



Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Health Research

Valuing the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men

Summary of recommendations and outcomes

Workshop and research meeting

30 – 31 March 2017, Melbourne

Introduction

The Lowitja Institute convened a workshop and research meeting to share knowledge on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men and the supporting role they play, and aspire to play, in their relationships, families and communities.

The objective of the meetings was to bring people together in a collaborative way to gain specific knowledge towards the design of research questions and innovative activities, to increase understanding of what enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men to be the best they can be. The majority of participants were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, with all participants contributing community, research, service delivery and/or policy experience in the area of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander men's health and wellbeing.

The following paper outlines the main themes of the discussion, and priorities for the Institute to consider in the development of a strength-based research agenda.

Sharing journeys

Participants shared their experiences of what led them to work in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's health and wellbeing. Positive and negative experiences were spoken of as being part of a learning journey, from which you learn from mistakes and aspire to make change.

Participants understand the difficulty of finding your way in the world, and continue to learn from each other to help others and support the journey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men. Personal experiences of loss, trying to fit in or escape circumstances, being shown a different way of thinking, becoming parents, or being involved in research, continues to drive participants to making change.

All of this is part of my journey, to help other young men. Having kids has made it personal. I have invested in culture, learning language and dances, and returning home for ceremonies. Family Wellbeing has helped me understand, and let go of things I can't control. I make sure that every mistake has something to learn, to pass on.

I come to this work through evaluation and research, and as a daughter, niece and mother. My cousin took his life, which drove me forward to do and learn everything I can, and be part of the design. I am not here to speak for men, but to offer my skills.

Many spoke of the importance of positive role models in their lives, people who looked out for them or gave them something to aspire to. Participants spoke of the important connections with others who have been a part of their journey and how, in the same way, they now 'try to get others to come along'.

Participants saw the role of research as something that could add value and be a vehicle for change, if carried out in appropriate ways. Research about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be led by them and driven by community concerns and agendas. Community are involved in research and are already building evidence and finding solutions in their own way.

Enabling young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men to be the best they can be

Summary of themes

Talking with and listening to young men

Young men are best placed to talk about their lives and must be given the opportunity to tell their story and be heard. We must value the strengths and lived experience young men already have and affirm how they see themselves in a positive way.

Strong identities

We want our young men to be strong in their own identity, to be resilient and respect themselves. We want our young men to be part of a celebration of the diverse identities they bring to our communities.

Connection to culture

Culture, and the values and principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, connect young men to the past, present and future. The ability to take core Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values and use them in a western world would enable young men to 'walk in two worlds', and help them understand how to make those two worlds as one.

Roles and place of young men

We need to recognise and value the diversity of young men's experiences of masculinity. We need to ask young men what becoming a man means to them, and how they understand the contributing roles they play in their families and communities.

Strong families and communities

We need to strengthen and support families to support young men and positively shape their life across the lifecycle. We need to work with parents early and gain further understanding of what works to enable young men across, and at different points of, their lives.

Self-determining lives of agency

We need to give young men access to knowledge and opportunities, and the confidence to make mistakes. Giving young men the opportunity to be heard, to define for themselves who they and make plans for who they want to be, will give them agency over who they become.

Role modelling a good life

Role models walk with young men and help them make decisions side by side, telling each other stories and listening to each other. Men and women help young men take their place, by role modelling a life rich in culture and purpose, and contributing to their family and community.

Creating a safe space

Cultural safety and ethical practice is about knowing what safety looks like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and young men. Creating a safe space for young men to have conversations requires us to commit to: being inclusive and accepting, empowering young people to be heard, building trusting and respectful relationships, being accountable, and responsive to issues raised.

Enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men

In sharing their journeys and knowledge, themes emerged of what participants see as working to enable young men. Participants underlined that research and activities about young men must be informed and guided by young men. As a starting point, however, participants put forward that enabling young men requires a focus on the following themes.

Talking with and listening to young men

Participants spoke of the need to better understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men and engage them in exploring their diverse identities, strengths and values. This involves gaining feedback from young men on research proposals and design; and ensuring there are appropriate vehicles through which they can express themselves.

Young men are enabled when they are given the opportunity to tell their story and be heard. Opening up a safe space for young men to yarn requires a shift in power and the building of trust; it requires listening not solutioning. There is a perception that when young people are talking, adults are not listening. A space needs to be created for intergenerational dialogue; for young people to talk to adults. Young men are best placed to define what 'best' or 'success' means to them. We must ask young men what they want and need, and with encouragement enable them to be the solution to their own problems.

To better understand who young men are and where they are at we need to ask them to yarn about:

- What do young men want and who do they want to be?
- How do they experience life? What challenges do they face?
- What are their strengths, talents and skills?

