

Aboriginal identification in NSW: the way forward



An Aboriginal peoples' perspective



Education
Aboriginal Affairs



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ARTIST RECOGNITION (COVER)

Kim Healey is a descendant of the Bundjalung and Gumbaynggirr nations, and also a descendant of the Djunbun (Platypus) Clan, original custodians of the Washpool at Lionsville in Northern NSW. She currently lives within Country in South Grafton NSW, creating and telling her stories along the mighty Clarence River. Kim strives to capture Country and utilise her voice through her work, to interpret the world around her.

This work captures Kim Healey's connection to Country. It speaks of the Bundjalung and Gumbaynggirr nations which were created by the Yuladarah, the creator of rivers, boundaries and tribal land. This is the Clarence River boundary with Susan Island in the middle of these two tribes which is a birthing place. Using a sgraffito technique, scribing in the sandy medium is a mapping system of Country.

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“ I have seen many changes in my life, some good, some bad. I remember when it was not a good thing to say you were Aboriginal. But now I think people need to know why we should identify now.”

– STUDY PARTICIPANT

HEAD OF ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FOREWORD

Aboriginal identification is a complex and often contentious issue for Aboriginal people, Aboriginal communities and governments

It is important that we understand the issues because they effect the services Aboriginal people receive and the conclusions we make about the impact of our efforts to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

In 2013, Aboriginal Affairs undertook a study to better understand the extent of identification when Aboriginal people access government services in NSW, the factors that influence their decision to do so and their ideas about how to encourage Aboriginal people to identify in these circumstances.

We found that identification for our participants was a complex issue and different for different people. Identification is not the simple transaction being asked to tick a box might imply. For some, being asked how they identify triggered painful emotions associated with traumatic experiences from both their past and present.

Similar to the findings from our research into changes in Aboriginal identification between the 2006 and 2011 Census of Population and Housing, identification at government services is not static, for many changing over time in response to location and the service approach and environment. This has implications for our understanding of the changes we see in our service outcomes. What we observe as a change may be explained by Aboriginal people's assessment of whether it is safe for them to identify. We need to be cautious with our interpretations.

The solutions are complex requiring attention to both the service system and the attitudes and behaviours directed towards Aboriginal people of those delivering these, and of the community as a whole.

Building on the considerable government effort to date, our findings suggest that a localised approach developed with the Aboriginal community, an inclusive dialogue at both national and local levels on the purpose and process of identification including the question asked, and sustained efforts to address the negative discourse about Aboriginal people will reap benefits.

There remains considerable commitment on the part of Aboriginal peoples to address the issues.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'J. Ardler'.

– Mr Jason Ardler
General Manager
Aboriginal Affairs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research purpose

In 2013, Aboriginal Affairs NSW undertook a study of the propensity of Aboriginal people in the state to identify as such when seeking or receiving a government service. The study sought to understand what affected this decision, and how more Aboriginal people might be encouraged to identify as Aboriginal. It was one of several initiatives intended to improve the identification of Aboriginal people in administrative data collections.

Overview of propensity to identify

A total of 499 Aboriginal people aged 15 years or older took part in the study. Just over 70 per cent of participants always identified as Aboriginal (the 'always-identify group'), a further 21 per cent sometimes identified (the 'sometimes-identify group') and eight per cent never identified (the 'never-identify group').

Propensity to identify varied with participants' age, gender and geographic location.

- Participants aged 35–44 had the highest proportion in the always-identify group (75.2%). The highest proportion in the never-identify group were aged 15–24 (11%).
- Just over 16 per cent more female participants were in the always-identify group compared with male.
- A greater proportion of participants living in major cities than in all other geographic locations were in the always-identify group.
- The proportion of the participants in the never-identify group living in remote and very remote locations was six times greater than that in major cities.

Barriers to identification

While there were some similarities in the barriers nominated by the sometimes-identify or never-identify groups, there were important differences.

The barriers nominated by the never-identify group were mostly to do with the difficulty of tracing identity (41.9%); and concerns about the question and how it was asked (22.6%); and racism, discrimination and stereotyping (16.1%).

While the sometimes-identify group also nominated these barriers, the proportions differed (13.1%, 18.2%, and 29.3% respectively). This group also nominated concerns about cultural safety (20.2%), the use and privacy of the information (12.1%), and the type of government service or its physical location (5.1%), as barriers.

Addressing the barriers

The solutions proposed included:

- addressing cultural safety and competence
- tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping
- ensuring information is kept private, and used only by those collecting it
- increasing community cultural awareness and education
- asking about Aboriginal identity
- empowering Aboriginal people, and pride in culture.

The solutions varied between the propensity groups, as did the relative importance each group gave to them. Those who always-identified were the only group to propose 'resolving issues to do with asking the question' and 'empowering Aboriginal people' as solutions.

The sometimes-identify and never-identify groups focused exclusively on racism, discrimination and stereotyping; information use and privacy; and community cultural awareness and education.

Compared with the never-identify group, the sometimes-identify group gave greater weight to addressing racism, discrimination and stereotyping (33.8% compared with 20.8%); and cultural safety (33.8% compared with 29.2%). In comparison, the never-identify group gave greater weight than the sometimes-identify group to clarifying how the information would be used and kept private, and increasing community cultural awareness and education.

The importance given to each solution varied according to the participants' age, gender and geographic location.

- For those aged 15–24, information use and its privacy were the most important solution; cultural safety and competency were at or near the top in importance for all other age groups.
- Female participants were 1.6 times more likely than males to propose resolving issues to do with asking the question.
- Participants living in major cities and outer regional areas tended to see cultural safety and competency as the most important solution while participants living in inner regional gave more weight to tackling racism, discrimination and stereotyping, and those living in remote and very remote areas to information use and privacy.

The way forward

The road to identification for our participants is complex. No single set of actions is likely to address all the issues, largely because the reasons for not identifying are different for different groups. Actions must address both attitudes and practices – the attitudes of individuals, communities and services, and the practices which services follow.

Fundamental values and beliefs about Aboriginality in general and Aboriginal persons in particular lie at the heart of an individual's decision to identify at any point. To address this, it is time that our country and our communities began a better informed and different conversation about Aboriginality.

We found the experiences of the participants in the study were often localised, which suggests that any solution must also be localised and informed by the local Aboriginal community. Such a localised response may have many facets, but as a minimum it will include specific changes to the way agencies' policies and procedures are implemented, and to the values and beliefs of individual staff and of each service centre as a whole.

INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

The language of this report

Throughout this report the term 'Aboriginal' is used to describe the many nations, language groups and clans in New South Wales (NSW) including those from the Torres Strait. The preference for the term 'Aboriginal' over 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' in NSW recognises that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of NSW (NSW Health, 2004). This is not consistent with the national approach in which 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' is the accepted term (ABS, 2014).

