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To cite this article: Jade Langerak, Claire L. Thompson & Grace E. Vincent (2025) Understanding Indigenous Australian men's compliance with domestic and family violence orders: a qualitative study of service provider perspectives, Australian Journal of Psychology, 77:1, 2488094, DOI: [10.1080/00049530.2025.2488094](https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2025.2488094)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2025.2488094>



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Published online: 28 Apr 2025.



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# Understanding Indigenous Australian men's compliance with domestic and family violence orders: a qualitative study of service provider perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Domestic and family violence (DFV) is a pervasive issue in Australia, with Indigenous Australians disproportionately represented. While research is increasing specifically for victims of DFV, this is the first study to investigate factors that influence male Indigenous Australians to comply or contravene domestic and family violence orders (DFVO).

**Methods:** Six participants (2 males, 4 females, aged >18 years) working in service provider roles related to domestic and family violence (e.g. psychologists, social workers, counsellors, support workers). Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 50 min, focusing on factors that participants believed influenced Indigenous men's compliance or non-compliance with DFVOs. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was conducted.

**Results:** Five master themes were identified relating to service providers perspectives of factors that might influence Indigenous men to contravene a DFVO: language and understanding, trauma, shame, repercussions, and trust. Three master themes emerged as factors that might contribute to compliance with a DFVO: language, specific support for respondents, and legal understanding.

**Conclusions:** Service providers held valuable unique perspectives on reasons for the persistence of DFV for Indigenous Australians. Participants agreed that more culturally appropriate intervention and prevention programs supporting positive cultural change would be beneficial.

## KEY POINTS

### What is already known about this topic:

- (1) Indigenous Australians are disproportionately affected by domestic and family violence.
- (2) Frequency of contraventions of Domestic and Family Violence Orders is also disproportionate in Indigenous Australians.
- (3) There is scant research to understand the factors contributing to why Indigenous Australian men comply or contravene Domestic and Family Violence Orders.

### What this study adds:

- (1) Service providers to the Indigenous Australian population can offer first-hand experiences and understanding of factors that contribute compliance or contravention of Domestic and Family Violence Orders.
- (2) Service providers can also offer insights into factors that encourage compliance with an order.
- (3) Lawmakers, support services and mental health professionals all have key contributions to facilitate a culturally appropriate response to domestic and family violence.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 January 2025  
Accepted 27 March 2025

## KEYWORDS

Domestic violence;  
Indigenous Australians;  
Interpretative  
Phenomenological Analysis  
(IPA); Domestic and Family  
Violence Orders

## Introduction

Domestic and family violence (DFV) is a serious, persistent issue across Australia, with Indigenous Australians disproportionately affected. While progress into understanding this nation-wide problem may have been slow, the last decade has seen DFV become a well-recognised and highly researched topic. Despite extensive legislative

changes, funding, public forums, advocacy, research, and education strategies, DFV still remains an area of concern, especially for Indigenous Australians. It has been reported that a DFV-related incident occurs every 5 min in the state of Queensland, and currently, 20% of all police-reported incidents are DFV-related (Downes &

Lodge, 2023). In 2023, DFV offences significantly increased, with 34,100 more contraventions of *Domestic and Family Violence Orders* (DFVOs) compared to the previous year. Crime and court statistics from 2022 indicate that some 15% of named respondents of DFVOs were Indigenous Australians (Queensland Courts, 2023). This is in comparison to the 3.8% of the Australian population who identify as Indigenous Australians (2021 data; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021a).

The primary legal mechanism of protection against DFV in Australia is a civil protection order known as a DFVO that was originally loosely entwined with the Family Law Act 1975. DFVOs were created to address family violence, including children as victims or witnesses to violence (Easteal et al., 2022). Over time, evolving legislative changes have occurred with more laws, definitions, and enforceable punishments being introduced; however, DFVO contravention remains amongst the most frequently reported offence throughout Australia (Kaspiew et al., 2011). The offence of “contravene domestic and family violence order”, is more commonly known in Australian and Queensland terminology as “breach of DFVO”. The elements of the offence of contravening a DFVO (S 177, Domestic and Family Violence Act, 2012) include that a person (a named respondent [*offender*]) contravenes an order to which there is a named aggrieved [*victim*]. Contraventions of a DFVO vary from failing to be of good behaviour towards a named aggrieved to more serious offences such as murder and infanticide (Domestic and Family Violence Act, 2012). Despite the seriousness of laws surrounding domestic and family violence and repeated efforts by lawmakers to emphasise the severity of DFV offences, many Australians – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, including victims and offenders – still perceive court-issued orders as “just a piece of paper”. A review of public perceptions found that people generally viewed violence outside the context of DFV as more serious and were more likely to support custodial sentencing for those offenders. In contrast, DFV-related offences were often seen as “less serious” (Horstman et al., 2021). This aligns with broader concerns about compliance with legal instruments designed to protect victims of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence. Research has highlighted similar challenges in enforcing intervention orders in stalking cases and firearm restrictions for individuals with histories of domestic violence where perceived enforceability and compliance play a critical role in their effectiveness.

In 2015, the Department of Justice in Queensland made swift legislative changes to better protect victims and their families. The changes were hoping to deter potential offenders from future offending. The

legislation saw harsher penalties for contravene DFVO offences, with first-time offenders facing 3-year imprisonment and further contravene offences facing 5-year imprisonment (Domestic and Family Violence Act, 2012). Bodman and Maultby’s (1997) theory on crime and punishment hypothesised that an increase in the probability and/or severity of punishment would reduce the potential participation in illegal activity and deter the likelihood to commit offences (Bodman & Maultby, 1997). Despite the threat of increased jail time as a deterrence, excessive rates of contravention of DFVO are still occurring within the Indigenous Australian population. International data shows that % percent of countries now have some form of legislation to prevent DFV (World Bank, 2024). However, there is scant information available relating to the evaluation of these legal sanctions. For example, in ASEAN nations, only two countries have legal provisions for monitoring the effectiveness of DFV laws, by maintaining a registry of cases or producing an annual report of cases and outcomes (Jaising et al., 2013). However, this monitoring does not specifically investigate reasons for compliance or non-compliance with DFV law.

