with control means that women do not have the same opportunities to make and keep friends. This sometimes means that the skills that we use to make and keep friends get a little rusty from disuse.

Women have told us that the loneliness that isolation brings often makes them act in different, sometimes less preferred ways when the chance to make new friends comes along. Sometimes this can get our lives off track, or take us back to things we have tried so hard to move on from.

In order that our journey together is the safest and most useful, we invite you to get yourself ready for any opportunities for new friendship that might come along. Here are some questions that might help:

Thinking of a time when a new friendship has worked out well for you, what did you do that helped with this?

Thinking of a time when a new friendship did not work out well for you, what went wrong? Was there something you learnt from this, some mental note that you made for yourself? What might you do differently this time?

Thinking of the less preferred things that you have tried to move away from in your life (e.g violence, alcohol and drugs.....) what kind of friendship experiences are you keen to avoid? In making new friendships, what might you do to protect yourself from returning to these less preferred things?

Thinking of the things that you now want for your life, what kind of friendships would support this?

(b) Drawing out women's preferred ways of doing friendship

Time constraints meant that the issue of friendship could not be specifically included in the session plan for every week, but we took opportunities throughout the group's life to reconnect with this topic. At the beginning of the second session we presented the issue of friendship as an 'ice-breaker'. We represented the questions to the group and invited participants to select a 'shoe card'² and discuss in pairs their "preferred ways of stepping into opportunities for friendships". Some of this was shared in the large group. This provided the women with some opportunity to share their preferences about new friendships generally. These included the pace at which they wanted to go, things they

² The "Shoes Cards" are a tool under development. They are aimed at supporting conversations about such things as how a person might like to "step into" some new way of being.

wanted to avoid, and the depth and amount of disclosure in which they may choose to engage. We did this in order to provide a space for people to reflect on their thoughts about the ‘friendship’ homework, and to make those thoughts very present in the journey on which the women were embarking. This allowed group members to be clearer with each other about their preferences for possible new friendships that may form within the group.

Here are some of the thoughts they shared publicly about their preferences for friendship:

- *Friendships that support my decision to stay away from alcohol.*
- *To take it slowly, not to offer people our whole cake, but one slice or one crumb at a time.*
- *To know our own boundaries, and not allow people to persuade us.*
- *Some of us are loving soberness and appreciating how stupid others look and behave when drinking.*
- *We seek friends we can trust.*

(c) Attending more closely to group agreements

As previously stated, in tandem with the explicit conversations around friendship, during the first few weeks we also invited women to join us in constructing ideas about how the group could work together. This was done by inviting women to identify “Angels” that they would like to have along on the group’s journey. Each women was invited to choose several “Angels with Attitude” cards (Deal & Gibson, 2001). We then invited the women to speak about the meaning of each of their choices, using the following questions as prompts:

1. *What difference would you hope this Angel would make to your/our time in the group?*
2. *How would you know that the Angel was present?*
3. *How could we encourage this Angel to remain with us?*
4. *That should we do if an Angel is hiding or goes missing?*

From this exercise participants' hopes about how they would relate to each other were specifically named, and particular preferred practices of respect were articulated. We hoped that this would support women to step into their preferred ways of relating to each other. We offer two examples from the eleven "Angels" selected.

The presence of "The Angel of Trust" would mean that:

- *what is spoken about in the room stays in the room.*
- *It would be possible to be our selves.*
- *people's ears would not burn.*
- *we would not 'blow each others cover' if we see each other outside of the group.*

We will encourage this Angel to stay with us on our journey by reminding each other to padlock up our vault at the end of group and only open it again the following week.

We can encourage the Angel of Trust to hang with us by knowing that we have the shared bond of having all been in a situation of violence and control. This could make it possible to trust how people might react to our stories because there would be the same level of understanding. We would not be telling each other what to do. We would be supporting, not judging.

Sure signs that the Angel of trust is missing might be

- *if people started to use the things they learn about each other, against each other.*
- *It might be a feeling...like something is missing, we might feel more closed, know you were holding back.*

There can be other reasons why people choose not to share, and we would not want people to feel that this was because we did not trust them. It can be about other things.

”The Angel of Respect” has been very present with us in our group so far. We support her to be here in the group when we remember that we’ve all been “in the same boat” and when we remember that “we’re going through what we are going through”.

We’ll know she is present when we’re looking each other in the eye (no scamming), when we’re listening to each other, and when we’re being given the time in the group to say what’s important for us. This helps us know that what we say “matters”.