The term 'Indigenous' is used when reference is made to the work of other authors where this term is used. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) note that 'Indigenous' should not be used as it is viewed by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as "diminishing their identity and/or fail[ing] to recognise the cultural diversity that exists within the collective population" (ABS, 2014, p.2).

The NSW Aboriginal population

It is estimated that in 2011, there were 670,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Australia, making up around 3.0 per cent of the total Australian population. Just over 208,000 of this group were living in NSW – 2.9 per cent of the state's population. NSW has the largest Aboriginal population in the country and one of the fastest growing (ABS, 2013a).

Between 2006 and 2011, the number of people in NSW who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in the national Census of Population and Housing (Census) rose by 28.9 per cent (Biddle, 2015). This raises several questions including whether the propensity of people to identify themselves and their children as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander had changed (ABS, 2013b).

The increase in the population may in part be attributed to the work undertaken by the ABS to encourage Aboriginal people to identify in the Census under the Indigenous Community Engagement Strategy (ICES). By engaging the ABS more closely with Aboriginal communities and organisations, the ICES aims to improve the collection of data from those communities, and thus the quality and relevance of Aboriginal statistics.

In 2013, Aboriginal Affairs NSW engaged the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) to quantify and explain the extent of the growth in the Aboriginal population in NSW between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses beyond changes that could be explained by births, deaths and migration from and to NSW. This study concluded that the increase reflected a range of “complicated and interrelated factors and [form-filling] behaviours leading to more individuals identifying as Indigenous” (Brown, unpublished, p.24).

The release of the Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset (ACL D) by ABS in 2013 made it possible to investigate the change further. In 2014 Aboriginal Affairs engaged the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) to undertake this investigation using the ACL D. Information on the ACL D is available from the ABS (ABS, 2013).

Biddle (2015) concluded that an individual's propensity to identify as Aboriginal changes through time. He also found a large ‘identification churn’ between 2006 and 2011 in the NSW Indigenous population. Of all those who identified as Aboriginal in either Census, 14.7 per cent changed from identifying as non- Aboriginal in 2006 to Aboriginal in 2011, while 6.5 per cent changed the other way.

Defining Aboriginality

Aboriginal identity and Aboriginal identification are complex and contentious issues for governments, Aboriginal people and Aboriginal communities.

In 2003, the Australian Law Reform Commission noted that since the time of white settlement, governments have used at least 67 classifications, descriptions or definitions to determine who is an Aboriginal person (McCorquodale, J., cited in Australian Law Reform Commission, 2003). A summary of key historical events relevant to the definition of Aboriginality is provided at Appendix 1.

Today, two very different definitions are used concurrently. The first relies on the Commonwealth Government definition and the second on identification.

The Commonwealth Government definition

In 1978, the Commonwealth Government adopted a three-part definition. Known as the Commonwealth definition, it comprises Aboriginal descent, identification, and community recognition. Since 1981, this test has been used to determine eligibility for certain programs and benefits (Gardner-Garden, 2003; Australian Law Reform Commission, 2003).

The Commonwealth definition was subsequently adopted by NSW and is now incorporated into legislation including the *NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983*.

In NSW Aboriginality determined through the Commonwealth Government definition can be confirmed through a *Letter of Confirmation of Aboriginality* or a *Certificate of Aboriginality*.

A letter of *Confirmation of Aboriginality* can be issued by any NSW-incorporated Aboriginal

organisation or Local Aboriginal Land Council. The former issues a letter, with a common seal, if it is satisfied that a person is Aboriginal after applying the Commonwealth Government definition. The latter can issue a letter to Council members (and to children of members who are under 19 years of age) with membership determined through application of the Commonwealth definition.

A *Certificate of Aboriginality*, with a common seal, can be issued by any NSW-incorporated Aboriginal organisation if satisfied that a person is Aboriginal after applying the Commonwealth Government definition.

Identification and identity

Identification differs from identity in that it is determined by the individual concerned rather than another person or an organisation.

In Australia, identification is used for statistical measurements of Australia's Aboriginal population and is captured through the Standard Indigenous Question (SIQ). The SIQ is based on the Commonwealth Government definition but does not include the third element – community recognition. It aims to capture all Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who identify themselves as members of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through the term 'origin'.

This methodology is used extensively around the world. In Australia it has been largely driven by the ABS with the support of most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and representatives (ABS, 2014).

The current SIQ was introduced in 1996 and is expressed as:

Is the person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, Aboriginal
- ☐ Yes, Torres Strait Islander

For persons of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, mark both 'Yes' boxes.

In considering the SIQ, an individual must first know their biological ancestry, and subsequently disclose it when data is being collected. The accuracy of official data therefore depends largely on whether an individual has the required knowledge and is willing to share it. Since the SIQ is used by the ABS in all data collections including the Census as well as by many government and non-government agencies (ABS, 2014), this creates problems. In their discussion of the issues in monitoring Māori health and ethnic disparities Donna Cormack and Ricci Harris remind us that any analysis is "completely reliant on having good quality ethnicity data somewhere" (2009, p.29).

The effect of definition

In NSW as in the rest of Australia, laws and policies exist specifically to benefit Aboriginal persons. Regardless of the program, service, benefit or fund sought, Aboriginality is a criterion for access to these benefits and proof of Aboriginality is required. The level of proof depends largely on the scale of the benefit. For significant benefits such as home loans, public housing or employment in Aboriginal-identified roles, the standard of 'proof' is higher in which case the Commonwealth Government definition applies.

The suitability of the Commonwealth Government definition as an all-purpose means of determining Aboriginal identity in contemporary Australia has been questioned since the 1990s by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. The procedures and practices relating to the confirmation of Aboriginality in NSW have also been the subject of debate (see Bob Morgan Consultancy, 2011; Gardner, 2003).

The individual components of the Commonwealth Government definition have also created some tension. The question of community acceptance has led to discussions of authenticity which have included categorising people as "less 'Aboriginal', less 'real' or less 'valid' than others" (Gorringer, Ross & Fforde, 2011, p.4). Identification – which on face value would seem to be the easiest element to establish – has led to questions about the genuineness of the assertion, particularly when an individual has not identified as Aboriginal in the past,

or when members of their family do not or have not so identified. 'Origin' as used in the SIQ has also been questioned on the grounds that cultural identity is central to being an Aboriginal person, not origin (ABS, 2014).

When a person identifies as Aboriginal but does not meet the other two requirements (descent and community acceptance) two consequences follow. The first is for organisations of whatever kind which provide benefits or services for which only Aboriginal people are eligible. Those organisations must then be able to assess the evidence provided and decide if it is sufficient.