Despite increasing research focussed on DFV, to the author’s knowledge, there is no extant research examining why rates of DFV are higher amongst the Indigenous Australian population, leaving a critical gap in providing guidance for effective policies and interventions. In 1999, a South Australian magistrate identified communication, understanding, and trust in the criminal justice system by Indigenous Australians and recognised Indigenous culture and values to potentially find better outcomes for victims and repeat offenders of partner abuse (Marchetti, 2019). This serious problem was recognised over 20 years ago; however, to date, there is no direct evidence of specific research relating to Indigenous Australian men committing DFV offences. More recently, programs targeting behaviour suggest that many do not have direct input from Indigenous community members to create programs that actually work for their own people (Snijder et al., 2015). Furthermore, Snijder et al. (2015) systematic review examined that the extent of community participation in community developed programs had great potential to improve the overall health and well-being within a community.

Evidence shows that Indigenous Australians, particularly those in remote locations, have lower access to support, including DFV support, compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (Fiolet, Tarzia, Hameed, et al., 2021; Fiolet, Tarzia, Owen, et al., 2021). Feelings of shame and fear may be associated with reduced

help-seeking, especially for Indigenous men (Fiolet, Tarzia, Hameed, et al., 2021; Fiolet, Tarzia, Owen, et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is evidence that some services can be perceived as culturally inappropriate, insensitive, and ineffective (Prentice et al., 2017). Relevant psychosocial factors for Indigenous people experiencing remoteness, homelessness, and poverty (referred to as *fringe-dwellers*), may include limitations to accessibility of services that might assist in complying with a DFVO (Poverty & Inequality, 2023). DFV is closely linked to psychological trauma, with growing recognition of the profound impact of intergenerational trauma from colonisation on Indigenous Australians (Menzies, 2019). Alcohol consumption is an accepted contributor to DFV (Laslett et al., 2021); however, data from Indigenous Australian communities show similar rates of DFV in alcohol-using and “dry” communities (Queensland Courts, 2023). Despite some research on barriers to accessing DFV support, there is a critical need to objectively examine the cultural and psychosocial factors driving the higher incidence of DFVO contraventions among Indigenous Australians compared to non-Indigenous Australians.

In 2021, it was identified that over 150 Indigenous languages were spoken (not including dialects) and 9.5% of Indigenous people reported speaking in Indigenous languages (ABS, 2021b). This may raise questions as to whether Indigenous Australians have sufficient understanding of DFVOs and the need for compliance. The recent landmark case of *Murray v Feast* (2023) saw a Walmajarri man have a conviction overturned on appeal due to the failure of an interpreter being provided. The appeal ruled that the sentencing magistrate erred in judgement by failing to allow the man an interpreter on the basis that the Walmajarri man only spoke *Kriol* (or, *Creole*). Historically, Kriol has been dismissed as poor English (Ponsonnet, 2010); however, within the Indigenous Australian population, it is a distinct and rich way in which Indigenous Australians communicate (Nicholls, 2013).

Compliance with a DVFO requires a certain level of literacy, yet many socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, including Indigenous Australians, face barriers such as poverty, homelessness, limited employment, and educational opportunities (Coffey et al., 2021). Indigenous Australians are more likely to experience early school dropout and disengagement (Lamb & Huo, 2017), thought to be connected to factors such as living in remote locations, socio-economic factors, family structure, and school type. Many remote Indigenous communities do not have secondary schools, thus, to attend high school means children must leave their family and community to attend

urban locations, leading to further disengagement (Lamb & Huo, 2017). Indigenous students are often deeply connected to their cultural traditions, but mainstream schooling may fail to acknowledge or integrate Indigenous cultures or knowledge systems that exist (Wilks et al., 2020). The limited access to education and the unique challenges faced by Indigenous Australians in remote areas further constrain their ability to engage with and benefit from critical support services.

There are limited support service providers (psychologists, social workers, counsellors, support workers) available, particularly for remote communities where many Indigenous Australians live. The Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care provides a list of supports for victim-survivors of DFV (Department of Health, 2024, but services vary, with few available outside traditional business hours. Given that DFV often occurs outside business hours, access to support during these times is critical. While emergency out-of-office services are available (e.g., freecall telephone number that provides 24-h online support for victims, but not perpetrators, of DFV). However, their limited availability is particularly concerning in remote areas, where access to essential services is already constrained. In February 2020, following a quadruple homicide of a woman and her three children by her ex-husband and the children’s father, the inquest into their deaths revealed that the offender had phoned two men’s DFV support service lines with no immediate support available (Queensland Courts, 2023).

This study used a qualitative approach to investigate why Indigenous Australian men comply or contravene DFVOs. Some existing research explores the cultural and psychosocial challenges faced by Indigenous Australians, including conceptualisations of masculinity and how this impacts Indigenous men’s motivations for using violence (Innes & Anderson, 2015). However, to the authors’ knowledge, no prior research has specifically explored factors contributing to the likelihood of DFVO contravention. This study aimed to understand the perspectives of service providers (psychologists, social workers, counsellors, support workers) on why DFVO contraventions occur and factors that may support compliance. Participants reflected on the process of issuing DFVOs and the influences that may increase or decrease the likelihood of Indigenous Australian men contravening these orders. Two key research questions were asked:

- (1) What do service providers believe are the factors that make contravention of DFVO more likely to occur amongst Indigenous Australian men?

- (2) What do service providers believe are the factors that make contravention of DFVO less likely to occur amongst Indigenous Australian men?

