Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' understandings, experiences and impacts of lateral violence within the workplace

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Lateral violence is the act of directing one's dissatisfaction inwards, towards another member of an oppressed group. Lateral violence is believed to be an ongoing and intergenerational consequence of colonisation and oppression for many Indigenous peoples around the world. Within Australian, oppression in the form of racism and negative stereotypes has consequently enabled lateral violence to thrive in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and in the workplace. The undermining of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' identity and authenticity is a powerful and destructive tool of lateral violence. Lateral violence within the workplace can be via disempowering structures, management, ignorance, and lack of understanding and acknowledgement. To further explore this issue, the current study used a survey methodology to examine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' understandings, experiences and impacts of lateral violence within the workplace, as well as participants' experiences of reporting lateral violence via a national online questionnaire. Of the 120 participants in the present study, 90% reported having experienced lateral violence within the workplace, while 86% reported having witnessed lateral violence. For nearly 40% of participants, experiencing or witnessing lateral violence was a weekly or daily occurrence. These experiences were reported to be associated with feelings of sadness, anxiety, and anger. Furthermore, 59% of participants who reported lateral violence to a supervisor stated that they were largely unsupported. The results indicated that within the sample population lateral violence is highly prevalent and associated with negative impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' work satisfaction, and social and emotional wellbeing.

Keywords: Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous, lateral violence, workplace, identity, authenticity

In recent years, the term 'lateral violence' has been reported by Indigenous peoples in various parts of the world. In Australia, the term has been used to explain infighting, intra community conflict and the broad expression of violence towards peers and other community members within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Gorringe et al., 2011). The dominant theory in the literature to explain lateral violence is the oppression theory (Rainford et al., 2015). It is defined as the way an oppressed and powerless group of people overtly and covertly direct their dissatisfaction inwards (towards themselves, their family and community), and toward those less powerful people (Embree & White, 2010). The term and concept of lateral violence has also been applied to the experiences of oppressed members within certain professions such as nursing over the past three decades (Roberts, 2015).

Attempts to undermine and challenge another member's authenticity and identity is reflected in a number of disruptive behaviours. The behaviours associated with lateral violence

are both covert and overt. Manifestations of covert lateral violence, are indirect, subtle, and widespread, including gossiping, putting people down, unfairly judging them, sabotage, bullying, breaking confidences and privacy, rumour mongering, withholding information (AHRC, 2011; Clark et al., 2016), and nepotism and board stacking (Cook, 2012). These behaviours can be instigated by individuals and or groups of people when targeting others (AHRC, 2011; Clark, et al., 2016). Covert forms of lateral violence within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are seen as more insidious, hidden, and perhaps safer (less detected by others) compared to overt forms of lateral violence (Clark et al., 2016). Conversely, overt behaviours are more obvious and typically involve physical aggression (Bigony et al., 2009), which can attract legal attention. The presence of overt behaviours in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is reflected in high statistics relating to intra community violence (ABS, 2016). Jack (1999) suggests that covert forms of social aggression are often used when the risks associated with overt forms are too high and if the intention of the person is to socially exclude whilst simultaneously gaining power. When such behaviour goes unchallenged it can allow the cycle of violence to continue (AHRC, 2011).

Other theories that explain the occurrence of disruptive and negative behaviours, including biological, developmental, intrapersonal and interpersonal models, have also been used to explain lateral violence (Vessey et al., 2011). These models have all contributed to the development of a comprehensive understanding of human behaviour; however, all have limitations (Vessey et al., 2011). For example, Farrell (2001) states that oppression theory of lateral violence does not cover the breadth of factors which create this destructive behaviour and allow it to thrive. Instead, Farrell states that lateral violence should be considered from three perspectives – micro (individual level), meso (organisational structure) and macro (level of power) – and that all three levels are interconnected. Despite the differing theories to explain lateral violence, the literature continually shows that when lateral violence occurs it has a negative impact on the individual, organisations, and the whole community (Bigony et al., 2009; Rainford et al., 2015).

Lateral violence is believed to have various triggers and behaviours. The triggers appear to revolve around two core concepts of *identity* and *authenticity* (AHRC, 2011; Bennett, 2014; Clark et al., 2016). The way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identify is complex and multifaceted, and unique to each person. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not homogenous, are diverse, and come from different families, communities, and language groups with varying histories and experiences. The Commonwealth Government definition of Aboriginality is via self-identification, descent, as well as community acceptance and identification (i.e. language group, familial and cultural affiliations). Authenticity is linked to identity and refers to the legitimacy of one's Aboriginality. Individual and community perceptions can differ and a person's identity and authenticity can also vary depending on location, history and community dynamics.

Historically, many government policies have been oppressive, and acted to categorise and remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from their families and communities and to assimilate them into Western society. Consequently, the colonial and historical impact has devastating outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 1997) which is still felt today. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been assimilated into Western society to varying degrees, with many sitting within two worlds, and/or on the margins of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and Western society (Roberts, 1983; Whyman et al., 2021a). The two world and marginality arena is a vulnerable space where people can be uncertain and confused about their own cultural identity (Roberts, 1983). They can also be undermined, questioned, and challenged about their authenticity and identity by others in the

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. This means that already oppressed peoples continually contribute to intercommunity conflict and lateral violence (Whyman et al., 2021b).

Preliminary research with a small sample of the Aboriginal population in South Australia has shown a relationship between lateral violence, wellbeing, and psychological distress (Clark et al., 2016). A previous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (Mick Gooda) closely linked acts of lateral violence with various types of trauma, including *situational, cumulative* and *inter-generational trauma* (AHRC, 2011). Thus, it is generally believed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience lateral violence as a reaction to various types of trauma, but especially from the effects of ongoing oppression, discrimination, and colonisation (Bennett, 2014). As a consequence of unresolved colonial trauma and the pervasiveness of lateral violence cycle, whereby the oppressed become the oppressors, has resulted.

