

## A culturally safe research process in mental health

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images or names of people who have passed away.

This fact sheet is an executive summary of the article, [Co-designing research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers of mental health services, mental health workers, Elders and Cultural Healers](#) (Milroy et al., 2022).

In this resource, we describe how culturally safe research can be conducted to learn about the state of cultural safety in mental health services, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, mental health service users, Elders, mental health workers, and Cultural Healers.

### Why is culturally safe research important?

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures have thrived for over 60,000 years. Social and cultural structures ensured every person was supported, and wellbeing thrived (Dudgeon, Milroy, & Walker, 2014).
- Colonisation, genocide and discriminatory policies have created a context of ongoing trauma and high rates of mental health concerns in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Milroy, Dudgeon, & Walker, 2014).
- Colonisation also occurred in mental health research where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges of health and wellbeing were excluded (Dudgeon, Rickwood, Garvey, & Gridley, 2014; Australian Psychological Society, 2016), and where research continues to occur 'on' rather than 'with' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Furthermore, Indigenous peoples globally have been prevented from maintaining sovereignty over data collected about them. It is therefore important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to '...autonomously decide what, how, and why Indigenous data are collected, accessed and used. It ensures that data on or about Indigenous peoples reflects our priorities, values, cultures, worldviews and diversity' (Maia nanyi Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective, 2024, p. 5).
- To ensure that any research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is ethical rather than harmful, it is important that the process of conducting the research is culturally safe.
- Cultural safety requires an understanding of the historical, social and political determinants of social and emotional wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the dynamics of power relations in and between cultural groups (e.g. between non-Indigenous Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples).



- Culturally safe research empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by working in line with Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, being and doing. For example, it is about understanding that the process of conducting research is as important as the outcome (Lindeman & Togni, 2022).
- Overall, for the results of any research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be meaningful, the process of conducting the research needs to be culturally safe.

## What is culturally safe research?

The following table outlines some of the principles of culturally safe research which we have considered in our investigation, and provides examples of what this looks like in practice. For more details on culturally safe research more broadly, please see this fact sheet on [working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in research](#).

Principle	Example
<b>Empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and knowledges</b>	Culturally safe research: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- meets the self-identified needs of the community</li> <li>- involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance</li> <li>- integrates Indigenous knowledges and worldviews into the research process, including decisions about methodology, data analysis and data sovereignty.</li> </ul>
<b>Builds and maintains authentic community partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Community consultation is ongoing.</li> <li>- Decision-making processes actively involve communities to ensure benefits are distributed fairly.</li> <li>- Relationship building is a research outcome.</li> <li>- Research processes allow time and opportunities for building trust and relationships.</li> </ul>
<b>Requires researchers to be self-reflective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All researchers (especially non-Indigenous researchers) need to reflect on cultural identity and relative privilege, and have a critical awareness of how their internal biases are shaped by dominant ways of knowing.</li> <li>- Reflection is critical, iterative, active and continual.</li> </ul>
<b>Conducts research ethically</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ethics approval received.</li> <li>- National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines followed.</li> </ul>

In the following video (1 minute, 27 seconds), Prof. Helen Milroy describes a culturally informed way of understanding what a research outcome can be.



 WATCH THE VIDEO TO LEARN MORE

## An example of culturally safe research

### Project aims

Situated within the wider Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing program, this project aims to improve the cultural safety of mainstream mental health services, to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers, carers, families and communities. We reflect here on the process of the research itself, to understand how to embed cultural safety in this practice.

This project follows a decolonising, Aboriginal Participatory Action Research methodology (Dudgeon, Bray, Darlaston-Jones, & Walker, 2020). It was designed using a phased, iterative approach.

Phase 1 involved consulting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members through yarning sessions, to co-design a qualitative interview to be used in the second phase of the project. For example, we wanted to understand whether Aboriginal consumers, carers and community members would be open to talking about their experiences of engaging with mainstream mental health services, and how to best to yarn about these issues. Through the qualitative interview (Phase 2), we hope to learn about the current state of cultural safety in mainstream mental health services, and how it can be improved.

### Phase 1: Yarning sessions

Six yarning sessions were conducted across one metro and two rural areas. We consulted with Aboriginal community members, consumers of mental health services, carers, mental health workers, Elders and Cultural Healers. During the sessions, participants discussed their interpretations of cultural safety and mental health and advised on how to design the qualitative interview for the next phase of the project.

In the following video (54 seconds), Prof. Helen Milroy describes some strategies that could improve cultural safety in practice.



 [WATCH THE VIDEO TO LEARN MORE](#)

### Process as the outcome

At every stage of the project, we followed the principles of culturally safe research. In the following table, we provide some examples and associated positive outcomes.

Stage of process	How cultural safety was ensured	Positive outcome
<b>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and ethics approval</b>	The project was led and governed by senior Aboriginal researchers and clinicians and was designed in accordance with NHMRC guidelines. Ethics approval was received.	Decolonised the research relationship and empowered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and knowledges.
<b>Training for non-Indigenous staff</b>	Non-Indigenous researchers attended two workshops on cultural awareness <sup>1</sup> and participated in a cultural exchange program with Noongar Elders, meeting over six, four-hour sessions.	Non-Indigenous researchers understood the importance of being self-reflective, that this is an ongoing process, and that building relationships based in trust is the foundation for conducting research in a culturally safe way.
<b>Co-design</b>	Aboriginal research team members were consulted as the first step in co-design. We then consulted with local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and community members. The yarning sessions themselves were part of the co-design process.	Using a focus group, yarning method to co-design the interview helped build positive and authentic partnerships with community. It also ensured Phase 2 will be conducted in a culturally safe way.
<b>Community engagement</b>	We consulted with Aboriginal-led partner organisations to learn about their priorities. We developed a research proposal to reflect these priorities, which we presented to community partners and sub-committees to begin and continue the process of relationship building.	We built and maintained community partnerships through authentic engagement, empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and knowledges.

1. Researchers attended two workshops about the 'dance of life', a framework created by Professor Helen Milroy. [Download a PDF summary of The Dance of Life](#)

Stage of process	How cultural safety was ensured	Positive outcome
<b>Focus groups (yarning sessions)</b>	<p>Consumers, carers, Elders and Healers were consulted separately to ensure we captured a diversity of experiences. We followed cultural protocols by holding focus groups on Country where possible, and in familiar settings. We used a yarning methodology and ensured flexibility by adapting questions to each group.</p> <p>Facilitators were senior Aboriginal members of the research team with existing relationships and appropriate experience. We provided breaks and shared food to build rapport.</p>	The design of focus groups and use of yarning methodology encouraged relationship building and was culturally appropriate.
<b>Feedback provision</b>	We verbally presented a summary of results to participants to ensure that their views were captured accurately. If we couldn't discuss results with participants directly, we provided a summary for their feedback. We updated our results to incorporate feedback.	Participants gave us positive feedback, both for our interpretation of findings and their experience of participating. Our results accurately reflected the views and voices of participants. Participants felt heard and trusted the research process.

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**Everyone is welcome to be here because you've been born of this country now and you are part of Mother Earth. So, let's take our places up together, stand together united and go forward combining both cultural knowledge bases, Western and Indigenous, and move together for the benefit of all of our children. Every child born in Australia now, every child who comes to live here now, should benefit from everything Australia has to offer, and that includes us.'**

PROF. HELEN MILROY

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**Thank you for being an ally and supporting the next generation of strong, deadly, and self-determined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.**

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