We’ll know if the Angel of Respect goes missing if there is a coldness in the room.

(d) Building friendship with the company of confidence

In week five, after exploring women’s stories of regrowing confidence in the face of the after-effects of violence, we invited the participants to consider what sort of difference the company of confidence might make to their journey with friendship. This exercise was again supported by use of the Shoe Cards. We offer three retellings of where this took women’s thoughts.

“Alias” chose gumboots for wading through. These would help “Alias” wade through having lost her oldest friend because she said one wrong thing, deal with the impact of a friend who has recently returned to her life, and protect her when moving into her new suburb.

Confidence would help “Alias” realise she can’t be friends with everyone. It

would help her sit at home and be on her own, to know that her Mum's down the road, without going into "super-dependency", to know that she can survive a new suburb and new people, and can say to them "I am a quiet person". It would help her set barriers and guidelines. Confidence would help "Alias" be cautious and careful.

"Lydia" chose ballet shoes because she still had to "tippy toe" in friendships. Confidence would encourage "Lydia" to hold back.

"Hill Billy" chose invisible shoes! These would help "Hill Billy" to do things without people seeing her tracks, without the crap that comes behind when she's trying things for the first time and is changing her life.

(e) Thickening accounts of women's preferred identities

Further on, in session seven, we invited the women to participate in an exercise that we hoped might provide an opportunity for them to support each other to step closer to their preferred identities. This exercise involved inviting each woman to offer an acknowledgement to other women in the group, a reflection on something that they appreciated about that person. We then briefly interviewed each of the women about what it was like to receive these acknowledgements, and whether it was something that fit with the way they viewed themselves. We enquired about other actions or events in their lives that had contributed or fit with this view of themselves. As an adjunct to this exercise, we were also keen to invite the women to situate these views of themselves in the context of friendships with other women. Here is a retelling of one woman's thoughts.

All of the acknowledgements made Marie stop and think. In particular, "being a wonderful friend" stood out. This was because when she has been stuck at home she has wondered "what's wrong with me, why don't I have any friends?" Also, "being a gentle person" stood out for Marie, because this got her thinking "then why don't I have

friends?”

Marie thought that these acknowledgements did fit for her. She also wondered that maybe she could be too gentle and soft at times, and that an effect of this could be that she would take anyone as a friend. She thought that maybe she offered “all at once” (the whole cake) and that this might put people off, and that maybe she needs to offer “bit by bit”.

This got Marie thinking she might do it differently the next time. Marie thought that doing it differently might have her talking with more confidence. She reflected that at times she doesn’t know what to say to people, she worries about what they might think and she worries that she might have said something stupid. She also reflected that she hates long silences because they get her wondering what she should say next. She would find herself thinking “just say something!” (There were nods and murmurs of agreement when Marie said this, and Liz suggested that “aren’t poodles cute?” might, or might not, be helpful when we find ourselves in this kind of situation!)

(f) Supporting women to hold on to new developments

In session nine, we invited the women to be interviewed about what had stood out for them during the course of the group, and what they wanted to hold on to in the future. As the women listened to each other being interviewed, we invited them to write down words and phrases that caught their attention. We gathered up these words and phrases, and from these pieced together a poem for each of the women as a way of supporting them to hold onto their thoughts³. Essentially the poem is constructed from the woman’s own words, and is offered as a retelling of what has been shared. Several of the interviews covered the issue of friendship with other women and we offer the following poem as one example.

³ This idea comes from Mary-Denese Holmes’ idea of ‘amateur poetry’, as presented at a Narrative Practice Workshop at the ‘Spotted Chook’ in Maleny, October 16th, 2005.

“Hill Billy”

*Can't live like a hermit all my life.
Meeting other women,
Who have gone through similar stuff.
Seeing growth has me thinking I could grow myself.
Extra strength to face the challenge at home.
Courage and confidence.*

*Thinking of people outside the group
Thinking of throwing life-lines to others.
Thinking of taking stands where others can not.
Noticing crap and how it isn't right.
Not alone, coming out, speaking out.
Doesn't hurt to throw a life line.
A chance to come out of your shell.*

What we noticed

In contrast to the experiences of the 2004 ‘Ladies’ Lounge’ we noticed the women being more careful in stepping into friendships, for example, slower to offer their phone numbers to each other, or to offer lifts. We noticed the way women spoke to each other about this, with statements like “I think I’m ready to do this now” expressed in a tone of mock nervousness. They noted aloud their sense of having taken a risk by taking these steps.