Globally, various forms of interpersonal and group violence have been described by the World Health Organisation, such as child maltreatment, youth violence, intimate partner and sexual violence, and elder abuse. Central to these understandings of violence is the intentional use of force, threats and power to harm oneself or others, which can result in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2014). Lateral violence is one of many acts of violence in which power is also at its core. Hence, power based behavioural manifestations, such as bullying and gossiping, have also been described in many communities and is a frequently reported behaviour of lateral violence. National data from the Bullying and Harassment: Australian Workplace Barometer 2014–15, reveals that 9.4% of Australian workers reported they had been bullied at work in the previous six months. The results also showed that there was an increase in bullying from the previous reports of 7% of the Australian workforce (Safe Work Australia, 2019).

Within Indigenous communities the added layer of racism and oppression which are depowering mechanisms, as well as trauma, means that laterally violent behaviours can become intensified, chronic, and normalised. Silencing can be used to maintain the status quo in communities (Clark, 2017; Gorringe et al., 2011). Furthermore, oppressed and depowered individuals and communities can and often fight those closest to them in an attempt to gain any semblance of power. In Australia and other Indigenous environments, lateral violence has been described as pervasive. These include in the home (Langton, 2008), community (Gorringe et al., 2011; Whyman et al., 2021a), schools (Coffin et al., 2010), residential schools in Canada (Bombay, 2014), university (Bailey, 2020), against women (Jaber et al., 2022), and in the workplace (Clark & Augoustinos, 2015).

To date, only a few studies have specifically explored the experiences of lateral violence and or other types of ingroup (between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) behaviours. Some of these contexts include studies by Clark and Augoustinos (2015) who found that 47% of Aboriginal participants reported that the workplace was the most common place where they had heard of the term lateral violence. A previous report by the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) (2010) indicated that various industries, including Aboriginal community corporations, reported that the third most prevalent class of corporate failure was due to internal disputes and called for early identification of such cases and the facilitation of mediation and dispute resolution. Such a high dispute rate suggests that organisations maybe prone to lateral violence. The Aboriginal sector within the arts industry (Cook, 2012) also highlighted lateral violence and reported three key findings: (1) lateral violence is rife; (2) many feared addressing lateral violence due to retribution and thus loss of employment; and (3) the definition of lateral violence was unclear. Within the University sector the Indigenous branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) investigated the occurrence of lateral violence and racial discrimination within the workplace for Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander members across all universities in Australia (NTEU, 2011). The results showed that 60.6% of the participants (N =172) experienced what they identified as lateral violence in their workplace. In 8.6% of cases where universities attempted to address lateral violence, only 5.7% resulted in affirmative action addressing lateral violence. Racial discrimination and racist attitudes were directed at 71.5% of participants with a total of 15.3% reporting to the university. Only 18.6% of reports resulted in affirmative action addressing racial discrimination. These percentages illustrate the high prevalence of lateral violence and racism within the workplace and the inability of organisations to effectively address and minimise their occurrence. A more recent report by the NTEU (2018) indicated that 66% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were now subject to lateral violence, a 6% increase. Recommendations to address lateral violence were to better understand its presentation in the workplace and how it differs from bullying and harassment. Recommendations also included proactive approaches with communities, mental health practices and that lateral violence and racism are appropriately included in policies and procedures.

The Current Study

There remains a paucity of literature on lateral violence concerning Indigenous people in various environments. Even though there is some information pertaining to lateral violence in the workplace, it continues to be very minimal and limited in scope. The current research is exploratory and aims to investigate the nature, experiences, reporting of incidences and responses, enablers, and barriers to reporting, and the impact of lateral violence on individuals within the workplace and in various industries. The research findings will assist in raising awareness and could contribute significantly to changing systems and decreasing disruptive behaviours where lateral violence potentially exist and thrives.

We anticipate that:

- a significant percentage (>60%)[1] of the sample will report experiencing (as a victim) and witnessing lateral violence within the workplace.

- A smaller percentage (< 70%) of the sample will report experiencing (as a perpetrator) lateral violence within the workplace.

- There will be a significant impact of lateral violence within the workplace which will have a negative effect on the emotional state (i.e. sadness, angry, worry) and workplace performance (i.e. productivity, work satisfaction, motivation) of participants.

- Many participants who experience lateral violence in the workplace will report seeking support to deal and/ or cope with it.

- There will be a limited or insufficient policies and procedures to address lateral violence in the workplace

- Lateral violence is not isolated to the workplace but also occurs in tandem in the community.

Method

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[1] This percentage was chosen as it is similar to the percentage reported in the NTEU study, described above, which was deemed high.

Design

The current study utilised a survey methodology to capture both quantitative and qualitative data from a sample of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Quantitative data was captured by Likert and yes/no responses to questions designed to summarise broad trends in the experiences of workplace lateral violence. Short answer qualitative questions allowed for more nuanced descriptions of these experiences. All questions related to understandings and experiences of lateral violence occurring in the past 12 months.

Participants

A total of 162 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participated in an online self-report questionnaire via SurveyMonkey about lateral violence within the workplace. The survey was distributed via Facebook and through community networks. The inclusion criteria for this study specified that participants be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, over the age of 18 years and employed sometime within the last five years in Australia. As a result of these criteria a total of four participants were excluded as they did not identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. A further 38 participants were also excluded from this study due to incomplete questionnaires. The final sample consisted of 120 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (reported together as in the survey). This comprised of female $n = 97$, male $n = 22$ and gender binary/fluid $n = 1$. Most participants (95%) were currently working, and half (50%) the sample was aged between 35 and 54 years. Approximately 46% of the sample worked for a mainstream organisation, with a slightly higher (52.5%) number working in an Aboriginal related sector (Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation or Unit). The majority of these workers were situated in education (almost 36%), social work (20%) and health (almost 16%) industries. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics (n = 120) (%)

Demographic Variable	*n*	%
Gender		
Female	97	80.8
Male	22	18.3
Binary/fluid	1	0.8
Age		
18-24	13	10.8
25-34	23	19.2
35-44	34	28.3
45-54	26	21.7
55-64	22	18.3
65+	2	1.7
Organisation Type		

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO)	33	27.5
Mainstream Organisation	55	45.8
Aboriginal Unit	30	25
Other	2	1.7
Industry		
Education	43	35.8
Social Work	24	20
Health	19	15.8
Justice	10	8.3
HR/Admin	5	4.2
Trade	3	2.5
Do Not Wish to Disclose	3	2.5
Arts	1	.8
Other	12	10

Procedure

Ethical consideration

The present study was approved by the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee in 2017. No major risks were identified or reported during the study.