- What are their values?
- What is it to be a man, and what is it to be an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander man?
- Diverse masculinities, sexualities and genders.

While it is important to identify the challenges young men face, it is also important to recognise the experience young men already have in facing those challenges. Many young men have existing resilience and coping skills, such as nurturing and parenting skills. It is important not to be overtaken by the adverse environments of some young people, but to recognise what they have despite this. We need to challenge the assumption that all young men are at risk, that they exist in a deficit, even when they are trying to get out of difficult environments. We must value the strengths of young men and affirm how they see themselves in a positive way.

Strong identities

Identity is the foundation of enabling and empowering young men and a celebration of the diverse identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men is important. We want our young men to be strong in their own identity; to be resilient and respect themselves. It was suggested that we better understand and identify the way young men feel valued, understood and strengthened in both a historical and contemporary way.

Positive identity is central to wellbeing, including the individual, sexual, or cultural elements of a person's identity. There was concern that many young men experience a loss of identity and the connections needed to build strong identities, which leaves an 'empty space' that can be filled with harmful elements.

The personal experience of identity for one participant has been a movement from 'who I am' to 'how I am'.

It is a focus on how I am with people and country, how I treat them and how I look after those things – a choice to focus on the positive and robust way of 'how I am'. In this way, I can care less about the 'who I am' as the 'who' can shift depending on who I am with, or where I am, but the 'how I am' remains the same.

Enabling young men requires changing the current narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. It is about educating mainstream Australia, 'the 97%', and even re-educating ourselves, 'the 3%', away from deficit narrative. It is about telling our young men that whatever mainstream Australia thinks of you, is not who you are. Above all, participants highlighted the importance of celebrating the success of our young men and all they have achieved.

Connection to culture

Culture, and the values and principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, connect young men to the past, present and future. Cultural identity can build individual and community capacity and is a resource for facing challenges. Rites of passage, and other ceremonies, can support the strong identity of young men in finding their totem, connecting them to their country, and holding them as they grow into men.

Having a strong connection to the past is about intergenerational relationships and spiritual connections, such as understanding that our ancestors are guiding us. The passing down of cultural law and positive core values of culture, such as 'looking after others as you would

your own', should not change even if expressed differently. The ability to take core Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values and use them in a western world would enable young men to 'walk in two worlds', and help them understand how to make those two worlds as one.

Being spiritually connected to culture, understanding kinship and community connections, and exploring what it means to be an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander man brings you closer to knowing who you are and where you are from. There is tension, however, between 'old' culture and 'new' culture; and between cultural loss and cultural renewal, which needs to be addressed. Culture does not stand still.

'Our culture evolves. We can acknowledge tradition but be flexible and adapt to the new world. We are not losing traditional ways but adapting'. Storytelling continues in new ways, such as the expression of traditional stories through hip hop music.

Roles and place of young men

Much discussion focused on defining what it is to be a man, what becoming a man meant, and the diversity of young men's experiences of masculinity. Many of our men are struggling with this question and we need to unpack this and what it means for our dynamic culture and LGBTIQ brothers. Deconstructing masculinity and roles for men is vital to valuing differences, such as exploring the types of masculinities that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men to play an important and productive role in society.

There are multiple positive roles that can be taken up by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. A mainstream focus on sport can hide the diversity of roles young men play, such as a brother, student, academic, father, or peer. This raised the questions of how young men understand the role they play, and if roles and gender were imposed on young men? How do we support the intergenerational transfer of positive men's roles, in a way that allows agency?

Roles are deeply interconnected to relationships, and how we see our place in community. Supporting young men to strengthen the caring role they play in families, such as a sibling, father, or uncle, will strengthen relationships. The important role of fatherhood was discussed, and the need for good fathering to hold and grow future fathers. Sharing the positive attributes and values of nurturing in contemporary society with young men, will show the positive influence those roles have on others, such as with their partner or children¹.

Strong families and communities

Strong families and communities enable diversity and love. Going home to an environment at home, where families are well themselves, enables young men to be the best they can be. Thus, it is also important to strengthen and support families to support young men and positively shape their life across the lifecourse. Functional and supportive families and communities requires working with parents early. The first 1000 days of a child's life was noted as critical in developing a person's health and wellbeing.

¹ The Quop Maaman: Aboriginal Fathering project aims to enable men to share positive attributes of good fathering; see <http://thefatheringproject.org/research/aboriginal-program/>

Successful approaches that enable stronger men and those who support them were discussed, including:

- The Family Wellbeing program²
- Mibbinbah: Be the best you can be³ and Red Dust Healing⁴
- A lifecourse approach, that endeavours to understand what enables young men across, and at different points of, their lives.