The second consequence is for service planning. The statistics based on identification may suggest the need for a service is at one level, but the service ends up being delivered at a significantly different level. For instance, the health statistics for a cohort of Aboriginal residents may suggest a certain level of diabetes management is required. Resources (funding, organisational capacity and personnel) are organised to deliver that level of service – say, a given number of diabetes check-ups at an Aboriginal health clinic. But the clinic finds it delivers far fewer check-ups because many eligible residents do not feel sufficiently confident that their identification will not be challenged. In other cases, the opposite could occur: the demand for services exceeds the level forecast from the statistics.

Barriers to identification

Previous research has sought to understand the circumstances that encourage Aboriginal people to identify. Three recent studies shed light on the barriers they face to identification when accessing government services.

In 2010, the ABS conducted research into the issues surrounding and contributing to Aboriginal peoples' propensity to identify in administrative data and ABS survey collections. The study concluded that the reasons for identifying in administrative data collections tended to be associated with pride in Aboriginal heritage; a perception that identifying has positive consequences for the individual; access to specialised services, including Aboriginal liaison

staff; referrals to appropriate services; and an understanding of what the statistics would be used for. Reasons for not identifying included the risk of prejudicial treatment; habits based on previous negative experiences or behaviours; discomfort with the manner in which the question was asked; and a lack of understanding about why the information was being collected (ABS, 2012).

The findings of the ABS somewhat mirror those of Kelaher et al. (2010). In examining the barriers to identification in mainstream general practice, barriers to identification nominated by study participants included: mistrust of the motives behind the collection of the information; previous negative experiences; concerns about privacy; uncertainty about, or inability to prove, Aboriginality; and the provision of poorer rather than improved services and treatment.

Scotney et al. undertook a similar study in 2010. The authors found that while all participants indicated that they would identify as Aboriginal if asked, a number of factors influenced their decision to do so. These included previous racism in the community; the patient-doctor relationship; the perception that discussing identity would lengthen consultation times; their assumptions about the motives of the staff of the practice who asked about Aboriginality; and the recognition of the culture and diversity of Indigenous Australians.

The impetus for this study

Both state and federal governments are committed to improving outcomes for Aboriginal peoples. This requires an accurate count of Aboriginal populations. Without accurate data, progress – towards the Closing the Gap commitments, for example – cannot be measured accurately. Similarly, health and wellbeing statistics (identifying trends in road safety statistics, for example) cannot be usefully analysed. New policies and programs may also be based on inaccurate information.

In July 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) revised the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) to include initiatives to improve Indigenous data in key administrative data sets –

specifically, the Perinatal National Minimum Data Set collections, hospital collections (admitted and non-admitted patients), birth registrations, death registrations, school enrolments and preschool enrolments. The following initiatives were agreed.

- All jurisdictions were to adopt the SIQ and reporting categories in data collections and information system for key data sets.
- All jurisdictions were to improve procedures for collecting Indigenous status information in health and education data by training staff in key collection positions about how and why to ask the self-identification question, and to raise their awareness about its importance.
- All jurisdictions were to develop and implement initiatives to raise the Indigenous community's awareness of the importance of identifying as Indigenous when accessing services and to therefore raise the propensity for identification (Schedule F, Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

The NSW Government asked NSW Aboriginal Affairs¹ to coordinate the state's response to this commitment.

Report structure

This study reports the findings of a research study undertaken by NSW Aboriginal Affairs to examine the propensity of NSW Aboriginal people to identify when in contact with government services.

The first section sets out the methodology, including its limitations; the second provides the findings on the propensity of study participants to identify and for those who do not identify the reasons for not doing so. The third section provides an analysis of participants' views on how identification could be encouraged and supported. The final section discusses the findings, drawing conclusions and proposing actions.

¹ Aboriginal Affairs provides specialist policy, advice and knowledge about Aboriginal issues. The agency does not directly fund or deliver services to Aboriginal people. Rather, its role is to provide strategic and evidence-based advice to those NSW Government entities and agencies responsible for funding and services, and to inform policy debate and reform..



METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research

This study was undertaken as one of a number of initiatives intended to improve the identification of Aboriginal people in administrative collections.

Building on existing research the study sought to elucidate:

- the proportion of Aboriginal people who identify as Aboriginal when accessing services the influence of the type of service accessed on an Aboriginal person's willingness to identify
- barriers to identification
- strategies to address barriers.

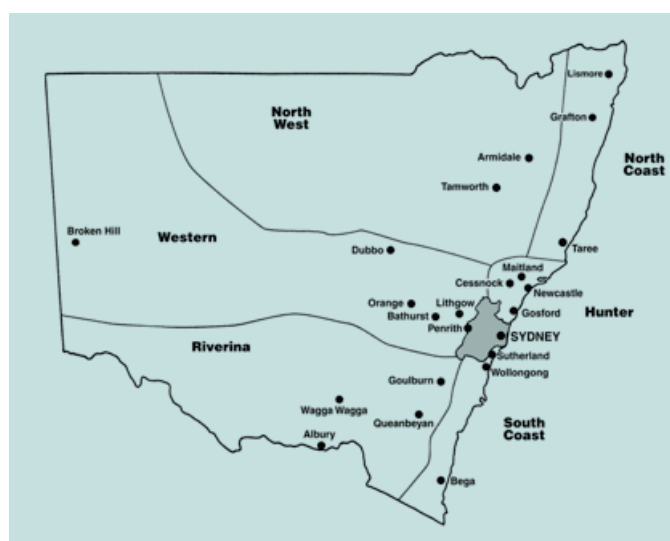
Building support for the study

NSW Government departments, non-government agencies and communities were engaged early in the study through information forums for government stakeholders and the 77 participating communities. As identification is a deeply personal matter, reflecting broader community concerns about Aboriginal identity, the forums were used to reassure

those taking part about the design of the study, to gain their consent, and to inform them of how the data collected would be used, and who would own it.

Participant communities included remote, rural, urban and metropolitan locations across NSW (Figure 1; Appendix 2).

Figure 1: Communities visited



Source: Identification study, Aboriginal Affairs, 2014

Preliminary findings, including a description of emerging themes, were discussed with participant communities and their comments incorporated into the subsequent analysis. Resources and time constraints limited the number of communities included to 34 (Appendix 2).

Research method

A survey was developed to collect relevant participant characteristics, their propensity to identify, the barriers to this and their ideas for improvement. Given that this study sought to obtain the views of Aboriginal people in their own words, the latter were obtained through open-ended questions. This approach also allowed a full range of views to be obtained.

To ensure the survey instrument was fit for purpose, it was pre-tested with Aboriginal staff from NSW Aboriginal Affairs and Aboriginal community members. The results were addressed in the final instrument.

The survey was made available both in hard copy and online on the Aboriginal Affairs website. Completed surveys were returned using a pre-paid envelope. The latter strategy made it possible for the survey to be completed by persons outside the participant communities.