Participant recruitment

A set of questions (described below), called the Workplace Lateral Violence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Questionnaire (WLVATSIPQ), was uploaded on SurveyMonkey with an invitation to be part of the study. It was widely distributed through social media and email. These included a provision of a Facebook page which was shared to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university student groups, activist groups, region specific groups, support groups; and via email to various networks familiar to the authors (i.e. colleagues, social media groups and community networks) across Australia. A further note was provided asking participants to distribute the invitation through their own networks with the aim of increasing the sample size. As the cohort required for this study was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific, the survey was purposely disseminated to locations with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement, although still accessible to the general public.

Before embarking on the study, participants were briefed about the research on a participant information page with a guarantee that their identity would remain anonymous, and they had the right to withdraw at any stage. Further, a list of national counselling services was supplied for them to contact if they became distressed by any information in the questionnaire with an invitation to contact the researchers if they had any concerns. Participants were then

invited to tick the consent box and fill out the questionnaire within a time frame of six weeks (8th May 2017 to 18th June 2017). The participants took an average of 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Materials

The demographic questions included gender, age, employment status, workplace type and industry. After the demographic information, a definition of lateral violence from the literature was provided followed by questions checking whether participants understood the definition. Once participants signified their understanding, they proceeded to a set of questions enquiring about their experiences, feelings, impacts and reporting of lateral violence.

These questions were designed in the absence of existing standardised measures or enquiries about lateral violence within the workplace for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. Questions were drawn and adapted from the Lateral Violence in Nursing Survey (Stanley et al., 2007), Critical Care Nurse Survey on Lateral Hostility (Alspach, 2008), Horizontal Violence Survey (Dumont et al., 2011), Horizontal Violence Scale (Longo & Newman, 2014) and research recommendations on preventing lateral violence within Aboriginal contexts (Clark & Augoustinos, 2015; Clark et al., 2016; Clark, 2017; Gorringe et al., 2011).The purpose of this method was to collect descriptive and statistical information about lateral violence rather than to measure or validate the questionnaire.

The WLVATSIPQ consisted of 54 questions in total and were arranged into six meaningful and functional areas by the researchers and were similar to the categories used in many of the above-mentioned scales. The questions underwent multiple reviews by the authors to ensure each area was sufficiently covered, consistent with unbiased language. To gather relevant information the WLVATSIPQ used various scales consisting of a 5-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree); a frequency rating scale (from never to daily); dichotomous questions requiring a yes or no response; multiple response answers; and dialogue boxes.

The first category was about participant understanding of lateral violence in which there were 6 items. This question related to a definition of lateral violence provided at the beginning of the questionnaire. Participants were asked to provide yes or no answers about whether they understood the definition, if this aligned with their previous understanding of lateral violence, and if they had heard about lateral violence prior to starting the questionnaire. A link to a lateral violence article (AHRC, 2011) was supplied for participants' perusal if they needed an improved understanding of lateral violence before continuing with the survey. The last questions in this section asked if they had seen the presence of lateral violence in their workplace (yes/no), and if they believed it was an issue in their workplace (5 point Likert scale).

The next set of questions focused on participant experiences of lateral violence as a victim and impacts which consisted of 18 items in this section. Participants were asked to rate (5 point Likert scale) their experiences of lateral violence (1 question), the emotional impact (7 questions) and work impact (4 questions), how often they had experienced lateral violence (1 question - frequency rating scale), and what type of lateral violence they experienced (1 question - multiple choice). This section also asked if their experiences of lateral violence was confined to their workplace (1 question – 5 point Likert scale), if not, was it a continuation of that experienced in the workplace (1 question – yes/no), and to describe the experience (2 questions – open response).

There were 5 items that related to the witnessing of lateral violence. For example, participants were asked (5 point Likert scale) if they had witnessed lateral violence in their

workplace (1 question), if this affected their emotional well-being and perception of their workplace (2 questions), and to rate how often they witnessed lateral violence (1 question - frequency scale). They were then asked whether they reported lateral violence (1 question – yes/no).

In terms of using lateral violence (as a perpetrator) a total of 11 items were contained in this section. Participants were asked (5 point Likert scale) if they had used lateral violence in their workplace (1 question), the emotional impact of this (4 questions – 5 point Likert scale and 1 question – open response), and how often they had used lateral violence (1 question - frequency scale). Participants were asked if they were aware that they were using lateral violence (1 question – yes/no) and, if so, what motivated them to do so (1 question – open response). Participants where asked if they had used lateral violence outside the workplace (1 question – 5 point Likert scale) and, if so, how (1 question – open response).

It was also important to understand the reporting of lateral violence and, in this section, there were 8 items. Participants were asked if they had reported lateral violence to a manager/supervisor (1 question – yes/no) and, if not, their rationale for not reporting (1 question - multiple response). Participants were asked how they felt when reporting lateral violence (5 questions - 5 point Likert scale). Furthermore, participants were probed about whether their workplace had policies, procedures and practices about lateral violence (1 question - yes/no).

Analysis

The quantitative data was descriptively analysed reporting on frequencies, means and percentages in order to provide information on prevalence. Content analysis was undertaken for the qualitative, open-ended questions, patterns were analysed from the responses to each question and relevant themes/categories were developed. Frequencies were calculated to determine scope and severity of lateral violence within the workplace. Both types of data were analysed using Excel.

