

Cultural determinants, cultural safety, and cultural governance

Policy Brief

March 2023

Introduction

Policy making does not occur in the absence of culture but is 'very much informed and shaped by the culture of predominantly non-Indigenous policy makers'.¹ To balance out this bias and the knock-on structural inequalities within the policy process, policy decisionmakers need to understand how culture relates to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Decisionmakers also need to adopt a cultural determinants approach and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and voices throughout the process,² if they genuinely intend to create successful policies. Further to this, policy bureaucracy should be reconstructed so that it 'is aware of its own limitations and upholds the importance (including the protective nature) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures'.³

Our culture comes from our lore, a very deep and sacred place. The cultural determinants of our health provide many of the remedies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equity and these determinants should be respected, understood and embraced by all.

June Oscar, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice
Commissioner 2020⁴

Protection in culture


Culture encompasses people's understanding of and being in the world. It shapes the relationships that people hold between self, kin, community, Country, and

¹ Lowitja Institute 2020, *Culture is Key: towards cultural determinants-driven health policy – Final Report*, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

² Lowitja Institute 2020, *Culture is Key*.

³ Lowitja Institute 2020, *Culture is Key*.

⁴ Lowitja Institute 2020, *We nurture our culture for our future, and our culture nurtures us*, prepared for the Close the Gap Steering Committee, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 3.



spirituality. It also strengthens identity, community bonds and communal and individual resilience, particularly through its expression and continuity.

Culture is more than practices (dance, art, song) ... it is a framework of ideas, truths, norms, values. It is about 'what matters'. It is how people make sense of life and the world.⁵

Craig Ritchie, CEO AIATIS 2020

Culture plays a significantly protective role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' individual, and community lives. The diverse cultures that have existed across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations for millennia have kept Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples strong, healthy, and resilient. This protection has been particularly important in the face of ongoing racism and inequity of the past 200 years.

The trauma of cultural disruption and suppression has had a profound effect on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health and wellbeing.

Close the Gap report 2020 ⁱ

The negative impacts of colonialism and two centuries of racist policies have affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' identity and sense of belonging in Australia as well as our ability to be our authentic selves.⁶ The impacts have resulted in generational damage to our peoples' health as well as systemic barriers that prevent us from safely accessing the Australian healthcare system and high-quality care.⁷

Being able to know, express and nurture one's culture is now recognised as a key tool in addressing these negative cultural impacts and improving the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health and wellbeing. It is also considered a way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to heal from the impacts of trauma, grief, loss, and discrimination.⁸

As acknowledged by all parties to the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 'strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are fundamental to improved life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'.⁹ The


⁵ Craig Ritchie, AIATIS, Cultural Determinants Roundtable, 2020

⁶ Lowitja Institute 2020, *Close the Gap - We nurture our culture for our future, and our culture nurtures us*, produced for the Close the Gap Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equality. Available at: [www.lowitja.org.au/content/Document/CtG2020_FINAL4_WEB%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.lowitja.org.au/content/Document/CtG2020_FINAL4_WEB%20(1).pdf)

⁷ Lowitja Institute 2020, *Close the Gap*.

⁸ Lowitja Institute 2020, *Culture is Key*, p. 18.

⁹ National Agreement on Closing the Gap.



National Agreement commits to 16 targets, several of which relate to cultural wellbeing and access to culturally relevant communications (refer to Table 1 below).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures have prevailed and endured despite too many experiencing entrenched disadvantage, political exclusion, intergenerational trauma, and ongoing institutional racism.

National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020¹⁰

Cultural determinants of health

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' approach to health and wellbeing is holistic and is understood through a whole-of-life cycle lens. We recognise that our health and wellbeing are impacted and shaped by a range of interrelated factors, including cultural, social, political, historical, spiritual, and ecological factors. Ideally, these are able to work in harmonised interrelation in all areas of our peoples' lives.

The cultural determinants that are now recognised to impact and shape Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health include:

- connection to Country
- family, kinship, and community
- Indigenous beliefs and knowledge
- cultural expression and continuity
- Indigenous language
- self-determination and leadership.¹¹


The balanced relationship between these determinants has been severely disrupted by the impacts of colonisation and attempted erasure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures. People cannot achieve optimal wellbeing if the cultural determinants are disconnected. At the same time, the Australian health system is built on a Western model of healthcare, and it is in crisis¹². This has caused Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to strive to strengthen and reclaim culture wherever we can, including through self-determination efforts.