One of the ideas for stepping into new friendships that was discussed a lot in the group was given the name “one slice at a time”. Using a cake metaphor, the women talked about the importance of not offering all of yourself (the whole cake) at once, and of not telling your whole and deep story to someone you’ve just met. Included in this concept of offering only one slice at a time (“or just some crumbs!”) were the ideas of checking

things out, and taking things cautiously; and of keeping boundaries and discerning who to tell what. We noticed this metaphoric language develop a life outside the group, as women held onto and tried out new ideas.

During the 2005 'Ladies' Lounge', women did form friendships with each other that resulted in some contact outside of time in the group. While the women were observed to proceed more cautiously than participants in the previous group, this contact was not without its trickiness. However, the exploration of the issues of friendship within the group context gave us a solid understanding of the women's preferences about how they wanted to do friendship, from which we could support them to continue to explore and deconstruct the events and their meaning. It was a joy to see the women celebrating the consciousness they had been bringing to their work in the landscape of friendship. During one conversation two of the women excitedly announced that they had been "talking about [their friendship with each other] not just doing it". They commented that this was a new experience for them.

The women reported that while they had made some choices as to the kinds of things they did together that were not congruent with some of the preferences they had expressed, at the same time, they found themselves being able to express this to each other, to discuss the alternatives, and to think through their choices. Explicitly inviting the women to speak about issues of friendship in the context of the group also positioned us well to advocate for the women in other contexts of their lives. When requested by the women, we supported them to make their friendship understandings and preferences known to other agencies involved in their lives, such as the Department of Child Safety.

We noticed that the women felt free to not attend the group on days when they were separated from their "best selves". When other staff involved in transport went to collect them on group days, the women openly discussed their decisions about not attending.

There were no instances of violent or abusive behaviour during the group sessions. Some of the friendships have weathered the storms of time, where as in the previous group, this was not the case. Where friendships did not weather the storms of time, women gave

clearer accounts of why they had chosen to end a friendship. These accounts were less blaming of other women, and were more confirming of their own hopes for the types of friendships they were wanting.

It was at the end of this group experience that we received funding to document what we had done, and to further explore the issue of friendship for women reclaiming their lives from the effects of violence and control.

THEMES FROM THE CO-RESEARCH

In this section we discuss the ten themes that we constructed from the interview transcripts. Where possible we have illustrated each of the themes with examples extracted from at least one of the women's interviews. Practice implications for each of the themes are considered.

Theme One: Rich journeys of exploration

In looking over all of the five transcripts from the research interviews, what stands out is the depth of thought that this group of women have put into the issue of friendship. We hope that our work has contributed to this in some way. While we had glimpses of women's thoughts in previous interviews we had not sought these out so carefully. Their thoughts may have been available to us had we enquired in more depth at an earlier time. We will watch with keen interest in the coming years to see if subsequent groups of women have this level of thought about friendship at the outset of our work together. This will be done through our pre-group interview as discussed further in Theme Five. The capacity of women to engage in meaning-making and to develop clear plans for bringing change to their journey with friendship supported us to remain enthusiastic.

The women's depth of thought confirms for us that women's work in reclaiming friendship after violence is not a thin story of failure, but rather is a rich journey of exploration; it is not just about standing against loneliness and isolation, but is about

seeking out understanding of their experiences, recovering or rebuilding their sense of self, supporting their children's friendships and development, and supporting other women.

Theme Two: What women want for their lives.

While there is some discussion in the literature as to the quality of support that can come from women who have experienced violence compared with support from women who have not lived with/experienced violence, what remains important to us is that we support individual women to move towards the preferred pictures they have for their lives, and support them to build the friendships that fit with what they are wanting. Stories from our conversations with women for this co-research speak to different needs, wants and purposes that women are attempting to meet and express through friendships. Here is a brief taste of some of these:

Knowing where I am coming from

I suppose my best friend has gone through domestic violence too. So she could understand where I was coming from. So we would sit and have talks. Her DV is the worse in Queensland. She went through hell...To see her live her life, and if she can be who she is today then, wow, so can I. Just having a friend to talk to who knows where you are coming from (Belinda).

One woman found herself drawn to another woman she had met in an educational setting

She was coming from a controlling partner, and I was just getting back from an ex-controlling partner. She had a lot to talk about. And I could relate to what she was talking about (Marie).