Results

Prevalence of Workplace Lateral Violence

As shown in Table 2, a high percentage of participants reported experiencing (90%) and witnessing (89.2%) lateral violence, with a smaller percentage reporting using or perpetrating lateral violence (62.5%).

Table 2

Frequency of participants who Experienced, Witnessed and Used lateral violence in the workplace in the past 12 months (%) (n=120)

Variable	*n*	*%*
Experienced lateral violence		**90**
Once	4	3.3
A few times	45	37.5
Monthly	20	16.7
Weekly	31	25.8
Daily	8	6.7
Witnessed lateral violence		**89.2**
Once	0	0
A few times	42	35
Monthly	18	15
Weekly	36	30
Daily	11	9.2
Used lateral violence		**62.5**
Once	30	25
A few times	34	28.3
Monthly	5	4.2
Weekly	6	5
Daily	0	0

A proportion of 37.5% of participants reported experiencing lateral violence outside of their workplace. Of these participants, approximately 70% reported it was a continuation of the lateral violence they had experienced in their workplace, while approximately 30% were unsure of its origins.

A content analysis of participants' open-ended responses to frequency related questions was used to determine where lateral violence frequently occurred when outside of the workplace. The common places reported were within families, community events, Aboriginal organisations, on social media, and in the general community.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of participants experiencing different behavioural lateral violence types. Gossiping (70%) followed by sarcasm (61.7%) and providing false information (60.8%) were the most prevalent behavioural forms of lateral violence within the workplace.

Figure 1

Percentage of total participants who had experienced different Behavioural types of lateral violence experienced within the workplace in the past 12 months (n =120)
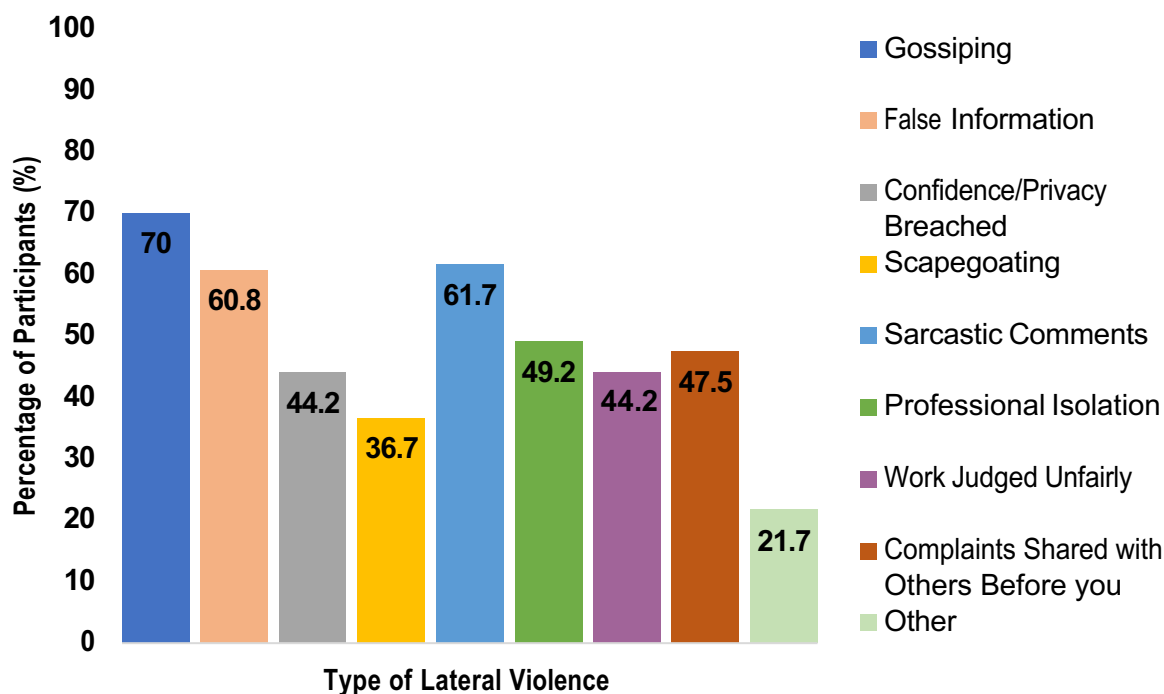

Emotional Impact of Lateral Violence

Of the 108 participants who experienced lateral violence in their workplace, the majority (82.5%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the violence had a negative impact on their overall emotional wellbeing, with feelings of sadness (85%), anger (82.5%) and anxiety (74.2%) being the most frequently reported. The frequencies of specific emotional outcomes are presented in Figure 2.

The results also revealed that of the participants who witnessed lateral violence, 75.8% agreed or strongly agreed that it affected their emotional wellbeing, while 81.7% felt it affected their perception of their workplace.