Most participants (70%) completed the survey online; 27 per cent completed a hard copy. A small proportion (3%) chose to provide information directly to the researchers.

The research team included two Aboriginal researchers – one from the Birpai community from the NSW Hastings River region and the other from the Brewarrina region, with cultural and family ties across the western region of NSW.

Recruiting the participants

Aboriginal people aged 15 years and above living in the participant communities were initially targeted. Government departments, non-government and community organisations (including community network groups) were encouraged to recruit participants directly using their own networks (e.g. employees and members). Those recruited were subsequently encouraged to approach others to participate, and so on, expanding the group of potential participants.

The participants' characteristics

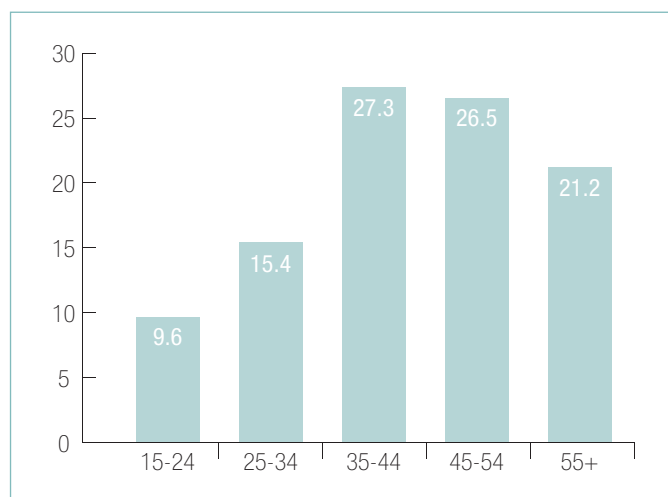
In total, 499 Aboriginal people aged 15 years or older participated in the study. The sample is not representative of Aboriginal people in NSW:

- Three-quarters of the survey group were 35 years of age or older and 21 per cent were aged 55 years or over (Figure 2). This compares with figures of 49.0 and 15.2 per cent for the whole NSW Aboriginal population. The difference in age profile is particularly pronounced for the 15–24 age group – 9.5 per cent in the survey cohort compared with 31.5 per cent in the NSW population.
- A greater proportion of female persons participated in the survey compared with the NSW Aboriginal population (58% compared with 51.0%).

- Participants came from 96 Local Government Areas and 189 postcodes with 98 per cent from within NSW. The remaining two per cent lived outside NSW (ten participants) or did not record their location (two participants).

A greater proportion of survey participants resided in inner regional, and remote/very remote areas compared with the NSW Aboriginal population (43% compared with 32.8%; 5.5% compared with 4.6%). The greatest variation between the survey groups and the NSW Aboriginal population was for inner regional areas (+9.7 percentage points, major cities (-7.9 percentage points), and outer regional areas (-2.1 percentage points).

Figure 2: Survey participant age group, per cent



Source: Identification study, Aboriginal Affairs, 2014

Ethical conduct

The conduct of the study was informed by the principles and guidelines set out in the Guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research (NHMRC, 2013), the Guidelines for ethical research in Indigenous studies, (AIATSIS, 2011) and the Ethical principles and guidelines for Indigenous research (AHURI, 2002). The researchers also engaged local Aboriginal community organisations to ensure adherence to local protocols.

Ethics approval for the content analysis undertaken by the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW, was

granted by the UNSW Human Ethics Research Panel (HREP) [reference: 9_14_026].

Consent

Written consent was obtained from study participants. Potential participants were provided with a plain-English information sheet describing the research, who was undertaking it, the amount of time required for participation, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, confidentiality and privacy safeguards, and contacts for more information or complaints. The researchers also spoke about consent at community meetings before the survey was distributed.

Analysis

Population percentages

With the exception of geographic remoteness, Estimated Residential Population (ERP) counts were used to calculate percentages for the various demographic factors, within the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population. The ERP was not available for the Aboriginal population by geographic remoteness – instead, the 2011 Census counts were used.

Geographic remoteness

The Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) developed by the National Centre for Social Applications of Geographical Information Systems (GISCA, 2006) was used to code remoteness. ARIA measures the remoteness of a location based on the physical road distance to the nearest urban centre (ASGC, 1996) and classifies areas into five classes based on that measure. Using the ABS labelling convention, the five categories of remoteness are:

- major cities
- inner regional areas
- outer regional areas
- remote
- very remote.

Of the 487 participants living in NSW, 43 per cent were living in inner regional areas of NSW, 37 per cent were living in major cities, 15 per cent in outer regional areas and the remainder in remote (2%) and very remote (3%) areas. Due to their small numbers, the latter two categories were collapsed into one – remote/very remote.

Content analysis

Researchers from the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW, undertook a content analysis of the text in the open-ended survey questions.

All questions were analysed to identify barriers and proposed solutions and patterns and themes identified. One theme related to proving identity. It included issues and solutions related to authenticity, and the process required to prove identity. This theme is not within the purview of government and was dropped from further analysis.

For the remaining themes, categories and subcategories were developed, and participants' responses were classified and coded according to them.

Descriptive analysis

The responses within categories were quantified and an analysis undertaken of proportions. Data were not reported where the number in a cell was less than five.

The analysis of barriers to identification was undertaken for those participants who indicated that they sometimes or never identify.

Methodological limitations

As stated above, the participants in this study are not representative of the NSW Aboriginal population. As a consequence the views expressed cannot be taken to represent those of the NSW Aboriginal population.

In addition, participants may have recalled experiences that occurred several years ago. Consequently the reader should exercise caution when drawing conclusions about current practice and beliefs.



IDENTIFICATION – PROPENSITY AND BARRIERS

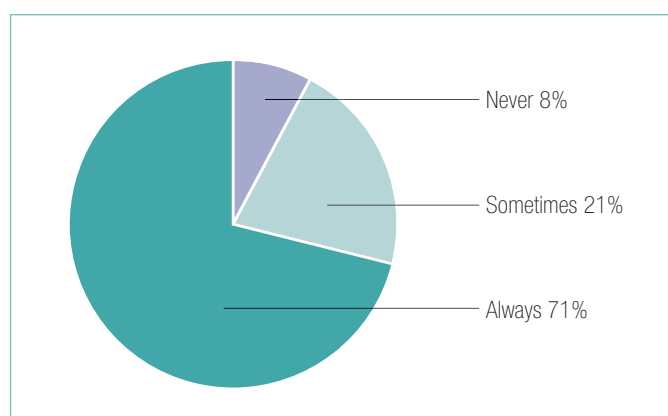
This section sets out the study findings on the propensity of participants to identify and the barriers to identification. It is important to note that the findings relate only to those circumstances in which an individual seeks or receives a government service. No conclusions should be drawn about identification in other circumstances, including an individual's private view about their identity.