You can't live with a counsellor in your pocket your whole life

At a reference group meeting we were discussing Levendosky et al.'s (2004) suggestion that advocates, rather than other women who have lived with violence, might provide more effective interventions and support for women who have lived with violence. One

of the reference group members, who was also a project participant, responded “you can’t live with a counsellor in your pocket for your whole life.” It is clear from the women with whom we work that while they value the support that we can offer them, they also have hopes to be able to get on with their own lives, separate from formal supports.

Bettering myself in a different way:

what I would get from a radio course, because those people are not going to work on set issues, they have there own issues. Yes they have got issues but in a different form. They are going to be bettering themselves in a different wayI’m *never* going to be a *big* social butterfly, yet I’m starting ..[this] new course and *hopefully*, this will enable me to meet new people, on a different level, not from a women’s group, because I kinda figured .. yes, they’ve all got merit in the women’s group, but we’ve come here, and the women have come here, with problems. (“Alias”).

By centring what women want for their lives, and by enquiring into what women are wanting from the different possibilities that friendships might offer, we can better support the development of friendships that are relevant to them. It appears that different needs and wants might be more prominent at different points in a woman’s journey. For example, at times women may want friendship with other women who have lived with violence and control, in order to provide a space for disclosure and to meet a need for understanding. At other times they may seek out friendships from a wider group of people, for quite different purposes. An area for our attention will be to further explore whether there are some universal ‘tasks’ in this process of reclamation that might provide a useful guide for support.

Theme Three: A taste of the reclamation tasks on which women have been working.

Realising that you have the right to choose your own friends.

I think it was when I first got over the realisation that yeah, I can go out there and face the world by myself, and I am able to pick my own friends, not be told who I can associate with and who I can't (Hill Billy).

Learning to discern.

I've got to go in knowing that I can't be going "I've got to be everyone's friend. I've got to be everybody's friend" ("Alias").

Finding new friends now.... you sort of.. sit back and watch first, to see how people react around you first, and then you sort of let a bit of yourself out (Hill Billy).

Thinking back there were a lot of times when I was being used rather than being useful. Now I can tell the difference by knowing whether or not I'm wanting to do what's been asked of me (Resa).

Forming clear ideas of what is wanted from friendship.

I go more for boring people now [rather than people who seem exciting]. They'll be better for me, for what I want for my life (Zoro).

Being aware of the lingering effects of violence and control on the reclamation of friendship.

The co-research interviews confirmed for us that lingering effects of control and violence were operating in women's journeys with reclaiming friendship. We heard stories of how one woman's partner had isolated her by 'putting down' her friends. This woman shared with us the lingering doubts she then had about her choice of friends and whether these people were okay or not. Another woman spoke of the way that 'mind games' had left her still questioning her sense of self, and continuing to feel unworthy of friends because of what her partner had made her believe. Most of the women spoke of how living with

violence and control had left them living isolated and disconnected lives. This often lingered long after separation from their partner.

Standing against the lingering effects of violence and control

Many of the women shared with us the steps they were taking to get back out into society after extended periods of isolation, as well as other steps they were taking in order to stand against the lingering effects of violence and control. As one woman put it “when you are starting to make new friends you just try and keep positive, even though you have got the negative thoughts going in your mind because of everything that you have been through” (Hill Billy).

Having structures in place.

Knowing I have firm structures in place ... not lending money, not drinking with them, not doing drugs with them, not being the mule and running around doing this and doing that (“Alias”).

Proceed with caution. In the past, I have given the whole cake not like a bit at a time. I have learnt to do that now. I don't tell all my story to someone I have just met (Marie).

Making friendship explicit.

Sometimes I tell her it is too hard and she must go but she will not let go, because she knows that I would be allowing myself to go back into isolation. She has seen and heard me talking about not wanting to go back to that (“Alias”).

If you don't like the situation you can change it. You can advise a new friend maybe if we do this friendship a different way, it will turn out better (Hill Billy).

I am going to be fair, clear and concise, this is where I am and this is where I am travelling to and this is where I want to be. And they all know that I am working on friendship (“Alias”).

We are reminded to make no assumptions about the significance of each and every step in a woman's journey of reclamation, that this journey may begin with the realisation that they have a right to freedom of association. The richness of these 'figurings' warrants their being shared with other women who may be starting this same journey. We look forward to finding engaging ways of offering some of these 'figurings' to other women through future groups.

We will endeavour to remain mindful that, in bringing together a diverse group of women, their hopes and intentions for friendship will be diverse.

Theme Four: "I am me again".