## Methods

### Author positioning

The first author identifies as an Indigenous Australian woman, and, as such, this research was conducted from the perspective of an Indigenous Australian woman. The first author aims to honour the unique customs, country, community, kin, spirituality, lore, traditions, and sacred history that is shared amongst these people as a core part of being. The first author has worked as a first responder, administering DFV legislation. The second author is a non-Indigenous clinical psychologist with experience working with DFV victims, survivors, and perpetrators, bringing a clinical and therapeutic perspective as well as research expertise to the study. The third author is a non-Indigenous Australian researcher with Indigenous heritage (Māori) from New Zealand, contributing an additional cultural sensitivity and research-based perspective to the collaboration. Motivation for this research has come from lived experience, and the desire to seek answers that may offer suggestions for improvements within the current systems that exist. The planning of this project included a review of relevant governance and guidelines (e.g., AIATSIS and NHMRC) and institutional ethical guidelines, as well as consultation with Indigenous Community Elders including key Indigenous social justice personnel with culturally specific knowledge and experience of health, education, lore, and DFV. Local Indigenous Elders gave their permission for the research to be conducted within their community and region.

### Participants

Participation was open to all service providers in the designated region who work with Indigenous Australians. Participants were emailed directly to ask if they would like to participate in the study. Six participants were interviewed (two males, four females). Four of the six participants identified as Indigenous Australians. All participants were service providers (psychologists, social workers, counsellors, support workers), who work in specific roles that address DFV. There were no inclusion criteria related to age, gender, or ethnicity as these are not requirements to work as

a service provider to Indigenous Australians, however all participants were over the age of 18. Further demographic information is not reported to maintain confidentiality. An email introducing the study, with the Participant Information Sheet attached, was sent to known DFV service providers within the study region. Those who wished to participate anonymously were invited to contact the researcher via an institutional email address or study-specific telephone number.

### Procedure

After institutional ethics approval (CQU 2023-50), a pilot interview with an Indigenous volunteer participant was conducted to screen for cultural appropriateness and respect, as well as timing and depth of the interview protocol. No adjustments to the interview were required as the pilot interviewee endorsed all interview questions.

The study sample consisted of the first six volunteers, and recruitment ceased after their interviews as data saturation had been reached with no new themes emerging from the completed interviews. Participants chose a pseudonym that they were referred to during the informed consent process and interview so that only the participant and the interviewer (JL) would know their identity. Participation was voluntary; no incentives or remuneration were provided. When recruiting participants, a detailed email about the research was sent to several service provider agencies located within the research area inviting participation. Interviews were conducted in private offices. Once recording began, verbal consent was obtained from each participant prior to commencement of the interview. Interviews used the terminology "*Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander*", rather than "*Indigenous Australian*" or "*First Nations*" people. Interviews lasted approximately 50 min, however the interviewer and most participants continued to yarn after completion of the interview, typically sharing more specific stories that detailed their own experiences of the issues they had identified in their formal interview. Most participants made a point of thanking the interviewer for conducting a study investigating this topic.

### Design and analysis

A qualitative interview-based approach and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) were used as interviews allowed participants to choose their own content and own words to relay their stories and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). IPA was chosen

as it provides a method to deeply explore participant experience data (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). IPA focuses on verbatim accounts and can yield useful results from small samples of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As this study was exploratory, the decision was made to interview DFV service providers rather than directly engaging with victims, survivors, or offenders. This approach provided a broad understanding of frontline perspectives by highlighting the challenges and patterns observed by service providers. However, it is important to acknowledge that these findings reflecting the viewpoints of service providers may differ from those derived through direct interviews with individuals directly affected by DFV. It is hoped that this study may guide future research incorporating direct engagement with victims, survivors, and perpetrators to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these factors.

Interview data was transcribed verbatim using orthographic transcription (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Pseudonyms were removed, and the transcripts were randomly allocated participant numbers (P1 to P6) to further de-identify the participants. Data was further anonymised if it could potentially identify the participant or other specific individuals. The methodology using semi-structured interviews conducted by an Indigenous Australian researcher encouraged participants to determine which issues were stressed or not stressed. As a part of cultural safety, some discussion before the interview for the interviewer and interviewee to familiarise themselves with each other was an important step in establishing rapport. From this process and reflection on the interviews, it was apparent that participants spoke freely and passionately, without hesitations, and the researchers subsequently have been extremely careful in managing the sensitivity of the data so that no identifying details of participants or persons they spoke about have been shared.

Triangulation through the convergence of information from different sources (Carter et al., 2014) was used to test validity of interpretation of the data, by having an independent researcher (CT) code a randomly chosen interview. The independent researcher identified the same themes and sub-themes as the researcher.

## Results

Prior to answering the two main questions regarding factors that may contribute to Indigenous Australian

men either contravening or complying with a DFVO, participants reported on their identification as an Indigenous or non-Indigenous Australian, their understanding and training around DFV, and their understanding of kinship knowledge systems. All participants felt that their prior training was inadequate and that updated learning packages were needed to keep up with the ever-evolving changes that occur in DFV services and processes. All participants were aware of Indigenous Australian kinship systems; however, none had received formal training on these systems. Those who were familiar with kinship knowledge systems were Indigenous Australian participants, and they were able to describe kinship based on their own lived experiences. No participant had received any training that related to intergenerational trauma, but several had intimate knowledge through lived experience.

The themes emerging from the question asking what factors participants believe might influence Indigenous Australian men to contravene a DFVO are listed in Table 1. The themes were identified as language and understanding, trauma, shame, repercussions, and trust. The themes emerging from the question asking what factors participants believe might influence Indigenous Australian men to comply with a DFVO are listed in Table 2. The emerging themes were identified as language, specific support for respondents, and legal understanding. Participant quotes are italicised, and brackets are used to identify material that was omitted, added, or changed in the participant quotes for clarification and confidentiality.

**Table 1.** Themes relating to factors that may influence Indigenous Australian men to contravene a domestic and family violence order?