All findings reported should be interpreted cautiously given the non-random nature of the participant group.

Propensity

As Figure 3 shows, 71per cent of participants who indicated their propensity to identify always did so, 21per cent sometimes did so and eight per cent never did so.

Figure 3: Propensity to identify when seeking or receiving a government service, per cent



Note: Five per cent of participants did not indicate their propensity and are excluded.

Source: The Aboriginal Identification Project, 2014.

The age, sex, and geographic location of participants were analysed to determine if these factors had any influence on the propensity to self-identify.

The impact of participant characteristics

The age, sex, and geographic location of participants were analysed to determine if these factors had any influence on the propensity to identify.

Age group

The age of participants appeared to influence propensity (Table 1).

- For the always-identify group, proportions ranged from 66.1per cent for the 45–54 age group to 75.2per cent for the 35–44 age group.
- For the sometimes-identify group, proportions ranged from 16.5per cent for the 35–44 age group to 25.8per cent for the 45–54 age group.

- For the never-identify group, proportions ranged from 7.1per cent for the 55 years and older group to 10.9per cent for the 15–24 age group.

Table 1: Effect of age on propensity group, per cent of all participants

| | 15-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55+ |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Always | 67.4 | 74.3 | 75.2 | 66.1 | 72.7 |
| Sometimes | 21.7 | 21.6 | 16.5 | 25.8 | 20.2 |
| Never | 10.9 | * | 8.3 | 8.1 | 7.1 |

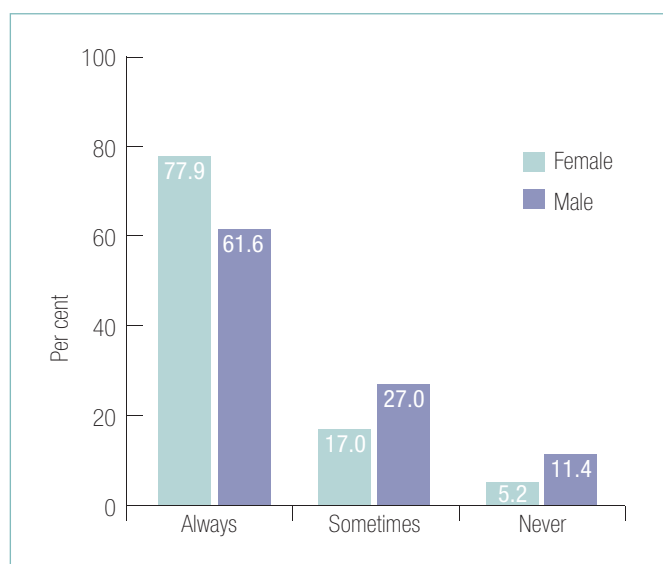
Note: *Number of participants <5.

Source: The Aboriginal Identification Project, 2014.

Sex

As seen in Figure 4, a greater proportion of female participants (77.9%) compared with males (61.6%) were in the always-identify group. The reverse pattern was evident for the never-identify group.

Figure 4: Effect of sex on propensity group, per cent of participants



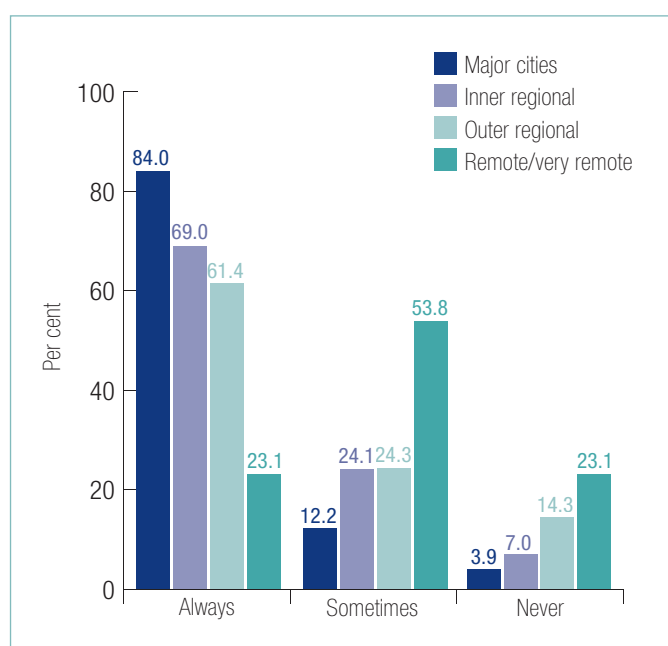
Source: The Aboriginal Identification Project, 2014.

Geographic location

In general there was a relationship between the geographic location of a participant and propensity, with propensity decreasing as remoteness increased (Figure 5).

- A greater proportion of participants living in major cities were in the always-identify group compared with all other geographic locations.
- A greater proportion of participants living in remote or very remote locations were in the sometimes or never-identify groups compared with all other geographic locations.
- The proportion in the never-identify group living in remote/very remote locations was six times greater than for those living in major cities.
- The proportion in the sometimes-identify group living in remote/very remote locations was over four times greater than those living in major cities.

Figure 5: Effect of geographic location on propensity group, per cent of participants



Source: The Aboriginal Identification Project, 2014.

Identification enablers

The participants in the always-identify group provided insights into factors that enable identification. This group cited pride in their identity and respect for their Aboriginal culture most often as reasons for identifying.

“I have always been proud to say I am of Aboriginal descent and never tried to hide the fact.”

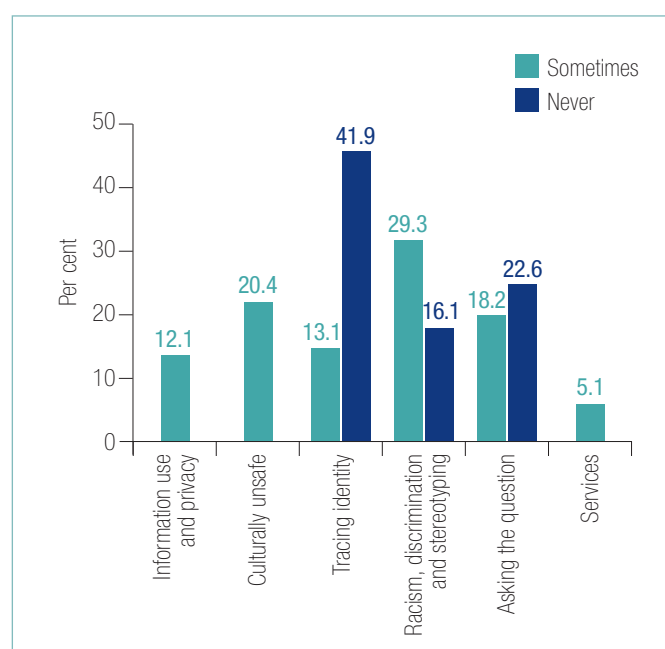
“I feel that I would be disrespecting every value my family instilled in me, also disrespecting my culture.”