These efforts range from owning our knowledge, continuing our cultures, and maintaining connections to Country and kin, to establishing Aboriginal and Torres

¹⁰ The Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations & all Australian Governments, 2020, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/>

¹¹ Salmon, M., Doery, K., Dance, P., Chapman, J., Gilbert, R., Williams, R. & Lovett, R. 2019, *Defining the Indefinable: Descriptors of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Cultures and Their Links to Health and Wellbeing*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Team, Research School of Population Health, The Australian National University, Canberra, p.v

¹² Donella Mills, Roundtable 2022 report - Donella Mills, Chairs of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)



Strait Islander community-controlled health organisations, hosting community events and running culturally safe services. On-the-ground community-led actions and programs that seek to strengthen cultural determinants of health are exemplified in such programs as the multi-agency Birthing on Country program.¹³

We know that investment in efforts that support cultural determinants leads to significant positive outcomes for our peoples. Research undertaken on cultural health and wellbeing programs and services demonstrate that they achieve better results than mainstream programs and services for our peoples.^{14,15} In particular, The *Mayi Kuwayu* study is building a strong evidence base to show the important links between culture and our peoples' health and wellbeing.¹⁶

As recognised in Lowitja Institute's *Culture is Key*, 'policy cognisant of Indigenous culture/s has tended to be underfunded, fragmented and approached as a largely aesthetic or historical endeavour – rather than as a foundation of social, economic and ecological connection'¹⁷ While cultural determinants are increasingly being articulated and recognised in health and wellbeing policy frameworks, implementation is reliant on whole-of-government buy in and action.¹⁸

Good policy invests in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led programs and supports community priorities, which include cultural and community activities. This includes embedding the cultural determinant domains and associated principles into new policies and processes, updating ways of working, and in the generation of any new knowledge and capabilities.

Policy making that seeks to influence the cultural determinants of health and wellbeing, however, cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach. It needs to be place-based and community-led. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are diverse and have diverse cultural practices, and therefore localised approaches are fundamental to policymaking.

¹³ Kildea S, Gao Y, Hickey S, Nelson C, Kruske S, Carson A, Currie J, Reynolds M, Wilson K, Watego K, Costello J, & Roe Y 2021, 'Effect of a Birthing on Country service redesign on maternal and neonatal health outcomes for First Nations Australians: a prospective, non-randomised, interventional trial', *The Lancet*, vol. 9, no. 5, pp. e651–59.


¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013, *Healthy for Life - Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services: Report Card*, Cat. no. IHW 97, Canberra, AIHW.

¹⁵ Malseed C, Nelson A, Ware R, Lacey I & Lander K 2014, 'Deadly Choices TM community health events: a health promotion initiative for urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people', *Australian Journal of Primary Health*, vol. 20, pp. 379-383.

¹⁶ *Mayi Kuwayu National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing*. Available at: <https://mkstudy.com.au>

¹⁷ Lowitja Institute, 2020, *Culture is Key*, p. 18

¹⁸ *Ibid.*



To better understand the relationship between cultural determinants and policy, the Lowitja Institute published the 2021 discussion paper, *Culture is Key: Towards cultural determinants-driven health policy*.¹⁹

Cultural safety and cultural determinants

Cultural safety goes hand in hand with the cultural determinants of health and wellbeing. Cultural safety enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to see themselves and their values reflected in the systems, programs, and organisations in which they seek healthcare.

“When cultural safety is present, the cultural determinants of health have far greater potential to flourish.”

Janine Mohamed, CEO, Lowitja Institute

Critically, cultural safety is relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's experiences in individual health encounters, as well as to the design and implementation of health policies, structures and programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

At the level of individual healthcare, the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency's (AHPRA) *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Cultural Safety Strategy 2020–2025* define cultural safety as:


“Cultural safety is determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities. Culturally safe practise is the ongoing critical reflection of health practitioner knowledge, skills, attitudes, practising behaviours and power differentials in delivering safe, accessible and responsive healthcare free of racism.”²⁰

Cultural safety is fundamental to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enter mainstream health systems when necessary, and that they experience quality, equitable and safe healthcare, where they feel respected and can trust the health professionals and staff involved. This contributes significantly to closing the gap.

Cultural safety is a complex practice that includes skills such as critical self-reflection, an understanding of the historical and contemporary construction of power, and the nature and impacts of different forms racism that operate at individual, societal and institutional levels so they are not replicated in the health system.

¹⁹ Lowitja Institute, *Culture is Key*, 2020.

²⁰ AHPRA, *The National Scheme's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Cultural Safety Strategy 2020-2025*, AHPRA, Melbourne, 2020, p. 9.



“[A] powerful characteristic of cultural safety is that it asks people to step into their responsibility and be agents for change in systems – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people cannot do this alone.”

Janine Mohamed, CEO, Lowitja Institute

Cultural safety in the design and implementation of health policies, structures and programs requires a shift in the location of decision-making power and applying a lens informed by Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

“Significant to implementing cultural determinant driven policy is the recognition that policy making does not occur in the absence of culture: it is very much informed and shaped by the culture of predominantly non-Indigenous policy makers. A cultural determinants approach must seek to balance this structural inequality by empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and voices throughout the policy process.”²¹

Cultural safety is integral to ensuring and improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social, emotional and physical safety, and of health and social and emotional wellbeing. Its application in individual health care interactions, and the design and operations of programs and systems in health and other sectors is vital for achieving equitable health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Governance, cultural determinants, and cultural safety

The cultural determinants and cultural safety are enabled through culturally grounded governance structures and practices. Increasingly, this is being described as *Indigenous nation [re]building*, which has a focus on the political determinants of health. It is the subject of a recent Lowitja Institute discussion paper, which defines nation building as:

“...a process Indigenous political collectives can follow to enhance their own foundational capacity for self-rule and self-governance.”²²

Health policy making occurs through government structures that retain their colonising foundations so both the starting point and process is not grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, even when efforts are made to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The cultural determinants need to drive policymaking with cultural safety as a joint focus where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities lead the

²¹ Lowitja Institute, *Culture is Key*, 2020, op cit, p. 1.