Figure 2

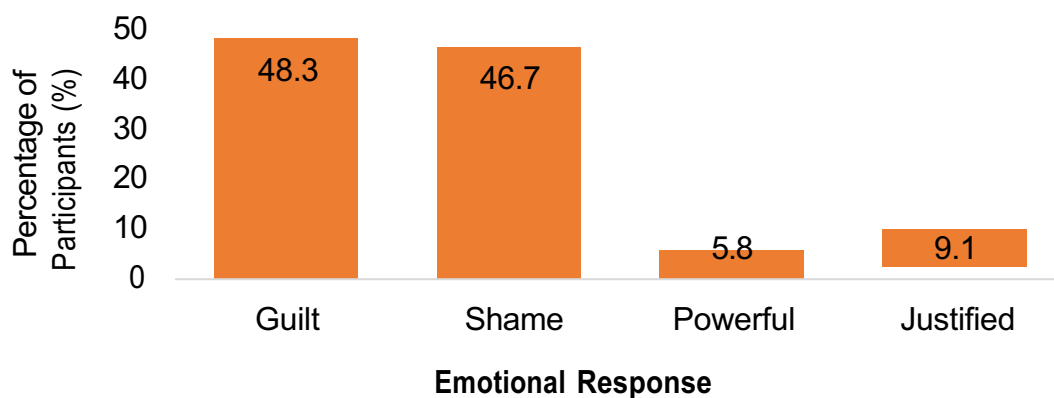*Emotional response elicited from experiencing lateral violence in the workplace (n=120)*
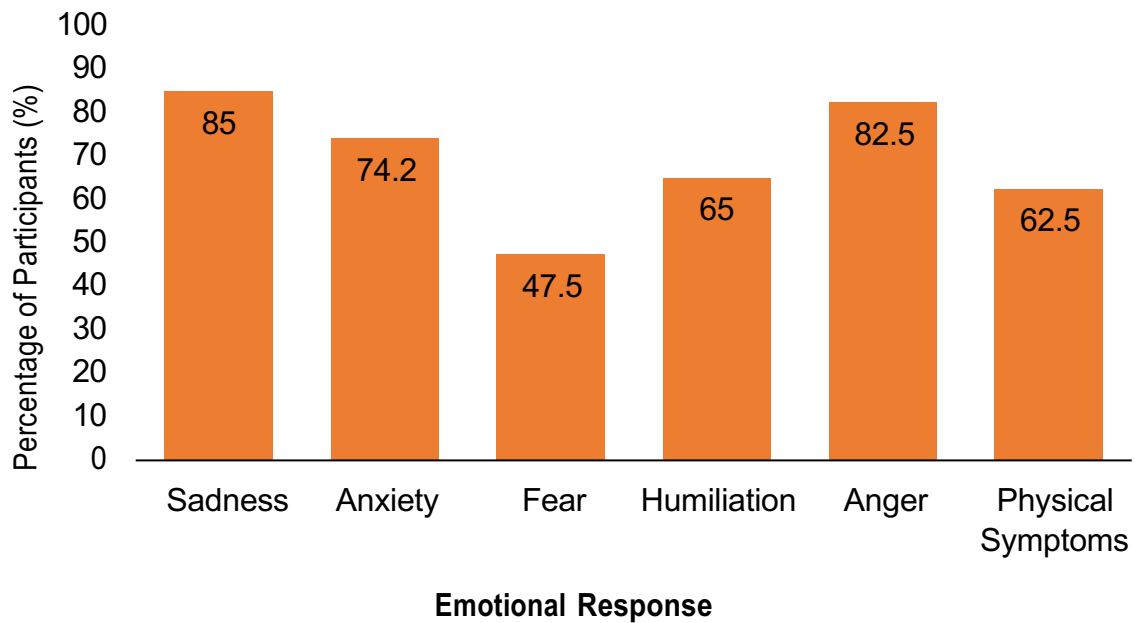
Note: Categories agree and strongly agree have been collapsed in this figure

As shown in Figure 3, nearly half of the participants who reported using (perpetrated) lateral violence in their workplace felt guilt or shame in relation to their behaviours. A total of 15% of participants who reported using lateral violence where aware their behaviour was lateral violence whilst perpetrating it.

Content analysis of qualitative data was undertaken to reveal participant motivations for perpetrating lateral violence. The most common motivations reported were frustration, anger/annoyance, retribution/ payback, and to fit in. These themes suggest both reactive and planned processes to perpetrating lateral violence. This seems to suggest that oppression and powerless people will direct their dissatisfaction towards people of similar power.

Figure 3

Emotional Responses Elicited from Using Lateral Violence in the Workplace (n=120)

Note. Categories agree and strongly agree scores have been collapsed in this figure.

In addition, a total of 30% of participants reported using lateral violence outside their workplace.

Work Impact of Lateral Violence

As per Figure 4, the majority of participants who experienced lateral violence in their workplace either agreed or strongly agreed that it had a negative impact on their work capacity, in particular, a reduction in their motivation to work (almost 72%). Productivity and looking for new employment were also notably high.

Figure 4
Work response elicited from experiencing lateral violence in the workplace (n=120)
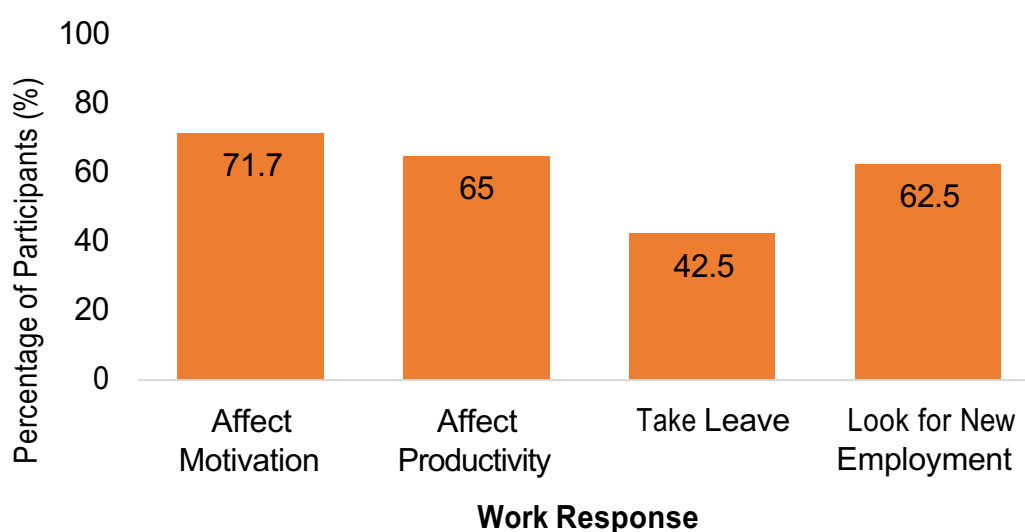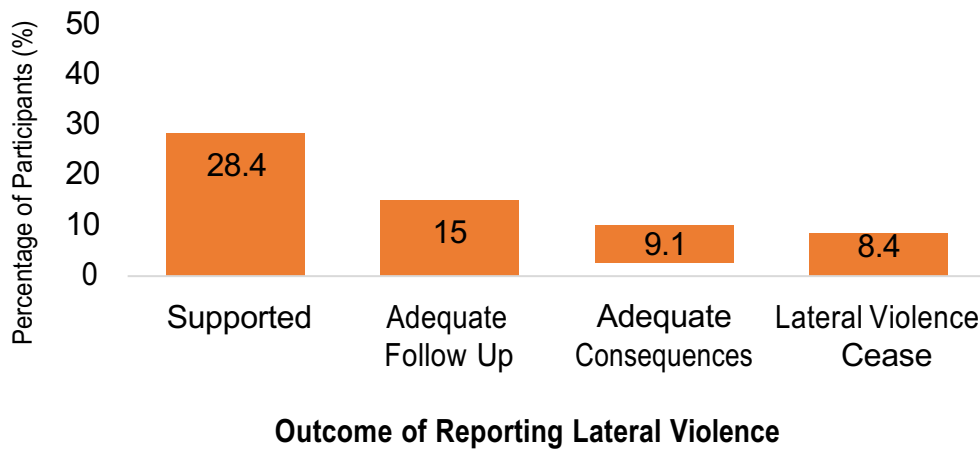