“I believe that if you are Aboriginal you should be proud to acknowledge your Aboriginal heritage being from such an old cultural background. I always identify as being Aboriginal.”

Barriers to self-identifying

Slightly more than three quarters (75.7%) of participants in the sometimes or never-identify groups provided information on barriers. As Figure 6 shows, there were differences both in the barriers cited and the relative importance assigned to them.

Figure 6: Barriers to identification, participants in the never or sometimes-identify groups, per cent within group



Note: Categories have been excluded where the number of participants was <5.

Source: The Aboriginal Identification Project, 2014.

The sometimes-identify group

Unlike the always-identify or never-identify groups, the sometimes-identify group made an active choice about whether to identify. They weighted up the possibility of a particular risk and if the odds were favourable they identified.

“When identifying I weigh up the consequences against the benefit. Sometimes consequences are greater than the benefit.”

“Reasons were – I’m going to be treated worse or better, why I am identifying ...”

For the sometimes-identify group the barriers to identifying included:

- risks of racism, discrimination and stereotyping
- risks to cultural safety
- risks arising from the SIQ itself, who was asking it or how or why it was being asked challenges in tracing their identity
- risks arising from information use and privacy
- risks posed by service type and location.

Racism, discrimination and stereotyping; cultural safety; and the process of asking the question were most frequently mentioned, together making just under 70 per cent of all barriers cited. The findings relevant to each barrier are provided below.

Risk of racism, discrimination and stereotyping

Australia has a long history of racism and discrimination towards Aboriginal people and sustained stereotyping of them. The responses of many participants suggested the default position was not to identify unless there was clear contrary evidence.

Concerns about racism covered both overt and covert behaviour.

“Some organisations and people can be covertly racist but state something else as the reason you did or didn’t get the service.”

“I don’t want to put up with their racism.”

Like racism, concerns about the potential for discriminatory behaviour and negative stereotyping arose from past personal experience or observation. In making the decision to identify some participants assessed both the risks to themselves personally and to Aboriginal people in general. The latter included the reinforcing of stereotypes and the loss of liberty.

“The communication of statistics generally is undertaken in a way (that) promotes negative stereotypes and political clichés of Aboriginal people. Too strong a risk that identification perpetuates racism and discrimination.”

“There is already enough of our mob in jails and picked on by the police so why should I let them get to me?”

Some made different decisions for themselves and their children, choosing not to identify their children because of a concern about a stereotypical or discriminatory service response.

“I don’t want people to think that they [my children] are ill or are having specific issues because they are Aboriginal.”

For participants with lighter skin, previous stereotyping on the basis of their physical appearance left them feeling exposed.

“...because I have white skin ... they say I am not black...”

“People look at me: am I black enough?”

“... probably did not look or sound ... Aboriginal.”

Risks to cultural safety

For the sometimes-identify group cultural safety was another factor to be assessed. For most in this group the decision to identify depended on whether the environment was welcoming, or whether they felt concerned they might be treated differently.

The absence of reception areas and waiting spaces that were welcoming to Aboriginal clients Aboriginal-friendly reception areas raised the possibility of embarrassment and intimidation.

“I did not feel I would be welcomed as a Koori woman.”

“If it isn’t private, if I feel intimidated or afraid, if I feel publicly identified or singled out.”

“Made to feel embarrassed, asked in front of others in a tone as if I am lying or they cannot believe I am Aboriginal.”

“... Also depends on who is in the waiting room ...”

Some of those concerned about differential treatment felt that if they identified they might receive a service based on a stereotype rather than on their personal needs.

“... I stopped telling them I was Aboriginal – I noticed the change in how I was treated and my rights were upheld. In hospital, or (at) the doctor, I don’t identify so that I don’t get looked at differently and get the same treatment as any other person.”

“If it is not relevant to a service then as a taxpayer I have a right to a general service provision.”

“Discrimination, people find out that you are Indigenous and suddenly treat you differently to how they treated you before, can be very obvious and makes you feel very uncomfortable.”

“You get treated worse if you say you are a Koori.”

“Because of discrimination. This means that if I identify I reckon ... I won’t get the loan or employment.”

Risks arising from the SIQ and how it was asked

Previous experience of the process of being asked the question – including the question itself, how and why it was asked and who asked it – influenced participants’ willingness to identify.

The suitability and adequacy of terms including ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Indigenous’ in capturing the range of language groups, nations and mobs in NSW were challenged.

“I do not feel that the word Aboriginal is respectful to our unique history and culture. We are all different language groupings. Aboriginal is too broad.”

The risk of being spoken to disrespectfully or not

being believed were important considerations for some. There was evidence that this behaviour led to feelings of shame, embarrassment and perceived judgment by others. It is important to note that in Aboriginal English, shame means more than mere embarrassment. It also means the risk of community and family ostracisation.

“I did not feel comfortable. The staff were rude.”

“The way the [staff] spoke to me was rude when asking the Aboriginal question.”

“The look of scepticism is enough to deter Aboriginal people from wanting to identify.”

Challenges in tracing identity

For 13.1 per cent of the sometimes-identify group their inability to prove their Aboriginal identity was a barrier. While members of this group did not question their identity they had not been raised Aboriginal or had grown up without knowledge of their Aboriginal descent. These participants were only willing to disclose their identity if they believed it would not be challenged:

“I only found out I was Aboriginal about seven years ago. This was because my mum didn’t know.”

“... My grandmother was so secretive about her upbringing. I don’t think she meant to but it always just seemed to be something you don’t talk about.”

“Because my family hid the facts of my heritage from me ... When I confronted them ... they admitted they were Kamilaroi.”

Risks arising from the use of information and privacy

Fear about how the information would be used and the privacy afforded it was expressed by 12.1 per cent of the sometimes-identify group. In general there were three issues.

- Respondents did not know why the information was being collected or how the question was relevant to the service they were seeking, and no explanation was offered.

“I don’t know why they are asking and what they will do with that information. It is not clear. They

just ask the question with no context. If I understand the purpose of the question and what will happen when I do identify then I do identify."

"I do not know why I am asked this question and sometimes I answer yes and other times not."

"Didn't feel it was necessary or relevant ..."

- Respondents took offence at the focus on Aboriginal identity to the exclusion of other cultural identities.

"If I was Irish/Swiss/Indian etc. it does not ask me to tick a box."

"Does any other culture have to identify in this ridiculous way?"

- Respondents were concerned about the privacy of the information once recorded – often stemming from an ongoing mistrust of government.