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
1. Language and understanding	1 (a) Jargon 1 (b) Layman's Terms 1 (c) Understanding 1 (d) Dialects
2. Trauma	2 (a) Intergenerational trauma 2 (b) Personal trauma
3. Shame	3 (a) Gender-role shame 3 (b) Literacy shame 3 (c) Community shame
4. Repercussions	4 (a) Family 4 (b) Cultural Obligations
5. Trust	5 (a) Impact of History 5 (b) Lived Experience 5 (c) Safety

**Table 2.** Themes relating to factors that may influence indigenous Australian men to comply with a domestic and family violence order?

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
1. Language	1 (a) The Murri Way 1 (b) Blackfella Terms 1 (c) Interpreters
2. Specific Support for Respondents	2 (a) Intervention and Prevention 2 (b) Supporting Positive Change 2 (c) Time (being 'unhurried')
3. Legal Understanding	3 (a) Indigenous Australians in roles of support 3 (b) Murri Court

### Contravention of DFVO

When exploring the question as to what factors may contribute to contravention of a DFVO, several sub-themes emerged from each superordinate theme. Within the superordinate theme of language and understanding, four subordinate themes emerged: layman's terms, jargon, understanding, and dialects.

The term "*layman's*" was used by several participants when describing the understanding of a DFVO being issued. One participant described observing a respondent being issued a DFVO by a police officer reading from the order without eye contact with the respondent. The participant described stopping the police officer mid-sentence, saying:

Stop, it's not in layman's terms. I asked the respondent if he knew what the police officer was talking about and he said "no" ... If you're just talking in there, it's about getting back to basics, and then I further explained the order in layman's terms and then they seemed to understand ... I think when you are dealing with certain people especially out on the land, you have to adapt so they can understand.

Another participant provided insight into whether they thought that Indigenous Australians understood legal language and the process of being issued with a DFVO, describing the DFVO as jumbled lingo:

No. Not at all. It is just words that are jumbled lingo. It is like a foreign language for some ... They don't understand a piece of paper and what's written on it. They don't even keep that shit. It means nothing to them. It's just lingo to them. Yeah it's English, but that means shit to them. They don't write it. They don't speak it. But if they do, it's not very well. Many think "fuck it, I don't understand this shit. She'll be right, I'm just gonna do my time, come out and do it again ... It's easier to just do the time when they don't understand what is going on.

When describing the diversity of Indigenous culture, all participants referred to each mobs<sup>1</sup> differences

depending on where they come from and described mob-specific languages or "dialects".

There could be over fifty (50) dialects here at the moment when you think about it. The amount of different people we have in our community, and if they're not here for work, they're here with family and that, so they're all coming in from every area, so it's just not localised" ... "What a word means for one mob,<sup>2</sup> can mean something completely different to another.

While exploring the superordinate theme of trauma, two subordinate themes of intergenerational trauma and personal trauma emerged. Intergenerational trauma is a term used for trauma that is passed down between generations, including colonisation. As described by one participant:

A lot of Indigenous people are traumatised from colonisation. I can't even think of that word, I was reading it this morning. It's when you're sitting around and you're, vicarious ... 'liability'? When you're listening to someone else's trauma and you're being brought up around that as a child, it's forever. It's embedded in you.

Participants noted that many Indigenous Australians would often say "yes", when they really meant "no" as a way to avoid police interaction. All participants noted an apparent trauma response when Indigenous people were interacting with police.

They don't want to be in the presence of police" ... every time something happens, they end up in jail. They'd rather not be in the presence of them, and pretend they understand.

The superordinate theme of shame emerged with all participants specifically using the word "shame" as a major contributor to contravention of DFVOs. The subordinate themes of shame included gender-role shame, literacy shame and community shame. One participant described the dynamic of gender-role in the community, the Indigenous culture and how men will never "dob" (i.e., dob on) in their families.<sup>3</sup>

Taking away a man from his family is shameful for him. He has been taught he has to keep his family together at all costs. In saying that, the women are just as bad, but they ain't dumb. The males will not dob on their family. Even if it wasn't them. That's their culture. You look after family. The woman needs to look after the kids. Even when it was her who stabbed him.

Each participant identified that many Indigenous Australians are unable to read or write, establishing the subordinate theme of literacy shame. Participants described that rather than tell police who issue a DFVO that they can't read or write, Indigenous people often

just feign understanding by either nodding or saying “yes” so the interaction with the police is over quickly.

... they [Indigenous Australians] can't read. A lot of people can't read, they're not going to understand them words anyway. Especially when they're using the big words.

The same participant also made note of the concept of time for Indigenous Australians:

The only time they know is when it's daytime and night-time.

When discussing shame, participants noted that within the community, nothing is private. A participant described the phenomenon and consequences of the “Murri grapevine”.<sup>4</sup>

The Murri grapevines spread so fast and then it turns into Chinese whispers. It's a thing alright ... It's all about the shame job that either the police put a domestic violence on him or her. Well, then we've got to go to go to family and tell family what we did. Family's going to know, which brings shame on the family. It's going to cause family rifts because when you live in community, everybody knows everybody and everybody's going to know everybody's business.

The next superordinate theme considered the repercussions that are likely to follow an Indigenous person being issued a DFVO. The specific repercussions which became subordinate themes included both family and cultural obligations. Participants noted that a significant part of Indigenous identity is family, and the impact a DFVO will have on repercussions within the family.

Participants spoke about cultural obligations and rules within Indigenous Australian communities. This includes the cultural expectation that one should apologise for any wrongdoings (customary law). Failure to make an apology when warranted can lead to serious repercussions and can cause serious fallout amongst families in an Indigenous community. One participant commented that this can lead to circumstances where a contravention of DFVO is committed.

You got to look at the repercussions of it. Everything in regards to being slapped with a domestic violence order, whether your mum, your dad, your uncle, your auntie, your nan stands there and says, “well, you are a dickhead. You shouldn't have done that. You need to go back there and apologise”. Then therefore she telling you to do that, you're going to go back there and say you're sorry and then you breach the domestic violence order.

