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# Chapter 6: Cultural, community and family resources

'The answers were there before white man  
come in'

Stories of strength and resilience for responding to violence In Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander communities

# CHAPTER 6

## CULTURAL, COMMUNITY AND FAMILY RESOURCES

In this chapter, we report on the cultural, community and family resources that can be used to address family and community violence as described by participants during interviews and focus groups.

### Cultural concepts and contexts

Conditions within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities are frequently described in terms of deficiencies or shortcomings. Often, little emphasis is placed on identifying the strengths and resources which have enabled them to survive for thousands of years and to be resilient in the face of significant historical and contemporary adversity. Many participants viewed traditional values, contained within law and culture, as a fundamental strength and protective resource, despite their experiences of colonialism. They also saw family cohesion, kinship care and community care as strengths.

In all cultures, there are elements that can be seen and those that cannot be seen. Cross-cultural researchers note that culture is both inside and outside the mind. Inside, it is present in psychological processes that are influenced and shaped by cultural practices and meanings. Outside the mind, it is in the prevailing social institutions, public practices and systems of meanings with which individuals interact, attuning their thoughts, feeling and behaviours.(66) Culture has been described as:

*... how you live, how you talk, how you just present yourself ... So, our young people these days don't realise culture not only means ceremonial time ... it's tied up with relationships, skin groups and kinship. It also keeps us together, and that's one of the intangible things, one of the things we can't see but we feel. It binds us together and makes us know who we are ... It helps us try to do the best things, to look at how life can be lived with the proper dignity.(44, pp. 49-50)*

We acknowledge the diversity of cultures across the country, including that Torres Strait Islander peoples hold a separate and distinct identity from mainland Aboriginal peoples. Despite many differences in cultures and identities, both within and between groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples share similarities. Following an extensive literature review of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures and their links to health and wellbeing, Salmon and colleagues concluded that:

*These similarities and differences — including strong spiritual beliefs that connect people to their land and sea, that are rich in songs and storytelling, art, a multiplicity of languages and a collective identity ... encompass origin, culture and language, as well as individual distresses originating from colonisation.(67, p.1)*

The harm caused by the ongoing undermining of the strengths of culture is shared by other First Nations People who have had similar experiences with colonisation. A Canadian report highlights the reality that colonialism was not simply a series of events that occurred hundreds of years ago, emphasising the importance of understanding that:

*colonialism is a structure that includes many different events – all created under the same, destructive logic. Viewing colonization as a structure means that we can't dismiss events as parts of the past, or as elements of someone else's history ... as events that people should just 'get over.'(68 , p.17)*

### Walking in two worlds: the contemporary cultural context

Study participants across all communities affirmed the strengths within cultural values and practices. They acknowledged that they live in two worlds: one in their family and community contexts, which are built on and imbued with local culture to varying degrees; and the other, as part of the broader Australian society comprised of systems created and maintained by a dominant Anglo-Western culture. As a result, there is an ongoing tension between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imperative to retain their cultures and the need to learn about, and successfully navigate, non-Indigenous systems each day. This tension between the two cultures affected participants in several communities. While asserting the need to retain culture, they acknowledged that there have been 'breakdowns' in culture since colonisation:

*Our culture's not as strong here. With some [mob] around here, some of them are real in touch with their culture, some are not ... Down here, we don't know where we come from, and a lot of them don't know where they belong. And I guess a lot of them are lost, a lot of mums, dads, children and stuff.*

Others described how this walking in two worlds could undermine cultural respect and roles and responsibilities:

*... when they go ceremony they show respect, but when they come back into town, they go different ways and don't listen, don't follow their responsibilities.*

Many participants described the strength of culture, including its role in reinforcing social control and standards of behaviour and creating a strong sense of identity. Inherent in many participants' narratives was the understanding that culture could help to restore well-functioning and safe families and communities, countering the impacts of colonialism:

*Yeah, so there's that, what I was talking about earlier, that sense of belonging and sense of community. Just isn't there now.*

