

What is research?



This information sheet may be useful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations who are interested in research, thinking about being involved in research or have recently become involved in research.

What is research?

Dominant culture perspective | The National Health and Medical Research Council states that research is: “the original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge, understanding and insight. It is a broad concept and there is no simple, single way to define research for all disciplines”¹.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives | “The Lowitja Institute views research as a quest for knowledge and being curious about unanswered questions. For us research is about applying our ancient knowledges and methods, challenging the status quo and thinking deeply, which of course we have done for millennia. Research helps us to understand our environment the ecosystem we are part of.” – Dr Janine Mohamed, CEO, Lowitja Institute, Narrunga Kurna

Why is it important to know about research?

Research occurs on a regular basis in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health contexts, yet ‘standard’ or dominant culture practices in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health have been questioned, criticised and debated over many years². If we are involved in research, questions we need to ask include:

Who decides what research is needed?

Who leads the research?

Who will design the research?

Who will benefit from the research?

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we have the right to identify our own research priorities, determine the research questions, lead and co-design projects, select the research team and secure support from organisations or communities we hope to involve³. Through doing this, unexpectedly, we may find ourselves closely involved in research. Professor Daryle Rigney encourages us to embrace research:



Do not be afraid of the process. See it as a way of being able to inform yourself, inform your nation, inform your community and make better decisions as a result of that.

Professor Daryle Rigney, Ngarrindjeri

What contributes to culturally safe research?

All researchers, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous, need to be culturally safe in their practice. A good start is by ensuring research is designed by and implemented with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and communities². As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, a culturally safe research environment occurs when:

- our experiences are believed and validated
- our cultures are centred and valued
- we feel welcomed, respected and do not experience any form of racism in the research project in whatever role we have.⁵

Dr Janine Mohamed explains that understanding and creating cultural safety requires self-reflection:



...and a power analysis. It is not about the gaze on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The gaze is actually back at yourself [as a researcher] and what you bring to the power dynamic.



How do we know if research is valuable?

Here are good signs that research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is valuable.

The research is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The research is designed to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

The research is highly impactful with positive health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations, communities, and Nations.

The research helps develop the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research workforce.

How do we know if research is ethical?

All research with and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must:

- follow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ethical principles
- prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research methodologies or frameworks
- consider the cultural determinants of health (see, for example, [Culture is Key](#) report).

Good and ethical research should demonstrate ongoing co-design, collaboration, and partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations, communities and Nations throughout the research process⁴. Capability building and professional development options should part of the process to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved in a range of project roles⁴.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we have the right to make the decisions that involve us whether it is in programs, policies, projects or research⁶. Effective engagement means that all researchers, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous researchers, demonstrate that involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations have power, trust, and free, prior and informed consent in the research project.

Respecting *Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property* or ICIP is a vital part of ethical research. The [Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property](#) information sheet explains more about what ICIP is and how to respect it.

What are the benefits of leading and participating in research for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities, organisations, and Nations?

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations set the research agenda and then lead, participate in and control research, this results in better health and wellbeing outcomes for our people and communities³. Research can lead to practical outcomes, including necessary government or organisational policy changes, and skill and leadership development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Critically, it can lead to tangible long-term benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families, communities, organisations and Nations³.

For individuals:



As researchers you can set priorities through a co-design process, and guide research processes in a culturally safe way, informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and experiences.

You can gain opportunities to apply your existing skills and knowledge, as well as further develop them and build up your experience.

For organisations:



Research can provide evidence about our communities' needs, new ways to meet those needs and information that helps us advocate for our work and way of doing things.

It can help us set up systems or develop resources that improve our management, services and research capacity.

For communities:



Research projects have the potential to mobilise the strengths and resources of our communities.

Quality research can support our communities to express self-determination and respond to community needs and aspirations.

What we do and learn through research can support us to design, develop and lead local solutions that place culture at the core of what we do.

CULTURALLY SAFE

Want to learn more:

- Visit the other resources in this toolkit and the Lowitja Institute's [website](#).
- Watch the Lowitja Institute video on our current research agenda [here](#).
- Learn about the Lowitja Institute research principles of beneficence, leadership, engagement, capacity development and measurement of impact [here](#).
- Learn more about the cultural determinants of health [here](#) on Lowitja Institute's website.

REFERENCES

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