Lastly, the superordinate theme identified was trust, with subordinate themes of history, lived experience and safety. One participant described trust from the

perspective of a service provider as something that can take “months and months” to establish and can be taken away in a second. In building trust, the participant explained that lots of talking goes on, especially around personal history about one's own background and cultural connections (such as where you grew up and who you know) so that others can identify commonalities. When discussing lived experience, one participant spoke of the term “bullyman”.<sup>5</sup>

Why have they got their nickname bullyman? It's passed down in generations. It's ingrained in us, as Indigenous people to always be aware that they aren't there for us, they're there for the white people, because the law wasn't made for us, the law was made for them, to protect them from us.

All participants provided responses that related to previous experiences that insinuated that Indigenous Australians did not trust police. Some of the participants related stories about their clients' current personal experiences, rather than cultural historical experiences.

They don't like being in the presence of them, because the cops, well they do pretty cruel stuff to them.

All participants noted that safety was considered for aggrieved persons, but appeared to be lacking for respondents. Participants mentioned several service providers for emergency accommodation and financial payments to female victims of DFV, but little consideration was taken to ensure that male respondents had a place of safety or knew how to navigate finding themselves a safe place in the event they had to leave the home.

All participants acknowledged that it would be difficult for respondents from remote locations to find a place of safety when forced to leave their home. Another participant specifically referred to the fear of personal safety that male Indigenous Australians experience when in the presence of police:

It's almost always the men who get taken away. It's just how it always is. The male is always to blame in the police's eyes.

### **Compliance with a DFVO**

When exploring the question as to what factors may influence Indigenous respondents to comply with a DFVO, several subthemes emerged from each superordinate theme. The data for this question revealed three superordinate themes: language, specific support

for respondents, and legal understanding. All participants strongly suggested that DFVOs needed to be explained in a manner that Indigenous respondents could understand and from this discussion, when describing how a DFVO may be understood, three sub-themes emerged which included explanation be done in “the Murri way”<sup>6</sup>, “Blackfella terms”<sup>7</sup> and with the use of interpreters. As one participant described:

By explaining it and by having someone there that actually knows the family, the Murri way, explaining this in layman’s term is better for them.

Another participant highlighted that the annual training for the service where they were employed, was not culturally appropriate and was delivered by a non-Indigenous person.

They explained it in white man terms, not blackfella terms. It felt like they [the course facilitator] didn’t understand us blackfellas.

All participants strongly believed that language barriers were a significant issue contributing to the contravention of DFVOs and that interpreters or support people were needed when DFVOs were issued. One participant referred to the advantage of support people in the room:

The idea of having a support person in the room ... It’s just extra ears, extra eyes

Specific respondent support was also a superordinate theme. All participants stated that specific services are needed for male respondents (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and strongly agreed that adequate support for respondents was significantly lacking compared to support for aggrieved persons, with all participants noting that there are limited intervention and prevention supports available. Several participants did not believe there was any preventative training or courses offered to incarcerated Indigenous Australian offenders, with one participant observing that “*perhaps lucky ones were offered something upon release*”. Another participant believed broken spirits needed to be rebuilt:

Intervention and prevention programs, support systems, counselling, cultural supports, all of that. How can we stop them from re-offending? How can we build their broken spirits?

Participants indicated that there was need for cultural change and believed it would be positive in the community. One participant stated:

I think part of how we can support positive change in offenders and people who have committed domestic violence is to restore some of those cultural roles ...

based on who you are and how you present within the community, so I think it is restoring culture. To restore the traditional role of our men in our communities. I think working with offenders to change behaviour is where you’ll find a lot of success in terms of reducing DFV, reducing breaches, things like that.

All participants suggested that with working within the Indigenous population and providing specific support, a tailored approach to facilitating understanding requires more time than is often allowed. Each participant agreed that different approaches were needed depending on the respondents’ needs. From this, the subordinate theme of time (being “unhurried”) emerged. One participant stated:

I think what we need is a bit more one-on-one with these people. When they’re being explained, they [police] need to talk to them so they understand it, but be one-on-one with them. Really talk to them ... it doesn’t even need to be a police officer that’s going. Someone just to follow up, speak with them, link them with DV units ... You need to have that because you can’t just walk in with a checklist you can tick off. You still need to talk to these people.<sup>8</sup>

The final superordinate theme of Indigenous Australians in roles of support for complying with DFVOs suggested that proper legal understanding of DFVOs helps respondents comply with the order. All participants suggested that more Indigenous service providers are needed, especially for service of legal documents or training provision.

You need First Nations People working in these units [Vulnerable Persons Unit]. They can help deliver services and assistance to people in these situations.

We need more available courses. More sitting down with elders and whoever.

Murri Court emerged as a subordinate theme. Three participants believed Murri Court can be successful for Indigenous offenders if proper procedures were in place. One participant noted that any elders sitting in Murri court needed to be from that country in order for any punishment to be respected and honoured.

Even like Murri courts<sup>9</sup>, these people don’t have ... In one Murri court I know of, they don’t have a First Nations Person from that country, that’s working on that country, related to that country. They [the offender] then have disrespect for that Murri court. Elders sitting there that’s trying to deliver them justice, and yes, they respect elders, but there is no respect when it comes to an elder being on another’s country ... do they even have permission to be there themselves?

A second participant believed it to be a successful alternative to mainstream court:

The Murri court enabled Indigenous offenders to go out and seek help instead of being locked up. That was a success. I'm not 100% sure if it's still going, but I hope it is. If they brought that into domestic violence court, that would be fantastic.

## Discussion

When service providers were asked as to what factors may contribute to Indigenous men committing DFV and contravening DFVOs, five superordinate themes emerged. These were language and understanding, trauma, shame, repercussions, and trust. While it was anticipated that trauma would be an emerging theme throughout this research, two subordinate themes emerged which were intergenerational trauma and personal trauma. The data revealed that many Indigenous Australians are living with both realms of trauma and apparent limited services that are equipped to manage this trauma from a culturally safe perspective (Services Australia, 2024).