²² D. Rigney, S. Bignall, A. Vivian & S. Hemming, *Indigenous Nation Building and the Political Determinants of Health and Wellbeing*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, 2022, p. 8.

process through appropriate governance structures that command the respect and support of Australian governments.

“Our leadership is a powerful tool for healing our communities and supporting our individual and collective health and wellbeing. Our leadership looks different to dominant cultural conceptions because it comes from our own unique world view and ways of knowing, being, and doing. Our leadership is consensus-building, and community-focused; it is not about the individual and it is not an exercise in coercive power.”²³

This shift can be facilitated by a health bureaucracy that is aware of their limitations in relation to Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, and is willing to change the spaces in which policy is made, ceding control to locations and processes external of government.

Given the long history of the destruction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural governance structures and processes, a significant opportunity for government redress and trust-building is to support, fund and learn from nation [re]building. A great example is the work of the Institute of Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH). They identified a risk in receiving government funding that Aboriginal community-controlled organisations could inadvertently become service providers or subcontractors to government and lose their community-controlled emphasis. To prevent this occurring they produced ‘The ways’ document that embedded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander terms of reference in all their work so systems and processes were culturally grounded.

Embedding cultural safety in governance

Embedding cultural safety in governances means ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership that represents the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Leadership must hold genuine decision-making power and be backed by solid resourcing, as well as be guided by respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ and communities’ knowledges and priorities.

Cultural safety is important for meaningful engagement, discussion, and identification of recommended actions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It is important to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and leaders have always been nation builders. Prior to colonisation, Indigenous peoples had complex sovereign systems of law and lore, which governed relationships within and amongst First Nations. These systems and structures were systematically and intentionally dismantled by the colonial settler-state. Consequently,

²³ J. Mohamed & J. Szwarcbord, ‘Harnessing the power of nation building to strengthen Indigenous health and wellbeing’, *Croakey*, 31 August 2022.

contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders are best thought of as nation rebuilders.”²⁴

Inclusion of the cultural determinants in health policy

Key principles

Several recent national health plans and strategies provide the key principles that should be applied in the policy context:

- significance of Indigenous cultural identity to health and wellbeing
- social determinants-driven
- rights-based
- strengths-based approaches
- Indigenous leadership
- recognises historical and intergenerational trauma
- recognises the historical and ongoing presence of racism.

These principles can be reinforced through policy mechanisms and approaches as well as strategies that privilege strengths-based community development and empowerment approaches, participatory research and evaluation, and shared decision-making.

National policy context

Cultural determinants were highlighted in the following key national policy documents:

- National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2021 Priority Reforms:
- National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017–2023
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031

²⁴ Ibid.

LINKS TO THE 2020 NATIONAL AGREEMENT ON CLOSING THE GAP

Cultural Determinants

The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* speaks to critical elements of the cultural determinants.

Self-determination is the focus of a priority reform:

- **Priority Reform 2** – Building the community-controlled sector
 - **Target:** Increase the amount of government funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and services going through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations.

Cultures and languages are one of the socioeconomic targets:

- **Outcome 16:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing
 - **Target 16:** By 2031, there is a sustained increase in the number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.

Cultural Safety

The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* recognises the importance of cultural safety in Priority Reform 3:

- **Priority Reform 3** – Transforming government organisations
 - **Target:** Decrease in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have experiences of racism.

Governance

Three of the four priority reforms link to this area:

- **Priority Reform 1** – Formal Partnerships and shared decision making
 - **Target:** There will be formal partnership arrangements to support Closing the Gap in place between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments in place in each state and territory enshrining agreed joint decision-making roles and responsibilities and where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have chosen their own representatives.
- **Priority Reform 3** – Transforming Government Organisations

- **Target:** Decrease in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have experiences of racism.
- **Priority Reform 4** – Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level
 - **Target:** Increase the number of regional data projects to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to make decisions about Closing the Gap and their development.

Priority Reform 3 requires cultural change within the bureaucracy – developing new skills, practices and ways of working that is enabled through leadership that is reflective, innovative, informed and committed. Bureaucrats must show integrity in their commitment to change both within their own organisations, across portfolios and in their advice to Ministers

ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

Culture plays a significantly protective role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' individual, and community lives. This policy brief provides a summary of how policy process and policy decisionmakers need to understand how culture relates to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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