We have heard from many of the women how friendship has been important for them in their reclaiming their sense of identity after living with violence and control.

B: I am Belinda again.

K: How did you get the old Belinda back?

B: Once I started to meet new people again, doing my TAFE course, going to work, and people seeing me for who I am. Yeah, and just having friends makes you see a different side of who you are. Yeah, so that helped. And get out, go to TAFE, get friends around you, you see you are a good person. But if they are going to sit in that circle and stay with that one person they are never going to get out of that. You need friends. The isolation is what gets you. Once you are isolated, you can't do anything, then who are you going to talk to? You are fully going to believe what that one person is telling you. No one is going to tell you any different, because you have no one to tell you. Once you have friends, and are doing different things, that's when it all changes (Belinda).

Processes we offer in the group, as well as the social interaction that comes from being in the group, can support women in reclaiming their identity. By offering opportunities for women to acknowledge each other, we can support the process of thickening up the stories of women's preferred identities.

Theme Five: Intentions.

One of our key intentions in offering a group for women who have lived with violence and control has been to support these women to take a stand against the isolating effects of this experience by building connections with other women. In pre-group interviews with potential participants most of the women we met indicated that this fit with their own intentions in coming to such a group. We assumed that connecting women with other women would be helpful. However, during the course of our co-research we had this assumption challenged. One of the women we interviewed had participated in the beginning of our first group. She withdrew from this group after conflict with another participant developed outside the group sessions. She elected to come back to our second group because she had experienced some issues with a male colleague at work. In reflecting on her return to the group, she developed some clarity about her frame of reference for participation.

But definitely in the beginning I looked at the women's group....as "yep!.....I can meet some people". But now I look at it as "yep! I can help me", you know, through listening to other people's [stories] and the coming together of everything.....I was saying that there had to be more strength from inside of me and more control in my tongue and more control over what these women know about me, and I have got to go in knowing that I can't be going "I've got to be everyone's friend, I've got to be everyone's friend." And they are not necessarily here to be friends, so you cannot expect to get real friendship, but you can expect to get some help, some therapy, as long as you are putting yourself out there. Every situation is different and you have got to treat them as different.

I have learnt that I still have a lot of weaknesses and a lot of victim issues from the first group, and I wanted to show myself that I can deal with confrontation a bit better. To step up to the mark[...]. This is just like a mini-world in the group that you come into, and there is a bit from here and there is a bit from there. I

wanted to see that I had strength to deal with interactions, but keep the interactions in a structured way, not go out of hand with it.

And work on myself, work on the boundaries for myself – to be reserved in interactions outside of the group, to be reserved in more personal issues especially talking about drugs and alcohol inside of the group. Making sure that I did not offer lifts too much to people too full on. Doing a little bit of research with these women - get a feel, feel more, listen more before jumping in and needing to be everyone's friend.....Certainly it worked having the boundaries and it worked thinking about going into the women's group in the ways I wanted to change. I definitely got this sense of strength and completion, that I survived this interaction with these other womenI wanted to have a good outcome and it has been good ("Alias").

After pre-group contact with potential participants, we sent each of the women a letter which gave an account of the themes from the conversation we had had with them. The pre-group contact usually had two parts, the first an informal discussion, and the second a more formal interview based on narrative ideas. As part of our research, we re-read these letters. In a letter to one of the women we noted her hopes to:

“find things to offer people, to have small talk that is not just negative advice [and] join our group as a way of ‘practicing’ some of these things.”

We were surprised to see that while a number of the women in the pre-group interviews spoke with us about the issue of friendship and building connections with other women, our letters to them, except in this one instance, did not document this. This has helped us realise that our focus for our formal pre-group interviewing has been primarily on gathering thoughts about themes from women's experience of violence in their intimate relationships. This leads to rich group session processes. Our discussion with women at pre-group interview about friendship and building connections has remained at the informal chat level. By elevating this topic for more formal consideration we hope that richer themes will emerge to inform our group work processes.

Theme Six: Disclosure.

As facilitators we need to take responsibility for what level of sharing we invite women into, and at what point in the group's journey. Understanding that the sharing of information may lead to the possibility of exploitation, we will need to be more transparent with the women about this in future groups.

And everyone had problems, but .. being friends in a structured environment in a group is good to be friendly, but to associate outside of the group, where it's no holds barred, it's not right. And it's [...] because you know much about them, and they know much about you, and it's kind of like a door that's just waiting to be left open, and.. you've got no way of .. protecting .. you know, your .. your experiences and .. your *past* which .. you're trying to *deal with* ("Alias").