The word shame is deeply rooted in Indigenous Australians psyche. To fully grasp shame from an Indigenous perspective is to recognise and acknowledge that shame stems from colonisation. Indigenous shame is a mixture of heavy emotions linked to words and feelings of personal inadequacy (Nooitgedagt et al., 2021). Colonisation and Westminster law forced Indigenous Australians to question their own cultural identities which caused fear, confusion, and self-doubt, resulting in shame for Indigenous Australians regarding who they were and how they lived (Kurita, 2022). This personal and cultural shame is manifested in what is now known as intergenerational trauma.

In the current study, shame was found to extend beyond the individual to encompass family, extended family, and the broader community. The stigma that shame carries is so great that it has been known to cause Indigenous Australians to self-harm or suicide to "rid" the feelings and emotions they experience (Soole et al., 2014). Shame, usually regarded as a generalised negative global self-assessment, is understood as having potential to silence, degrade, humiliate, isolate, exclude, and negate a sense of belonging (Shefer et al., 2017). The politics of shame presuppose a relational and social connection with others. Within the politics of shame, lies shamed identities and shamed cultures. Within Indigenous Australians, customary law dictates how shameful behaviour can be rectified. This falls back to the rules of respect,

responsibility, and reciprocity, with apology often being the first step in rectifying and avoiding ongoing repercussions. Failing to make a situation right for Indigenous Australians can cause ongoing problems within a community. It can lead to prolonged inter-community violence and, at its most severe, cause exile, which leads to further feelings of shame. The superordinate theme identified three subordinate themes which included gender-role shame, literacy shame, and community shame, all of which can be mapped back to colonisation and intergenerational trauma (Armstrong et al., 2018).

Fear of family separation or removal of children from families remains a significant concern for Indigenous Australians and this was found in data collection with all six participants speaking about family (Menzies, 2020). Traditionally, it was the role of the man to keep the family together, however with DFV being more prevalent amongst the Indigenous population, children may be removed from homes that are deemed unsafe (Our Watch, 2018). The data from the current study suggests this creates shame for the man, and shame within the greater community which exacerbates difficulties in complying with a DFVO (Rossiter et al., 2017). Customary law expectations would be placed on a man, with community elders intervening and giving instruction for that man to make the situation "right", thereby creating a dilemma between meeting cultural obligation or following a DFVO which may not be fully understood (Nogrady, 2019). In Indigenous culture, if an instruction of an apology is ordered by a community elder or family member, it is formal in nature, and the person being given the order is expected to comply with that order.

The lack of understanding leads to the theme of "literacy shame", which was the second subordinate theme to emerge from the data. Participants described that many Indigenous Australians have low literacy levels (Hamilton et al., 2016). While it was unsurprising that limited education was a factor that could contribute to the offence of contravening a DFVO, the shame experienced around the inability to read or write was a reminder that illiteracy among Indigenous Australians reduces the ability to participate equally in the transaction of a DFVO (Fiolet, Tarzia, Hameed, et al., 2021; Fiolet, Tarzia, Owen, et al., 2021). Literacy shame starts before adulthood for Indigenous Australians. Many Indigenous children experience literacy shame from the start of school when they self-identify that they are not at the same skill levels as their classmates (Lilley et al., 2020). Indigenous children may find mainstream school difficult due to issues of

school-readiness, study skills, and educational support in the school and the community (Czarnecki, 2018). Thus, they feel shame which relates to early school drop-out (Smith et al., 2018).

Trust was another superordinate theme to emerge, with subordinate themes such as history, lived experience, and safety being identified. Whether it was lived experience from the Indigenous participants or the retold stories that the non-Indigenous participants had been told by their clients, every participant could relay examples of why Indigenous Australians find it difficult to trust Westminster law and those who apply it (Herring et al., 2013). The third subordinate theme relating to trust was safety. Indigenous Australians felt that they were not safe, especially when being named as respondents in a DFVO and cultural survival instincts appeared (Seran, 2015). Interestingly, alcohol was identified by only one participant as a factor contributing to the contravention of a DFVO. Traditionally, alcohol has been blamed for many problems in Indigenous communities (d'Abbs & Hewlett, 2023). It is well known that substance abuse and addiction is a form of "self-medicating" for many people, including non-Indigenous Australians, and substance abuse frequently occurs with trauma (Costanzo et al., 2023). Thus, alcohol was not considered to be a theme in this analysis, but rather, a symptom of trauma.

Participants described factors that could assist Indigenous Australians to comply with DFVO and three superordinate themes emerged. They included language, specific support for respondents, and legal understanding. These subordinate themes overlapped with strong links to culture appearing in all. While language and being unable to understand the meaning of a DFVO was prominent in factors that may cause an Indigenous Australian to contravene an order, it was also a prominent factor in ways to support compliance with a DFVO. Terms such as "The Murri Way" and "Blackfella terms" were linked to the need for interpreters for Indigenous Australians who do not speak English. Every participant offered strong advice that suggested that interactions with respondents needed to be explained in "blackfella" terms, in the presence of another "blackfella" who was either an elder or a senior knowledge holder (Warburton & Chambers, 2007) and that time and being "unhurried" when explaining DFVOs are needed for the transaction of the communication to be effective and understood (Devitt et al., 2017).

All participants believed that more intervention and prevention programs and support for positive cultural change were needed, and all believed that Indigenous Australians respondents needed more support. While

cultural change may seem obvious, this is met with its own complexities because culture on its own looks very different and can mean many different things to culturally diverse populations. Lastly, for this support to be effective, more supportive community and Indigenous Australian involvement is needed. Three participants believed that Murri Court was an effective way to enforce punishment for various offences because Indigenous people still need to abide by customary law, and it is a law that is respected due to cultural obligation. To ensure cultural appropriateness for Indigenous Australians who breach a DFVO, it is worth exploring ways that an apology can be made without contravening the DFVO. Many DFVO contain further conditions, specifically that no contact be made directly or indirectly by the respondent to the aggrieved. This means that under no circumstance can a respondent make any contact with an aggrieved or even ask another to contact the aggrieved on their behalf. Given that apologising for wrongdoing is of such significant cultural obligation, the apology could still occur, but with very clear conditions. This could mean that an elder from the family of the offender offers an apology to a police liaison officer or community leader and that it be passed on to the family of the victim.