Note: Categories agree and strongly agree scores have been collapsed in this figure

Reporting Lateral Violence

Overall, 59.2% of participants who experienced lateral violence informed a manager or supervisor. A proportion of 40.8% of participants who witnessed violence reported it to a manager or supervisor. As shown in Figure 5, only 28.4% of those who reported violence felt adequately supported, while restorative action was taken in a small percentage of cases.

Figure 5

Reported outcomes of participant reports of lateral violence in the workplace (n= 120)

**Outcome of Reporting Lateral Violence**

Note: Participants agree and strongly agree scores have been collapsed in this figure.

There were various reasons for participants not reporting lateral violence, with many believing that nothing would be done about it (40.8%), while 35% reported that the perpetrator was in a management position. The frequencies are presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Reasons why participants did not report lateral violence in their workplace (n= 120)

Reason for Not Reporting Lateral Violence
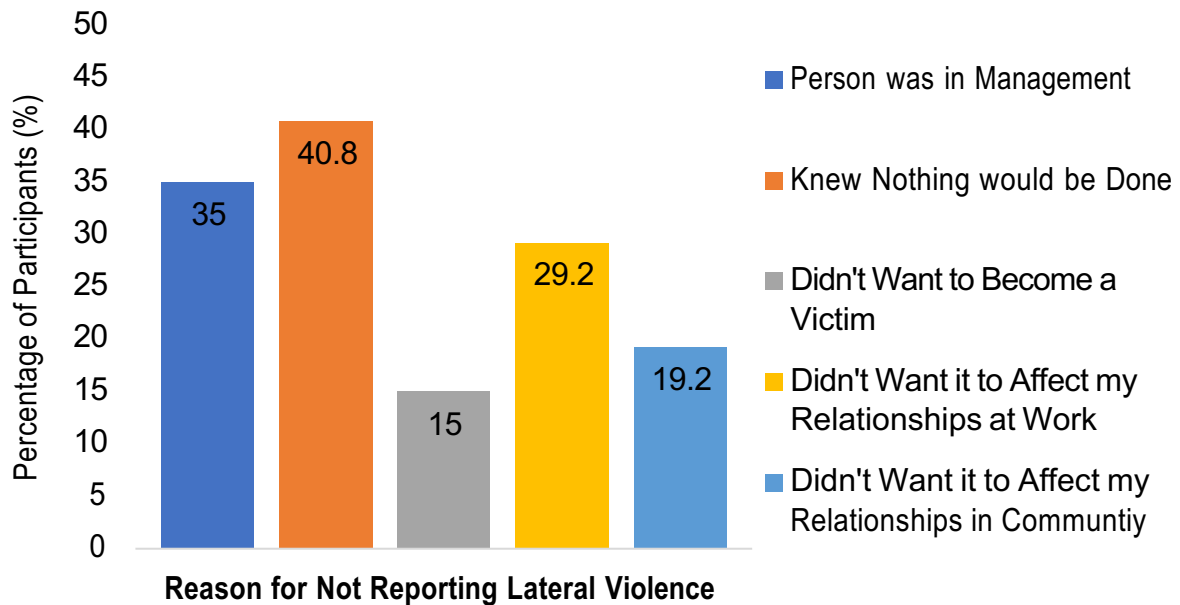
Discussion

It is believed that lateral violence is pervasive in Indigenous communities globally which appears due to oppressive environments. As an exploratory study, the findings support a prevalence within the workplace as it identified that a high percentage of participants had experienced and or witnessed lateral violence. These findings supported our first anticipated

aim (over 60% of participants). Furthermore, these incidences of lateral violence were found to occur across a range of organisations and industries and on a regular basis. The most common behaviours of lateral violence experienced by participants in the study included gossiping, sharing false information, and sarcastic comments which is consistent with research findings about covert behaviours in the general nursing profession (Alspach, 2008; Bambi et al., 2014) and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the University sector in Australia (NTEU, 2011; 2018). This also supports that covert forms of lateral violence are insidious and more common than overt forms (Clark et al., 2016), particularly in workplace environments that have policies and procedures that supposedly govern behaviours and professionalism.

This study also offers an opportunity to explore the ways lateral violence affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the workplace, including emotions and workplace performance. The most frequent emotional effects experienced by participants were sadness, anger, and anxiety, all indicating a negative response as a result of lateral violence. The results from this study correspond with previous literature in the nursing profession, which has consistently shown the profound negative impact of lateral violence on emotional health and work-life satisfaction, such as reduced self-esteem, psychological distress, and negative physical symptoms (Bigony et al., 2009; McKenna et al., 2003; Rainford et al., 2015; Vessey et al., 2011).