Just in the two ladies I have met over there, I know they go through a lot of pressures because they are in the sort of situation that I have got out of. I find I can sit down with the girls and have cuppas and they will open up more to me because they feel they can trust me more, because every time they feel negative I can give [th]em a positive and it brings them out of the slumps they are in, brings their spirits up and they feel that they can achieve things in their own lives as well ("Hill Billy").

Theme Seven: Building Analysis.

Women's mutual support of other women was often the substance of some of the more informal chats that we have had with women with whom we are in relationship. In these moments we would often suspect the workings of the ongoing effects of violence and control. We would sometimes hear other women blamed for the violence they were experiencing. We would invite consideration of whether violence and control would be happy to hear them speaking in this way of another woman's experience. We supported the women to identify some of the tactics of violence and control that can result in blame or responsibility being shifted to a woman who has experienced injustice. At other times we realised we had missed opportunities to open up such conversations.

Another friend at the park is quite a bit younger than me and reminds me so much of a younger me. It is scary to see where her future is going. Just the stuff that she's putting up with, and going back to the guy...just me all over so it is really hard to listen to her complain about what her partner is doing, knowing that she is causing it, she is the one that is having the affair and she nags at him until he goes off his nut at her and hits and she will come over and whinge about it and I don't want to listen. (Resa)

In hind sight it might have been helpful to ask some of the following:

Did you find yourself nagging at your partners?

What got you doing this?

What did you want from this?

What does this suggest to you about what your friend might want or be up against?

Are there ways that you have been made to feel responsible for violence that has followed nagging?

In our work with women, we support them to identify cultural and social structures that support violence. We invite women to locate their personal experiences of intimate partner violence within this framework. We also support women to understand the specific tactics of violence and control, and their lingering effects. These practices could be extended to locate the responses of family and friends within this frame of understanding. Supporting women to construct this analysis may act as a buffer to unhelpful support and position participants to be more effective helpers themselves.

I have got some lady friends on the island at the moment that are going through the same crap that I have already faced. With the last group we had with the girls here, we went through stuff and we were all a mess [...] to help those girls out, and show them what the husbands are playing at, like the mind games and that. They are saying "he doesn't do this and he doesn't do that", but I got my own

folders out from the last group, some of the poems and every thing like that, how they *do* manipulate, and things like that. I had the girls over, and we were sitting there over a cuppa and one of them – I’m showing them the stuff, and we’re talking – and one of the girls says “I’ve been putting up with too much bullshit,” And then she rings me up yesterday morning and she says “you realise what, I’m the boss of the phone this week. I’m playing by my rules now, instead of him putting his rules forward all the time”, they are trying to work their relationship now as a fifty: fifty. Not all his own way, and not all hers you know. (“Hill Billy”)

We are mindful that acts of resistance can increase risks to women’s safety (Goodman, Dutton, Vankos, & Wienfurt, 2005). Because of the ripple effects of women supporting other women to step into acts of resistance, we will need to more explicitly build women’s awareness and analysis of these issues.

Theme Eight: Building Community.

We recognise women survivors of intimate partner violence as a potentially rich resource for the communities in which they live. Their enduring passion for justice and fairness for other women warrants resourcing. We could offer community training events to specific groups of women survivors who have an interest in being able to step into helpful support of other women who have lived with violence and control. This idea is similar to those from “Claiming Back Community” (CultureShift, 2001). This study looked at the needs of the informal support networks of families experiencing violence. It recommended educational resource kits for use in learning circles with personal supporters.

Theme Nine: Understanding history.

Women explicitly explained to us how some of their past experiences of family, friendships and relationships were impacting on their current experiences. For example, “Alias” told us how growing up in her family had not equipped her with knowledge of how to make or maintain friendships.

... so how could I find worth in other people if I couldn't see worth in me and my family and friends, well, people that were around. I know *now* that it's not just me it's my whole family that have issues with people. We don't form strong connections, you know, years and years and years of friendships. It's something that happened when we growing up. We grew up in a violent [situation] ... we went from four different fathers and I think that is *why* I've been unable to form long connections with people ..

“Marie” told us how her history of being sexually abused as a child had caused her to experience a deep depression when she was a teenager. During this depression she wanted to be alone, and this was when she lost her friends. She also lost her skill of making friends, because she found it hard to trust others. Later she used alcohol to be more “outgoing and confident”. Alcohol then became problematic in her life and isolated her from others.