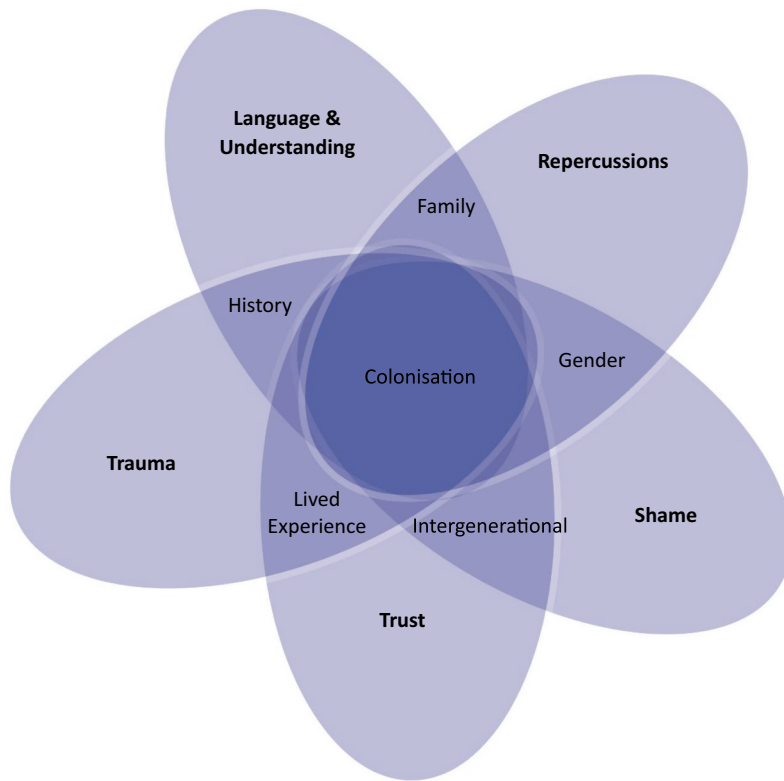
The themes emerging in this study provide valuable insight and suggest that many factors contribute to contravening DFVOs, and these factors have not been previously well explored. This highlights the importance of further research into the psychosocial factors that impact Indigenous Australians. Interestingly, these themes fit well with Erikson's (1950) psychosocial theory of development (Kivnick & Wells, 2014), identifying the stages of children's development and how the impact of colonisation would have severely disrupted these stages.

The themes have been delineated and presented separately, however it is likely that these themes are closely inter-related. As an initial attempt to propose the possible relationships between these themes, thematic maps are presented in Figures 1, 2. While the suggested connections are tentative, these thematic maps represent a first step towards the development of a theoretical framework for understanding compliance with DFVOs.

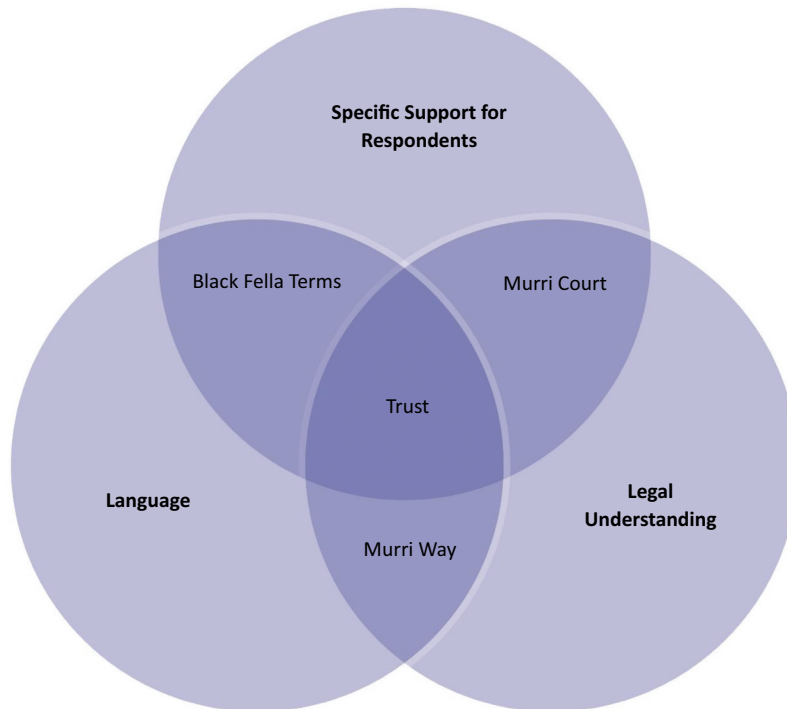
## Implications

### Lawmakers

The data indicated that an Indigenous-specific framework implemented into future DFV training could be of great benefit to Indigenous Australians. While DFV



**Figure 1.** Examples of interconnections between main themes (Research Question 1).



**Figure 2.** Examples of interconnections between main themes (Research Question 2).

training provides knowledge that recognises actions and behaviours that constitute DFV and the process of issuing DFVOs (Pfitzner et al., 2022), there appears to be no evidence that culturally specific training is provided to those who issue the DFVO. Participants revealed that, at times, they had to intervene during a DFVO service to inform police officers that the involved Indigenous Australian did not understand what they were being told. While there are checklists and policies in place in some practices, there appears to be no culturally appropriate framework that directly assists and provides guidance for document service (Islam & Mazerolle, 2022). Given that extensive legislative changes happen frequently regarding DFV, it is vital that a clear understanding of laws and policies is maintained. To put this into perspective, it was only in 2017 that DFVOs were recognised nationally, and not by state-by-state jurisdiction. Prior to this time, DFVOs were state-by-state legislation with differing offences, definitions, policies, and procedures creating further complexities and understanding.