"... A negative history of government 'counting' and identifying Aboriginal people ..."

"I was afraid of what the government might do with my information. Now, I report but I am concerned about what implication this has given the nature of the legislation in [Australian State or Territory] and whether this puts me and my family at risk."

Risks posed by service type and location

For a small proportion (5.1%) of participants in the sometimes-identify group, place influenced the decision whether to identify. For some, place was a geographic location such as a particular town; for others, place was a specific service.

Services included private businesses such as real estate agents or sporting clubs and professional services such as general practitioners and dentists; federal government services most notably Centrelink and NSW Government services including police, housing, education and health. In drawing conclusions the reader should be aware that the numbers in each 'place' group were small, that it is likely that participants access universal services more frequently than non-universal services, and that

participants' experience may have been recent or several years old.

The never-identify group

The barriers to identifying for the never-identify group gathered logically into one of three main clusters or themes which together accounted for 94% of all the barriers they cited. (Figure 6):

- challenges in tracing their identity
- issues to do with asking the question
- concerns about racism, discrimination and stereotyping.

Challenges in tracing identity

Tracing identity was a much more significant issue for those in the never-identify group (42%) compared with the sometimes-identify group (13.1%). About a third of those who had difficulty in tracing their identity were disconnected from their Aboriginal heritage with about a quarter specifically mentioning a history of removal or adoption, either of themselves or a parent or grandparent:

"I did not know I was Aboriginal because mum was adopted when she was a baby."

"I only found out I was Aboriginal. This happened about a year ago. My grandfather was removed."

Coming late to the information left many participants in a position where it was difficult for them to prove their Aboriginal descent; without this proof, they felt they had no right to claim Aboriginal identity for themselves. For this group, knowing of their Aboriginal identity was insufficient for them to choose to identify in any circumstance.

"I believe that it would not be right to identify as being Aboriginal when I cannot prove where I came from."

Barriers arising from the SIQ and how it was asked

A slightly higher proportion of the never-identify group cited barriers related to the question and how it was asked (22.6%), compared with the sometimes-identify group (18.2%). For the never-identify group the barriers were great enough that they never identified in any circumstance. The

reasons they gave were similar to the sometimes-identify group and included:

- the adequacy of the SIQ in explaining their identity

“I do not like the word Indigenous as I am a Barkindji Woman, not generic as Aboriginal or Indigenous.”

- not being asked the question in the first place

“I am not asked. So I didn’t answer yes.”

“I was not asked if I was Aboriginal.”

- the negative attitudes of service staff.

“[Service provider] workers are often saying stupid and racist comments. Not all, but I have experienced comments.”

Concerns about racism, discrimination and stereotyping

Compared with the sometimes-identify group a smaller proportion of participants in the never-identify group identified racism, discrimination and stereotyping as a barrier (16.1% compared with 29.3%). However for the never-identify group fear of this type of behaviour appeared to take precedence over any other consideration. The fears of this group were based on personal experience and included:

- experience of stereotypical assumptions based on their physical appearance – assumptions that these participants chose not to challenge

“Not asked. I’m sure it is because I have fair skin.”

“...The assumption is that I am white as I look white...”

- experience of racism or of service provision based on their Aboriginal heritage not on their personal needs

“Why would you identify as being a Koori or Murri? It’s only a problem if you do.”

“Supplying this information would not impact on any outcome for me personally, it’s like reverse discrimination.”

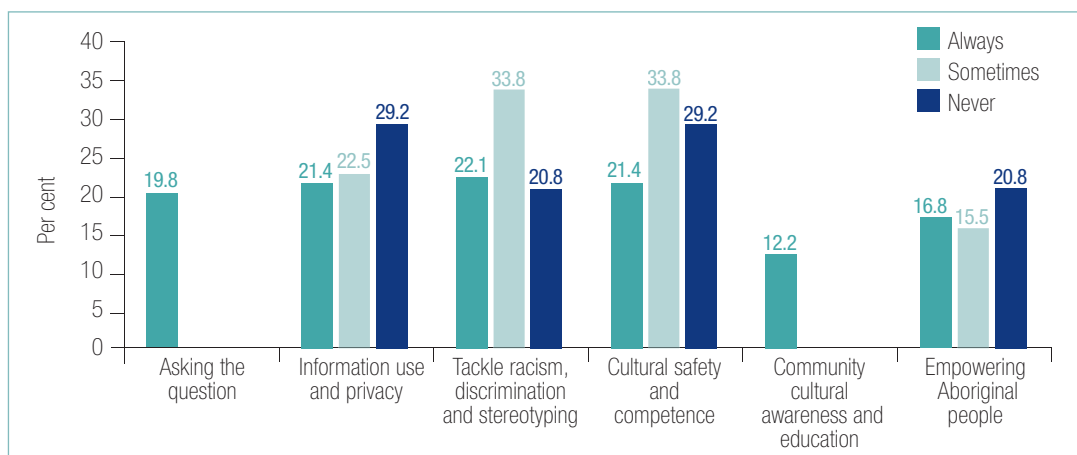
“I think we get treated differently when we tell them we are Aboriginal. So I do not identify.”

IMPROVING THE PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY

Forty-eight per cent of the survey participants offered suggestions about how to encourage Aboriginal people to identify.

Overall, increasing cultural safety; tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping; information use and privacy; and increasing cultural awareness were most often suggested (Figure 7).

Figure 7: How to do things differently, by propensity to identify, per cent within grouping



Note: Categories have been excluded where the number of participants was <5.

Source: Aboriginal self-Identification project, 2014

The effect of participant characteristics

The participants' age, sex, geographic location and propensity to identify were analysed to determine if they influenced the solutions proposed.

Age

There was some variation in the solutions proposed by participant age group (Table 2).

- Clarifying how the information provided on identification would be used (36.8%) was mentioned most frequently by the 15–24 age group.
- Addressing cultural safety and competency (25.0%); and tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping (22.9%) were mentioned most frequently by the 25–34 age group.
- Addressing cultural safety and competency (28.4%) and clarifying how the information provided would be used (23.0%) were mentioned most frequently by the 35–44 age group.
- Tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping (25.6%); and addressing cultural safety and competency (24.5%) were mentioned most frequently by the 45–54 age group.
- Addressing cultural safety and competence (23.9%); tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping (21.1%); and increasing community cultural awareness and education (21.1%); were mentioned most frequently by the 55 and older age group.