Self-determining lives of agency

Participants called for young men to be given agency and to allow them freedom and choices. 'Give them a choice. If they make a mistake don't bring them down. Be positive'. Operate in strength based conversations, practice positive reinforcement and let young men know that they have skills and talents. Identify with each individual what their talents are and build on that.

When young men are asked what they want or need, many answer 'I don't know'. Young people need to be shown what a successful life is to be able to aspire to one. Enable young men with access to opportunities to develop knowledge and skills, learn about leadership, relationships and nurturing children, and understand cultural values. Giving young men the opportunity to be heard, to define for themselves who they are and make plans for who they want to be, will give them agency over who they become.

Role modelling a good life

There was much discussion about what a role model is and what constituted good role modelling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men, to enable young men to know and take up their place in community. Role modelling is living a life rich in culture and purpose, contributing to community and family, being a good father, uncle or partner – so young men can visualise what it is to be a positive influence in their family. There is a role for men in this space, and a role for others to help young men take their place, such as peers, women and our old people.

Many participants spoke of the responsibility of older people to guide young men in ways of being a good person and a good leader, while acknowledging that old and young men can listen and learn from each other.

Not a top down approach. Help young people make decisions side by side, telling each other stories and listening to each other. It is about us being right beside each other, the young people and the whole community, supporting each other along the way.

Being a role model is about teaching not lecturing, helping young men learn and make mistakes. A lot of this depends on us, to teach them step by step, enable them to be confident to make mistakes.

²Family Wellbeing is an empowerment program developed by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which aims to empower people to take greater control over the conditions influencing their lives, see <http://www.lowitja.org.au/family-wellbeing-program-empowerment-research>

³ Mibbinbah undertakes a range of activities to build the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island male groups and their communities, see <https://www.mibbinbah.org/>

⁴ Red Dust Healing is developed from an Indigenous perspective for Indigenous Men and their families to heal, see <https://www.thereddust.com/>

We must give young men the opportunity to walk with us; if they can walk beside us they can learn with us and not look backwards. To do that they need to trust you and you trust them. Role models walk with young men and nurture them, and know the balance.

Different people teach you different things, including expectations and future aspirations. Young people do not know about roles they can play or life choices, such as going to university, unless they are shown them. The roles young men can see themselves playing come from other people's role modelling of them. Other important things that should be role modelled to young men is how to support each other and address lateral violence, how to solve problems, and being shown alternative choices. Stories of personal journeys offer alternative life possibilities, such as describing the point where a person went from a deficit space to one of success.

The journeys and stories told by the group, that is, the telling of stories, was defined as a form of role modelling for young men, which could be extended as a research endeavour. Stories are particularly important for young people who cannot ask questions, yet they still watch older men all the time.

The research is all your stories, as role models for young men – you are part of a research movement, we are not stuck we move. These stories are about the movement in your life.

The sharing of knowledge was also described as a strong element or tool of role modelling. 'Role models are here in this room. We all have a tool box, full of knowledge and training, to give others'. The exchange of knowledge, and other elements in the toolbox such as education and language, were also described as the making of a 'role model system'.

Creating a safe space

Cultural safety and ethical practice is about knowing what safety looks like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and young men. To enable young men to participate in research and have safe conversations, requires us to commit to:

- Inclusive language and actions, including the safety and inclusion of LGBTIQ brothers
- Understanding and accepting of our diversity
- Empowering young people to stand up and be heard
- Building trusting and respectful relationships
- Being accountable and responsive
- Following trauma informed principles of care.

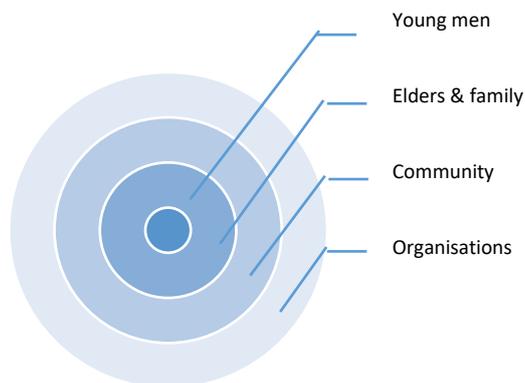
Enabling research and collaboration

The development of models and approaches that are inclusive, enabling and holistic are needed to strengthen individuals, families, communities and systems in the support of young men. Working together to do positive research must include a focus on the following:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led research

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must lead and have ownership of the research to enable their young men. Involvement and genuine engagement with the research can be achieved through:

- Co-design of the research with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men – engage and listen to young men and develop genuine partnerships with them
- Community-based research – community are the rightful owners of their stories, and in the best position to develop local solutions
- Inclusive involvement across generations, disciplines, gender and men
- A conceptual framework that places young men at the centre, surrounded by Elders and family, community, and organisations.