“Resa” told us how she thought that her experience of wanting to please others and to not upset them came out of her experience of her mother dying when she was about eight years of age.

I guess I put everything aside.. I never worried about what the kids wanted, I put that aside to be there for who ever. I have always been like that. Ring me up “I need help”. I have been there for who ever [Interviewer: So it has been really important to you for a long time to be there for others?]. Yes. [Interviewer: Do you have any sense of when you first noticed that?]. Probably comes from losing Mum, not having anyone there for me when I was a child. So I guess I try to compensate for that by being there for other people.

“Resa’s” subsequent experience with her stepmother impacted on her sense of self and on her relationships with men.

[Interviewer: Is it important to you to feel useful?] Yeah an idea Mum passed on but my step mum was not so good at making me feeling needed. She was the start of me feeling bad about my self and then guys started telling me the same things. So you start to think that she was right and then someone new, some new guy comes along

and tells you something like that, that you are useless.. they must be right. But then in the end you realise that they are not right. [Interviewer: Being there for others, what effect has it had on other relationships?] On the kids, dragging them around a lot, and with my cousin who was very controlling. The kids would get punished for something that I had done. Like I might go and visit a friend and be home an hour later and so the kids would get punished for that.

We will need to give consideration to spending more time within the group work sessions to exploring the societal context for women's experiences of violence and control, and to further explore the links between experiences of intimate partner violence and other, earlier experiences of violence and control.

Theme Ten: Women's hopes and actions for their children's friendships.

The women told us of their hopes for their children's friendships and what they have done to support their children around the issue of friendship.

"Alias" told us:

I'm trying to be a friend to my children instead of just being a routine mum, you know, and everything's done, done, done, done. But not too much where I'm just their friend, and I lose out on the disciplinarian side of things. And it seems to be working all right, and I think and *hope* that they're going to be better. And already my child, Nikita, has had a friendship for *three years*, with a child that she went through grade one with. Her best friend, my daughter's *eight*, and her best friend almost lost her life in a car accident two years ago, and the mother herself has been through violence and been [in a] refuge and almost lost her life and her own child's life pretty seriously. I committed to this mother that regardless of our interaction, the children, if they chose to have a friendship, we were going to try and keep their friendship alive and do what we wanted to. So it entails allowing them to have phone calls, allowing [them] to have time, special time. It aided in the child's recovery and it's good for my daughter.

[...] My boy he's struggling to find friends now. I've come to an impasse where I don't know how to teach them to form friendships, 'cause I'm still learning that part myself. So I'm learning with the kids as I grow, but encouraging them to have friendships.

“Hill Billy” told us about how she provides a “drop-in centre” for her children’s friends, and how she plays practical jokes and tries to create an atmosphere of fun. In the aftermath of leaving a situation of control and violence, “hillbillies having fun” has been one of the important ideas this woman has held onto for herself and her children.

This theme has implications for our work with women as well as for work with families and children. For our work with women, we will continue to listen out for these issues and offer other supports to women in their work to support their children. Little research attention has been directed towards understanding the subjective experiences of children and young people and to the strategies they use to deal with violence and its aftermath (Laing, 2000). At Kyabra Community Association Inc., although we offer some group work for child witnesses of domestic violence, the issues raised by the women in this co-research, have us considering it could be helpful to offer a parallel group work project for children to explore and address the impact of their experiences on the forming and maintaining of friendships. Such an intervention, by guarding against future isolation, may also go some way to decreasing the likelihood of this generation of children finding themselves experiencing intimate partner violence. Additional resources would be required for this agency to step into this work.

WHERE TO FROM HERE

This research has involved a very small number of women, and has been located in an agency that has a particular focus and context. As such, implications for practice in other contexts will need to be considered with care. We have identified much for the

consideration of our own group work with women. Firstly, we are reminded that, in bringing together a diverse group of women, their hopes and intentions for friendship will be also diverse. Secondly, we are reminded to make no assumptions about the significance of each and every step in a women's journey of reclamation of friendship after violence. This journey may need to begin with a woman's realisation that she has a right to freedom of association. We will keep in mind that the stories we have heard of women's journeys into reclaiming friendship are not thin stories of failure, but rather are rich stories of exploration. The richness of the 'figurings' that the women have shared with us warrants our sharing of these with other women who may be starting this same journey. We look forward to finding engaging ways of offering some of these 'figurings' through our future groups.