*The only answer now for us, or the solution ... one of the solutions is, and I think it's the best one, is for us to go back and to apply, to rebuild, to reconnect, to what was there before ... That is everything included from the Elders being the keepers of that lore, the kinship structures, the uncles with full disciplinary rights on our children and it's a controlled manner. There's teaching, education, an awareness of our way, I-o-r-e. It is the full-frontal proactive way to teach our children about our standards and then we'll see the changes of practices on the ground, whether it be relationships, anything. Ceremonies, hunting in our societies. That'll impact the change on the ground.*

*If our culture got implemented a little bit more, and respected, we might not have these issues.*

*... and from all them Aboriginal communities up there ... and they still follow Aboriginal law up there, and they're a much stronger culture up there, and they're not likely to fall in the same place where we do down here, because they know where they're from, and they come from their Country. They belong to their Country.*

The importance of belonging is reinforced by our quantitative findings (Table 7; Table 8). The prevalence of feeling violent was significantly lower (25–30% lower) among participants who felt that they belonged in their community 'a little bit', 'a fair bit' or 'a lot', compared with 'not at all'; this association was not significant for the other violence outcomes.

The views about the strengths of culture align with those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about other aspects of life, such as health and wellbeing. The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013–2023*, developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from around the country, places culture and wellbeing at the centre of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.<sup>(69)</sup> Others suggest that culture is an important protective factor in achieving social and emotional wellbeing.<sup>(70)</sup>

## Building and reinforcing culture

### Passing down culture

Some people spoke about the importance of teaching and reinforcing culture and identity. They emphasised the critical need to teach youth about their cultures to support cultural continuance before it is lost forever:

*... and improving that belonging and identity and helping with that clash of Aboriginal culture ... Australian culture and religions, things like that.*

*Bring the cultural stuff. Like learning stuff.*

Participants expressed deep concern about ensuring that young people have enough opportunities to learn about their cultures, and enough time with Elders and cultural teachers, to learn and sustain their cultural learning. They noted that, often, ceremonial gatherings are only held once a year; they worry that this is not enough for sustaining cultural learnings. One participant observed that, nowadays:

*In the schools, kids are in the schools, so they miss out on sitting with the old people, right?*

The key role that Elders play in imparting cultural knowledge was emphasised:

*It's our custom, you know. But it's been, like I said, up and down. Sometimes there's no respect but it's not ... it's only just a small portion of disrespect but we still need to fix that. That's why we need to get the Men's Group up and running, so we can strengthen that relationship between Elders and youth because if we can get that strength, we won't have any violence because before this, you don't see father and son fight. You don't see uncle and nephew [fight] but these days you see that.*

## Safety through ceremony

One participant spoke about the potential protectiveness of ceremonial activities:

*But if that ceremony went nearly for three or four months, there's no violence or anything, everybody pay respect.*

Another described how revitalising culture supported a Community to stop using alcohol:

*Yeah. And, that's up to ... talk to the cultural authority group really, yeah. But I know where I come from, the people stopped drinking by restoring the status of dance and culture ... That's what happened, you know, and the restoration of the status was in dance.*

A third participant said that in their Community, ceremony generally only occurs once a year:

*Yeah, but this is really hard, you know. The only time young men can keep up with the old fellas is ceremony time and we only have that every – once a year ...*

## Resilience

Building culture among young people was integral to building and reinforcing resilience. Participants spoke about the benefits of being able to walk in two worlds, which provide strength and resilience:

*... the thing is by teaching the younger generation traditional culture, that fortifies them to have a bit of pride in where they come from, and who they are, and then they can go into white society and learn the structure there, what is right, they become doubly stronger. They don't have to be weak, they can be doubly strong, because our culture are survivors.*

*Yes, reinforcement in our culture, and then also the respect of the culture we're living in will doubly fortify and that's one thing that would be really, really good.*

Participants spoke about their lives today, reflecting on their stories of survival against the adversity that they and their ancestors have faced. In many cases, these stories of resilience were linked to culture, which was described as a resource:

*It's like when we ... with [name] here, with the guys, we'd go through what's relevant to today and what we're dealing with, then I quickly take them back to traditional culture and what we had to deal with. And how strong we were back there. We're survivors, we're still here but we're losing our strength because we haven't got that willpower and that knowledge ...*

*See this here, resilience and protect, you know what that says to me, that says culture. You know what, if they had a base, if the non-Indigenous wider community had a base like we did as a people, and from a culture perspective, that's what gives us our resilience, because our old people ... would protect our ... like, dad and all them, don't go down there because this is what'll happen to you, or don't go over there or that's what'll happen to you. So, these are protective factors.*

*Just to reiterate, with the resilience and I totally agree with brother which is this, is that we've had that forever and a day, we are a resilient people, we are. Protective factors, we protect ourselves, that's about it because no one else seems to do their job.*

These descriptions of resilience appear to be consistent with socio-ecological perspectives described in the literature.<sup>(71)</sup> Participants' accounts suggest that resilience is not only considered in terms of individual strengths, but also in terms of the resilience-building resources that are available in the environments within which individuals reside (e.g. cultural, family, kinship, community). Their accounts also indicate that Elders would help to facilitate access to these resilience-building resources through their stories and anecdotes, aimed at protecting young people, and through their teachings and guidance. Each of these elements is important in developing and promoting resilience building among people.

## Community self-determination

Many participants spoke about the need to restore decision-making to communities, so that they could take more responsibility in their families and communities:

*For us, as an Indigenous people up here, we know what we want to do and if the government will just help us to come in, be patient with us, help us to get it down pat ... we can tell you, bro, we'll make some noise. People will see the beauty in our culture, in our way of life.*

*We have to find the balance, what that funding is for, how it gets used and the other side of that is we go hammer and tongs in accepting our own responsibility in restoring what was lost, once lost, and putting it back up.*

*... realistically, if the decision-making is left to us, we put everything down and then we make a decision or call on the young fella running amok. It shouldn't be the case because if everything actually functions, then the education, the uncles will teach the young fellas their standard and their responsibility and what's expected of them to look after a household ... If that is fully functioning and it's being taught every day about what's right, what's wrong and they get it, our life is really about teaching, if it's taught every day, then we should be okay.*

Many people described the importance of drawing on, and valuing, knowledge held within families and communities. One participant described the importance of learning from existing knowledge to promote safety for all family and community members, rather than having an external interventionist approach as the only option:

*I always think about it. My mum with my aunty with my grandmother, I've got seven brothers and three sisters. How did they manage with what they had? They knew how to manage overcrowding in the houses, all that sort of stuff. They had the technique; they knew what to do. We are looking at white men way to try and fix it. **The answers were there before white man come in.**<sup>32</sup>*

Supporting these qualitative findings, we found some quantitative evidence that the perception of community self-determination was protective against violence (Table 7; Table 8). Participants were asked to what extent they believed that outsiders had the final say in decisions about the community; responses of 'a lot' were considered indicative of a perceived lack of community self-determination. Responses of 'a little bit' or 'a fair bit' were considered indicative of perceived moderate community self-determination, and 'not at all' was taken to indicate perceived high community self-determination. The prevalence of conviction related to violence was significantly lower among community members who perceived that their community had moderate and high, rather than low, self-determination (e.g. for high self-determination: 14% versus 25%; PR=0.58, 95%CI: 0.42,0.80). The pattern of association was similar, but weaker and not significant, for the other violence outcomes.

These results are consistent with literature on the influence of community self-determination and cultural engagement on rates of suicide among Aboriginal youth in Canadian communities. For example, lower suicide rates were observed in communities wherein factors identified as markers of cultural continuity were present. These included: having a measure of self-government; having litigated for Aboriginal title to traditional lands; having achieved a level of local control over health, education and policing services; having established community facilities for the preservation of culture; having established a measure of control over child welfare services; and having elected councils composed of more than 50 percent women.(72)

## Family and kinship care

Participants explained that family and kinship care are important for fostering safety within families and communities. Some reported that family and kinship structures had been, and continue to be, compromised (as previous sections outlined). This has reduced the function of these once strong and supportive structures, to keep people safe:

*Because everybody had a safe place. I believe everybody had a safe place in the Community, everyone. Families work it out for themselves. They had a solution like [name] says, our grandfathers, nannies, grandmothers, uncles, aunties. They didn't need someone else to tell them how to do it ... The government needs to understand that. If they really want to deal with the safety of Community in that area, they need to really come ... You've got to find a balance because, really, the solution that we're talking about is restoring and going back to the principles, cultural protocols, kinship structures and cultural practices is the restoration of that.*

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32. The bolded words form part of the title of this Report because they capture the essence of what many participants expressed.