The high levels of lateral violence currently being experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the effects are concerning given the already high levels of trauma and vulnerability within communities. Such incidences will have ramifications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and may lead to impaired psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing issues and increase intra community conflicts. This can contribute to a fracturing of one's cultural identity which can lead to a questioning of one's authenticity which may affect their place and acceptance within their community, all of which can have long-term negative impacts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (AHRC, 2011; Bennett, 2014; Clark et al., 2016). Although the results of the study are descriptive there is potential for important future research opportunities. These could include investigating the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' mental health and identity is adversely impacted by their experiences of lateral violence and whether the frequency of lateral violence impacts the severity of emotional and work performance outcomes.

In terms of the negative impact lateral violence had on work satisfaction, an overwhelming percentage of participants reported decreased satisfaction. Not only does lateral violence impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' desire to attend work but also affects psycho-social benefits of work. The study further reiterated that participants who were experiencing lateral violence felt reduced motivation and productivity at work as well as feelings of anger. The results imply that experiences of lateral violence may have a serious effect on retention and quality of work and job satisfaction, which may lead to long-term impacts on employment opportunities and financial stability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may also be negatively impacted by these workplace experiences. The social and emotional wellbeing model developed by Gee et al. (2014), is shaped by the strengths of one's connections to their body, mind, emotions, family and kin, community, culture, country, spirituality and ancestry. Strengthening and nurturing such connections at an individual, collective (community) or systems level, may improve cultural and emotional safety in the workplace (Clark et al., 2022).

It is clear that lateral violence has overall negative impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the workplace and flowing into their personal lives. Despite this, it

appears a small proportion of those who experienced (victimised) or witnessed lateral violence and reported negative effects also used (perpetrated) lateral violence against others in their workplace. There are a host of reasons why using lateral violence may have been under reported in this study. In addition to reported feelings associated with guilt and shame, other reasons may include, fear of being caught out, honesty, believing it was not actual lateral violence, and simply forgetting the incident. Further exploration of why, how, who and when people use lateral violence could inform strategies to support organisations to address lateral violence and improve outcomes for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Understanding the implications of lateral violence within the workplace provides insight into employment challenges experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and potentially enhances their employment trajectories and satisfaction. This study suggests that career pathways and sustainability of employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff could be under threat in workplaces where lateral violence is pervasive. Potential ramifications include a high turnover and difficulty attracting, recruiting, and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and organisations. This may contribute to and perpetuate low proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in such services and organisations and when they do, as indicated in the results, they are looking for new employment and thus retention is an issue. Our findings potentially add to the study by Clark (2017) which showed that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will avoid working within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations for fear of lateral violence and negativity.

The presence of lateral violence within organisations occurs at both structural and individual levels. A proportion of 40% of the sample stated they did not report lateral violence because they felt nothing would be done to address it within the workplace and or the perpetrator worked in management. This suggests a potential level of acceptance, inaction, or paralysis or lack of trust in the organisation when lateral violence is witnessed and experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers. The results could also indicate that normalisation of lateral violence being prevalent in the workplace might coincide with research indicting normalisation in the community.

Similarly, acceptance or stagnation in the nursing profession enables ongoing oppression and lateral violence between nurses. In addition, 35% of participants stated the perpetrator was in management and 15% were concerned about potential ramifications and therefore were reluctant to report the incidences of lateral violence. According to Roberts (2015), organisational and managerial attitudes towards lateral violence impacts on workplace retention and after three decades of research in the nursing profession, laterally violent behaviours continue to pervade with very few interventions to change the behaviours or power dynamics that enable such violence to flourish (Roberts, 2015). Within this preliminary study it seems clear that organisations that are supposed to support and respond to a collective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, are not adequately deterring or addressing lateral violence. Until this occurs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will continue to experience negative outcomes as a result. Some organisations and research projects are considering culturally safe practices and are inclusive of recognising and addressing lateral violence as part of their approach (Clark et al., 2022).

Another anticipated aim of the research is that participants who experience lateral violence will seek support to cope and deal with the impacts. The study found a high percentage of participants reported experiencing and witnessing lateral violence and reporting to a manager or supervisor, highlighting the desire of many participants to address lateral violence. It was unclear from this study what deterred the remaining participants from reporting lateral violence.

Of those who reported lateral violence (59% of the overall sample) approximately one in four did not feel supported by their manager. Many factors could be influencing this finding, including lack of knowledge and training about lateral violence, awareness of issues at different organisational levels, poor managerial education and skills development and individual deficits and attitudes (i.e. lack of empathy for those who reported lateral violence). A better understanding of these influencing factors would be pertinent for organisations to adequately address the lack of support, perhaps by drawing on the positive or helpful aspects of those who followed up reports of lateral violence. Even though the number of participants who reported that lateral violence did not cease after they reported to management was small, it was nonetheless very concerning. This suggested some level of incompetence within organisational structure, policies, practices, and managerial skills. This was supported by the low level of participants who believed their workplace had policies and procedures to address lateral violence, as well as participants who were unsure if their organisation did.

The results of the current study provide evidence that lateral violence is a serious issue in the workplace for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and which requires significant attention, particularly within environments where there are significant numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The negative impacts of lateral violence are overwhelming with serious consequences for workplace productivity, satisfaction, staff recruitment, retention, and morale to name a few. Unfortunately, symptoms of oppression are lack of power and inaction which can then enable further oppression. Therefore, when organisations do not address these issues, the likelihood of lateral violence re-occurring is greater, and without appropriate intervention only limited change will be achievable. This assertion is consistent with previous Safe Work Australia data that shows bullying is a serious concern in the general community and that there has even been a steady increase over time (Safe Work Australia, 2019).