### **Service providers**

It was made very clear that the participating service providers were passionate about their jobs and were as equally passionate about finding better ways to assist in the prevention of contravening DFVO. Importantly, while the researcher and the participants denounce the actions and behaviours that constitute DFV offences, they all express the importance of finding effective solutions. The participants wanted more support to better assist their clients, and proactively supported the introduction of more intervention and prevention strategies with a strong cultural perspective.

### **Mental health and psychosocial support services**

Given that the data showed strong overlapping themes such as trauma, language, literacy barriers, and shame, which link strongly with colonisation, the need to implement culturally specific frameworks is apparent. Evidence shows that trauma and substance abuse are linked and research suggests that treatment for both needs to be addressed together (Costanzo et al., 2023). While it may not be effective in the short term, the adaptation and implementation of a culturally specific, trauma-based framework, designed and delivered by Indigenous mental health care professionals could lessen the gap that currently exists. This could lead to an interaction where

Indigenous Australians feel more confident in seeking assistance from service providers.

### **Identified gaps in research-based evidence and practice**

There are significant gaps in the relevant research evidence, especially in investigating psychosocial cultural factors. While the identified themes were unsurprising, what is surprising is the lack of research investigating how these factors impact Indigenous Australians and their ability or inability to comply with a DFVO. From an educational perspective, there is research that provides insight as to why early school drop-out occurs (Tomaszewski et al., 2022); however, there is a failure to link this to factors of why a DFVO may be contravened and how this lack of education causes feelings of inequality when various levels of communication are needed in adulthood. In addition, the examination of implications for lawmakers, support services and mental health practitioners, flows into considerations for non-Indigenous people working in these areas.

### **Strengths and limitations**

This was a preliminary study exploring the perspectives of service providers to those directly involved in DFV; however, its major strength is in making a novel contribution to knowledge in this under-researched area. Despite a substantial and growing body of research into DFV, no extant research could be located that specifically explores the unique perspectives of service providers to Indigenous Australians. However, some limitations must be noted, particularly the narrow focus on one specific region in Australia. Although the research provided rich and informative data from the sample, it cannot be presumed that other regions in Australia would have the same findings. Future research should further explore the applicability of these findings to other regions in Australia and Indigenous communities internationally, building on the insights gained from this study. Also, this study focussed specifically on men as offenders and the results cannot be assumed to apply to female offenders.

Clearly, more research is needed to explore this complex topic to improve mental health and psychosocial support services offered to Indigenous Australians. Data saturation was reached quickly with a small number of participants. However, in addition to being from one region of Australia, the participants were all noted to be passionate about

their jobs, which raises the possibility that this subset of service providers who volunteered for the study may hold different or stronger views than other service providers. Only further research can clarify whether this is the case, with more voices needing to be heard in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of communities' views. A useful next step in this field of research would be to gather the perspectives of the perpetrators, victims, and survivors of DFV. Such future research could extend understanding across regions and gender of offenders, helping to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors involved. Further data would guide service development in DFV services through identification of the targets and processes that most need assistance. Future research could seek ways to better provide face-to-face or online education modules to service providers. Some of the themes that emerged in this study, such as the role of language differences and lack of understanding in the process of being issued a DFVO, may be best confirmed by collecting data directly from offenders. Although ethically complex, this approach would allow the relevant individuals to tell their own stories and share their own insights. This could assist in the development of a culturally appropriate framework when issuing legal documents. The evidence suggests that DFV amongst the Indigenous Australian population is multi-faceted, complex and suggests that western-based frameworks do not fit well with cultural considerations. While ethically complex, and potentially involving extra hurdles, the best approach appears to be to allow relevant community members to share stories and their own insights when developing programs. This could assist in the development of finding a culturally appropriate framework that is more suited to Indigenous Australians. Future work could also examine men's motivations for using violence and the influence of masculinity, which were beyond the scope of the current study. Future work could also explore how these findings might help inform better ways for non-Indigenous service providers to work with Indigenous communities across regions or contexts, and how this might help shape policy and practice. This could include developing a deeper understanding of Indigenous concepts and communication practices such as kinship systems.

## Conclusion

This study explored factors that influence male Indigenous Australians to comply or contravene

DFVOs by seeking the perspectives and experiences of relevant service providers. Superordinate themes emerged identifying language and understanding, trauma, shame, repercussions, and trust as factors that increase the likelihood of contravening a DFVO. Appropriate language, specific support for respondents, and enhanced legal understanding were identified as factors that encouraged compliance with a DFVO. Overall, the data suggests multiple problems exist with current DFVO processes and enhanced culturally appropriate solutions are needed, including changes to processes and increased support services.

## Notes

1. The word "mob" is used by Indigenous Australians to identify the clan, family, or location that they come from.
2. Mob is the word used by Indigenous Australians to identify which clan, family or area that they belong to and come from.
3. To "dob" in or to "dob" on a person is informing or telling another person about actions or perceived wrongdoings of another.
4. A well-known phenomenon within Indigenous communities and culture where everybody knows everyone else's business.
5. A long-standing word Indigenous Australian use to describe Police Officers who traditionally were very cruel and harmful to Indigenous Australians.
6. To speak in a way that Indigenous Australians can understand.
7. Terminology used by Indigenous people both male or female to describe other Indigenous people both male and female. It is offensive to Indigenous Australians for non-Indigenous Australians to use this word when describing them.
8. These people' relates to Indigenous Australians being issued with a DFVO. It has been used neutrally. While the participant doesn't condone DFV, they recognise that offenders still need to be properly spoken to and in a way they understand.
9. A specialist community court consisting of elders and community members for sentencing Indigenous Australians in Queensland.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [JL], upon reasonable request.

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