Participants in some communities described the importance of persisting in exercising kinship roles, despite the disruption caused by colonisation. Informal kinship caring arrangements provided support for keeping children safe:

*We've got to find out how it works for us, our kinship structure, how we deliver it.*

*That is one of the most pivotal part where the uncles teach these young fellas now and sometimes it's a camp ... Some of them come out good, some of them don't but if done properly and we sit them ... sit back down and we think about it and we write to it and we restructure it and we start to implement it whether it's in our schools to begin with, where we teach our children life skills. I mean, life skills around boundaries.*

*Probably just be in a social network in different ways and having connections with not just your own mob but other families. Families all grew up with other families ... If you feel you're not in a safe situation, you know you could ... ask for help or something like that in that sort of way.*

These observations by participants are consistent with quantitative findings from the CMS. We found that a high level of family cohesion was associated with significantly lower personal experiences of violence, both across a participant's lifetime and within the last year, and significantly lower use of violence (Table 7; Table 8).

## Community safety

Participants spoke at length about their communities and what safety looks like for them. They spoke about community safety, taking ownership and responsibility in different ways:

*I think it's because of the respect between each family and I give credit to our Elders and our youth. We do have our ups and downs, but at the end we always manage to sort things out and have the respect for each other. We're still working on that, you know. There's still more room for improvement. I think it's because ... our Community is a very unique Community.*

*I reckon safe communities boils down to ownership of the communities. You know, like if you take ownership of that community and say, 'Oh, this is my area, this is my place.' Well then, you know, and you want to make it safe.*

*It can be as simple as pulling a bloke up and saying, 'What are you doing? That's not how you treat somebody.'*

*I've had members of the Community come up to me on occasions and said, 'Why have you said something about such and such an issue within this Community?' And I said, 'Well, one, I'm a tribal Elder, and it's my responsibility to act on behalf of the entire Community when it comes to our people.'*

An inherent message in the narratives of participants is the importance of taking responsibility culturally and as members of communities in supporting community safety and challenging inappropriate behaviour where it occurs. It can be difficult and even dangerous to intervene, because their actions may not be appreciated by the protagonists and their families; nevertheless, several participants observed:

*You're accepting that behaviour by not saying anything ... And when you say something, that means that you're not accepting it, 'No, that's not right.' That's exactly right. 'That's not right, that's not our culture.'*

Some participants spoke about safety in terms of place, describing feeling safe:

*When I'm on Country.*

Other participants spoke of safety in terms of the environment and people around them at different times:

*They've got good lighting in the parks now.*

*Well, a safe place to me would be, even for a single person, somewhere where that person can go and someone's there to talk to that person ... Someone to actually make sure they've had a feed, make sure that they've got somewhere ... a clean bed to sleep in. Just to make sure that they're safe ... It can be secure, but no good just being secure and be there on their own.*

Participants' responses suggest that concepts of safety are multi-faceted. They find diverse ways of accessing safety and promoting safety within communities. Supporting these qualitative findings, we found that respondents to the CMS who reported higher levels of 'community wellbeing' reported a lower prevalence of violence (Table 7; Table 8). The prevalence of violence (experience and use) was lower among participants who said that they felt safe in their community during the day and during the night and that there was not a big problem with people fighting (including family violence) or with humbugging in the community. In addition, the prevalence of conviction in relation to violence was significantly lower in communities where gambling was not a problem; this association was not significant for the other violence outcomes. We did not find evidence of an association between violence and a measure of community cohesion.

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