From reflecting on the themes that have emerged from this project, we will be mindful to continue certain aspects of our practice, and we will endeavour to include some new ideas into how we support future groups and the work we may do with women. These are as follows:

- In pre-group interviews we will be more intentional in our enquiry and discussion with women about the issue of friendship. In particular, we will invite women to think about their needs, wants and purposes for friendship in regards to possible connections they might make within the group, and also in regard to friendships outside of the group.
- We will continue to use the homework questions that were helpful in raising women's awareness of their preferences for friendship.
- We will endeavour to further explore whether there are universal tasks for women in reclaiming friendship. We will do this by sharing with others the archival records we have of the work that women have done in this reclamation process.
- We will continue to carefully develop a working agreement within the first few sessions of a new group. This provided an opportunity for women to put in place understandings that supported their preferences for their lives.
- We will continue to provide group opportunities for women to support each other in reclaiming their identities.

- In our session planning, we will continue to be conscious of our duty to manage disclosure. In particular, we will endeavour to be explicit with participants about the relationship between disclosure levels and issues of safety and friendship.
- We will be more explicit in building women's analysis of control and violence, especially including the relationship between acts of resistance and levels of safety.
- We will offer women the opportunity to explore and reflect on how the fuller history of their lives might impact on their friendships.
- We will continue to offer participants opportunities to disclose issues that might come up for them during a group session. For example, these opportunities could be either as a one-on-one counselling session or an "outsider witness" process.
- We will endeavour to seek out ways to offer community training that specifically supports women to support other women who are reclaiming their lives from violence and control.
- Once the group has finished, we will endeavour to offer women the opportunity for a 'post-group' interview, for example, two or three months after the end of the group. This would be to allow the women a chance to clarify, and have witnessed, possible reflections or intentions they have for their lives following their experience of being in the group. It would also help us to evaluate and refine our work.
- We will listen out for, and seek ways to respond to women's concerns for, and support of, their children's friendships.

In stepping forward with these ideas, consideration will need to be given to the length of group sessions and to the duration of the group's life. Adopting all these ideas in a eight-to twelve-week group program may dilute the potential of each idea. Other workers supporting women in one-on-one or family settings will be important allies in progressing this work with women. Sharing our practice ideas with these workers will be an important step in this process. This project has extended our understandings of what it takes to support women to reclaim their lives from the injustices of intimate partner violence.

In closing, we would like to share Theresa's extended poem of 'New Beginnings'. Theresa finished this poem moments before this project was presented as a work-in-progress at the "Weaving the Threads: Strengths –Based Practice Conference", Brisbane, October, 2006.

New Beginnings

*Friendships have begun
To blossom in the sun.
Confidences grow
And hope still flows
So hold on tight
While we take this flight
Down this road of new beginnings.
(By Theresa, 2006)*

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Appendix

Proposed Interview Tool**New Beginnings Project Interviews**

(Prepared by Liz Price and Jan Gilchrist, 2006)

Expose of the problem of trickiness in friendships

- Can you tell us a time when trickiness in friendship has been around?
- How did you know it was around?
- What did it get people doing/saying/feeling?
- What was happening
- What would you call this trickiness, is there a name you would use for it?

History and operations

- When did you first notice its presence in your life?
- How does it work? What tricks does it use?
- Have there been times when it's had more hold over your life?
- How did it manage to have more hold over you life?
- What things, ideas, forces were supporting it or working with it?
- Has it managed to maintain its hold?
- What's it got planned for your life?

Effects

- How has it had you feeling?
- What has it had you thinking?
- How has it affected the way you see yourself?
- What effect has it had on other relationships in your life such as family/children/neighbours?
- Have there been other effects of this in your life?

Evaluation

Are these effects okay by you?

Which of these effects are most concerning for you?

Justification

What do they get in the way of that you are wanting of your life?

Option A: Standing against the effects

- Has there been a time in your life when it has had less hold?
- How did you know it had less hold?
- What were you doing at that time?
 - Can you remember any particular plans or strategies that you had to get in its way?
 - How did you get ready for that?
 - How long had you been planning this?
 - Where did this idea first come from?
 - Had you tried this idea before?
 - What did you want for your life that got you doing this or planning this?
 - Have there been other times in your life that you have been taking steps to get more of this in your life?

Option B: Further Exploration of the Justification

What do these effects get in the way of that you are wanting of your life?

Evaluation Questions

How was it to talk about these issues in this way?

What if anything has become clearer for you?

What difference might that make?