

Embedding lived–living experience in NGO research: A practice-based model for inclusive AOD service and policy innovation

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Background: Alcohol and other drug (AOD) services are increasingly expected to generate practice-based evidence; however, research and evaluation are often conducted without meaningful integration of lived–living experience (LLE). This can limit the relevance, accessibility, and impact of findings within real-world service settings. This work describes a practice-based model for integrating LLE into research, evaluation, and service innovation within a large Australian AOD NGO.

Intervention: A participatory research model was embedded within routine service delivery, incorporating peer researchers, co-production workshops, and iterative feedback processes. LLE perspectives informed study design, outcome measurement, and interpretation of findings. This approach is illustrated through two applications: (1) co-production of the Australian Short UPPS-P (AUS-SUPPS), and (2) the “Dialled In” study examining mobile phone use within AOD treatment to inform policy and practice within residential settings.

Implementation: In the AUS-SUPPS project, LLE input identified problems with language clarity and contextual relevance within an impulsivity measure. In the Dialled In study, LLE-informed design explored mobile phone use, a contested area in residential services where policies vary between restriction and access. Across both projects, LLE involvement identified issues less visible in researcher-led approaches and directly informed measurement refinement and policy development.

Conclusion and Next Steps: This work demonstrates that NGOs can function as embedded research environments where LLE operates as a methodological principle rather than an adjunct to research. Embedding LLE within service-based research may strengthen the contextual relevance and practical utility of findings across AOD settings. Future work will further expand lived experience leadership through co-interpretation, ongoing participation in design, and evaluation of impacts on research quality and service outcomes.

Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations communities: Embedding LLE within NGO research systems may support more contextually grounded and culturally responsive service and policy development, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

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