Thus far, in Australia, the terminology along with an increased understanding of lateral violence has proliferated in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts with increased information, articles, educational and awareness workshops, and initiatives for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and workplace (Clark & Glover, 2019). Addressing workplace lateral violence can be achieved with a combination of individual and systemic approaches. On an individual level, each staff member is responsible for improving their professional relationship with others and acknowledging the impact of their actions within the workplace culture (Woelfle & McCaffrey, 2007). Organisations need to focus on enabling supportive and positive workplace practices and culture, whilst reviewing policies and procedures which allow lateral violence to bourgeon. Awareness, education and understanding about lateral violence (individually and organisationally) has been shown to be effective in changing behaviours, attitudes, and various work practices, especially in the nursing profession (Dahlby & Herrick, 2014). A number of Aboriginal specific initiatives addressing lateral violence are available, including: Aboriginal People & Lateral Violence which is also referred to as the Black poppy syndrome (Ryan, 2023); Lateral Healing in Victoria which specialises in awareness and train-the-trainer workshops that counteract lateral violence (Koorreen Enterprises, 2017); Lateral Love which provides information about lateral violence and lateral love (Lateral Love, 2017); Spirit Healing which provides lateral violence workshops for Aboriginal workplaces which is based in New South Wales (Brown, 2022); and Preventing Lateral Violence which is based in Adelaide and offers a one-day workshop that increases awareness and empowerment to various Aboriginal people (Clark et al., 2014). These workshops have been evaluated and shown to contribute to improvements in understanding, attitudes, and behaviours for preventing lateral violence in various contexts (Clark et al. 2017a; 2017b; Clark & Glover, 2019). Additionally, there are collective or repository Indigenous

websites that can steer one toward appropriate resources and or training (Well Mob, 2023). Emphasis must be placed on education, awareness and understanding to address the negative impacts of lateral violence and combat its normalisation.

Limitations

Limitations to the study include a potential self-selection bias in the sample. It could be that only those who had experienced or witnessed lateral violence and were adversely affected by these incidences responded to the questionnaire compared to those with limited or no experience of lateral violence or with minimal emotional impact. Additionally, the study may have raised the hopes of some participants wanting greater action towards change. Such limitations are consistent with previous studies looking into lateral violence within nursing populations.

Given that there were no culturally relevant questionnaires focusing on lateral violence, questions from existing measures within the nursing population as well as information from previous research and literature were drawn upon to inform the current set of questions used in this study. Due to the development of a new Workplace Lateral Violence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Questionnaire (WLVATSIPQ) and the exploratory nature of this research, it was outside the scope of this research to test the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. A validated measure would have ensured more robust findings. There were some specific limitations with the utilisation of the questionnaire, data collection, and analysis. The differing measuring scales used (i.e. yes/no responses and the five point Likert scale) made it difficult to combine some analyses. There were also some inconsistencies within the Likert scale asking "how often" the event occurred which only became apparent after collecting data. Examples relate to: question 23 which did not provide the option to select 'once' meaning participants may have selected another option even though it was incorrect; question 27 combined 'once' and 'never' potentially confusing participants; and question 17 did not provide an option to choose 'not applicable' if the participant had not experienced lateral violence which could have skewed the responses. Furthermore, there were not enough dialogue boxes for participants to add desired comments. A trial of the questionnaire would have also been beneficial, but given the time limitations of this project, this could not be achieved. Opportunities were also missed to conduct further analyses with the material, such as calculating for inter-reliability. These errors are minor within the context of an exploratory process and minimally affected the analysis and interpretation of results. There is confidence by the authors that the overall results prevail. Nevertheless, some level of caution will need to be applied when considering these results.

Strengths

Granted the paucity of research on lateral violence within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, this exploratory study has provided strong insight into the pervasiveness of lateral violence and demonstrates a crucial need for further research. The results revealed how lateral violence impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples social and emotional wellbeing and workplace behaviours. Its negative outcomes, particularly on workplace behaviours, highlights the impact lateral violence may be having on organisations' service delivery, task outputs and capacity, as well as the financial costs of high staff turnover, increased sick leave taken and reduced productivity. The necessity for organisations to take responsible actions to address lateral violence is clear. Considering the sensitive nature of the research topic, the relatively high response rate indicated the interest in the topic and corroborated the need for interventions addressing lateral violence as well as

effective cultural safety initiatives within the workplace. The majority of participants were willing to engage and completed the survey in its entirety and the results covered a range of areas of concern which is being disseminated to the public through this article.

Further Research

There continues to be limited psychological literature and resources concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences and the impacts of lateral violence. Therefore, future research investigating a range of areas is warranted. For example, the Workplace Lateral Violence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People Questionnaire could be improved, sampled, and validated for use within the workplace and serve as a baseline measure for improvements within the workplace. Psychological support in relation to lateral violence, both within the workplace and community, would vastly improve understanding, as well as addressing and supporting the development of effective interventions and resources for preventing and addressing lateral violence. These could include the activation of awareness, education, and empowerment processes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to prevent, address, and cope with lateral violence when it pervades various environments at individual and systemic levels. Additional research exploring specific organisational responses, policies and procedures for lateral violence could also be of benefit to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and within Aboriginal organisations and services. Therefore, constructing a comprehensive understanding about the interrelationship amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, organisational structure and the systems that support both, with the aim to build a culturally safe and united workplace, would be extremely constructive and beneficial to all. At the very least, this approach could create a safe environment to attract, recruit and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who in turn could provide a similar (safe and united) service back to the community. Feasibility research could help inform a hotline or external service, such as counselling or Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services about lateral violence to aid systems and individuals to address it.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the extensive exposure to, and prevalence of, lateral violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the workplace and in a range of industries and organisations. Lateral violence negatively impacts individuals in various ways including their emotional wellbeing and workplace satisfaction which can contribute to high staff turnover. Lateral violence can be addressed within the workplace with a combination of individual and systemic approaches especially where organisations understand the significance of addressing and preventing lateral violence as well as supporting staff who are subjected to it. There needs to be an emphasis on education and awareness to combat normalisation and the negative emotions and implications of lateral violence as well as a review of policies and procedures and support mechanisms. Education and awareness approaches are important and powerful when provided by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander personal and services.

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