Strengthening families and communities

Strengthening families and communities to support young men is key to enabling young men to be the best they can be. We must support and learn from integrated models that understand the connections between the individual, family, and community, and appreciate how services and policy impact those relationships. Models such as the Family Wellbeing or Mibbinbah program, and the First 1000 Days Australia⁵, focus on strengthening the ability of individuals to respond to challenges and take up opportunities that will empower them to nurture strong relationships and families.

Systems change

Individual efforts and learnings that strengthen young men are important, as is the integration of those findings across the wider service delivery and policy landscape. Better access to information and uptake of learnings, such as protective factors, across sectors and policy is needed to create change across the wider systems that shape people’s everyday lives. Building the capacity of the workforce to develop and sustain services and programs, for example; and developing policy strategies that take action on the social determinants of health to address health inequities.

Sustainable and appropriate methodology

Research should leave a legacy and influence positive change in the community, such as developing tools, skills or information as part of community involvement in the project. Potential research approaches put forward, included:

⁵ First 1000 Days Australia aims to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to address their children’s needs from pre-conception to two years of age, thereby laying the best foundation for their future health and wellbeing, see <http://www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au/>

- Establishment of an advisory group, including young men
- Rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry
- Participatory action research (PAR) with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as young men taking leadership roles in the research and the training of young men to develop skills e.g. peer to peer interviewing
- Valuing stories and the power of storytelling – building capacity of young men to tell their story and lead the conversation in their own way e.g. through yarning circles, voice or video recording, photo voice, dancing or painting
- Identifying what is working, such as models of care and practice that promote strength and resilience, cultural practice and learning for young men; and identify gaps
- Adapting models and approaches to local community needs and values
- Collaborative research partnerships led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including young men and stakeholders across community, research and policy areas e.g. Koorie Youth Council, men and women’s community groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream peak bodies, advocacy groups such as Black Rainbow, government, empowerment programs such as Family Wellbeing and Mibbinbah, researchers, and NGOs.
- Evaluation of research and reflection on:
 - What worked well? What didn’t work? How can we make it better?
 - Is it relevant? Are we meeting needs? Is it bringing benefit?
 - How can we increase the impact of our findings, e.g. through knowledge translation?

Working together

Establishment of a national network will share knowledge, connect communities and researchers, and connect men. However, ‘men cannot do it alone, we need the strength of women too. It is not just an individual approach, but a collective’. The group discussed values and principles that offer guidance on how we can work together and conduct research in a collaborative and positive way to reach our goal of enabling young men.

Respect and empathy – Respectful of our diversity, and the different experiences and knowledges it brings

Honour – Honour culture and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices. Honour the voices and strengths of our young men, and those that support them

Openness and inclusiveness – Open to listening and learning new things, being inclusive of all, and embracing vulnerability

Cultural lens – Working with and for community, guided by cultural values and best practice

Courage – To engage, participate, to challenge and be challenged in an engaging way

Honesty and integrity – A commitment to walking the talk, being responsible and accountable and remembering our obligations to our people

Safe and positive space – Create a welcoming space that enables the building of trust and supportive relationships. Encourage positivity and operate with positive, strength-based discourse.

Enabling research and collaboration

Summary of doing positive research

Working together to do positive research, to support and value the role of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, must include a focus on the following:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led research

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must lead and have ownership of the research to enable their young men, through: co designing the research with young men and communities; being inclusive of different generations, genders and disciplines; and using a framework that centres on young men.

Strengthening families and communities

Strengthening families and communities to support young men is key to enabling young men to be the best they can be. We must support and learn from models that focus on strengthening the ability of individuals to respond to challenges and take up opportunities, which will empower them to nurture strong relationships and families.

Systems change

Integrating research and evidence of what works across services, sectors and policy, is needed to create change across the wider systems that shape people's everyday lives. Systems change is required to enable the uptake of evidence across health, justice, education and training sectors, for example, to achieve integrated and culturally informed support for young men.

Sustainable and appropriate methodology

Research that aims to enable young men must engage and build the skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout the process. Doing positive research involves: valuing stories and enabling young men to tell their story, collaborative research partnerships, the establishment of an Advisory Group, rigorous methodology and evaluation, and continual reflection on how our research can better benefit young men, and the families and communities that support them.

Working together

We need to better connect the strength of our men and women, communities and researchers to share knowledge. We must work as a collective and commit to our values and principles of: respect and empathy, honour, openness and inclusiveness, applying a cultural lens, courage to engage, honesty and integrity, and creating a safe and positive space.