Table 2: Participant solutions, by age group, per cent

| | Age group | | | | |
|--|-----------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| | 15-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55+ |
| Addressing cultural safety and competency | * | 25.0 | 28.4 | 24.4 | 23.9 |
| Tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping | * | 22.9 | 17.6 | 25.6 | 21.1 |
| Clarifying how the information will be used and privacy | 36.8 | 10.4 | 23.0 | 16.7 | 16.9 |
| Increasing community cultural awareness and education | * | 20.8 | 9.5 | 14.1 | 21.1 |
| Asking about Aboriginal identity | * | 10.4 | 16.2 | 11.5 | 8.5 |
| Empowering Aboriginal people and pride in culture | * | 10.4 | * | 7.7 | 8.5 |

Note: *Categories have been excluded where the number of participants was <5.

Source: Aboriginal self-identification project, 2014.

Sex

A greater proportion of females than males suggested asking about Aboriginal identity; and tackling racism, discrimination and stereotyping as ways to increase identification. A greater proportion of males suggested addressing cultural safety and competence, and community cultural awareness and education (Table 3).

Table 3: Participant solutions, by sex, per cent

| | Sex |
|--|---|
| Addressing cultural safety and competency | A greater proportion of male compared with female participants (26.4% and 23.4%). |
| Tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping | A greater proportion of female compared with male participants (22.0% and 20.3%). |
| Clarifying how the information will be used and privacy | Similar proportions of male compared with female participants (18.9 and 18.4%). |
| Increasing community cultural awareness and education | A greater proportion of male compared with female participants (16.9% and 14.2%). |
| Asking about Aboriginal identity | A greater proportion of female compared with male participants (14.2% and 8.8%). |
| Empowering Aboriginal people and pride in culture | Similar proportions of male compared with female participants (8.8% and 7.8%). |

Source: Aboriginal self-Identification project, 2014

Geographic location

The geographic remoteness of participants influenced the solutions proposed by participants (Table 4).

- Addressing cultural safety and competency (24.1%) and clarifying how the information will be used and privacy (20.5%) were most frequently mentioned by participants living in major cities.
- Tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping (23.6%); and addressing cultural safety and competency (22.1%) were most frequently mentioned by participants living in inner regional locations.
- Addressing cultural safety and competency (38.5%); and tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping (20.5%) were most frequently mentioned by participants living in outer regional locations.
- Clarifying how the information provided would be used and its privacy (38.1%), and community cultural awareness and education (28.6%) were most frequently mentioned by participants living in remote or very remote locations.

Table 4: Participant solutions, by geographic location, per cent

| | Major cities | Inner regional | Outer regional | Remote/very remote |
|--|--------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Addressing cultural safety and competency | 24.1 | 22.1 | 38.5 | 23.8 |
| Tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping | 18.1 | 23.6 | 20.5 | * |
| Clarifying how the information will be used and privacy | 20.5 | 16.4 | * | 38.1 |
| Increasing community cultural awareness and education | 12.0 | 19.3 | * | 28.6 |
| Asking about Aboriginal identity | 15.7 | 10.0 | 15.4 | - |
| Empowering Aboriginal people and pride in culture | 9.6 | 8.6 | * | - |

Notes: * Categories have been excluded where the number of participants was <5; denotes nil response.

Source: Aboriginal self-Identification project, 2014

Strategies to increase identification

The always-identify group

As seen in Figure 7, the always-identify group suggested a range of options for increasing the identification of others including:

- tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping
- addressing cultural safety and competency
- clarifying how the information will be used and its privacy
- asking about Aboriginal identification
- empowering Aboriginal people
- community cultural awareness and education.

A significantly greater proportion of participants in this group suggested asking about Aboriginal identity, and empowering Aboriginal people as ways to increase Aboriginal identification compared with participants in the sometimes or never-identify groups. Many in this group focused on the need for legislation or policies to be devised or implemented to tackle racism, discrimination or stereotyping:

“.... should be required by law.”

“[We] go to these professionals assuming they know what’s available and government policies and drives etc, but they don’t.”

“On most of the occasions these strategies/policies whilst they are well intended they have rarely implemented appropriately in the first instance.”

The sometimes-identify group

Compared with the always-identify group, the sometimes-identify group suggested a smaller range of options for increasing identification, and a greater proportion suggested addressing cultural safety and competency, and tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping (Figure 7).

Options included:

- tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping

- addressing cultural safety and competency
- clarifying how the information will be used and privacy
- community cultural awareness and education.

More than 90 per cent of suggestions concerned clarifying how the information will be used and privacy; tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping; and addressing cultural safety and competency.

The suggestions offered by this group provide insights into how to increase the identification of Aboriginal people who respond to the prevailing environment and circumstances when deciding whether to identify.

Addressing cultural competence and safety

This group felt that increasing cultural competence would entail changes both to the operation of service centres, and to the attitudes and behaviour of staff.

Non-Aboriginal staff would need to know about Aboriginal history and the experiences of Aboriginal peoples, including the effects these have had, and continue to have, on Aboriginal people. Further, the staff would need to understand that there is no one journey for Aboriginal people but many journeys that are complex and for some, painful. In the words of participants:

“Better training for staff on Aboriginal cultural awareness with the aim to reduce ignorance.”

“More empathy from services about people’s journey to find their Aboriginality.”

“Cultural awareness that’s across all government services. This needs to have a local content, involve local Aboriginal people, all non-Aboriginal staff to do this, mandatory.”

“Lots can be done. Better education from non-Indigenous workers on the needs and how to genuinely work with our mob.”

For the sometimes-identify group, creating a culturally safe service required attention to physical spaces. It was clear to participants that the values and beliefs of a service centre are reflected in the design of reception areas, waiting spaces and

interview rooms. These need to be welcoming and appropriate to the Aboriginal community in which the centre operates:

“More comfortable surroundings and Aboriginal people feeling like they are identifying without judgement.”

“Don't make me walk across large expanses of open area to get to the reception desk, it feels scary.”

“Ensure that these interviews are carried out in private, I have walked out of agencies because I have not wanted to discuss my Aboriginality at the front counter. This was not out of shame but out of fear of being judged by others who do not know my background.”

“Spend time and effort on how we can make these services more welcoming for Koori people.”

“More Aboriginal liaison officers in public services.”

Tackling or stopping racism, discrimination and stereotyping

As with cultural competency and safety, the measures this group suggested to tackle or stop racism and discrimination included the education of service staff. The group also suggested that racist behaviour be identified as such and that there be obvious consequences for it.

“More understanding of the different types of Aboriginal people in NSW.”

“Remove the fear and racism that comes with being a black person in this country.”

“I know that some people have difficult jobs, but the attitude and way they ask can turn people from answering correctly.”

“Get rid of racist workers.”

“More discipline with staff that are racist.”

Suggestions to counter stereotyping included challenging the negative discourse and myths about Aboriginal peoples, including that physical appearance determines Aboriginal identity.

“It is perceived that Aboriginal people receive more services than the general public, so I hesitate to declare my Aboriginality at the counter of a Government Agency.”

“Stop treating us like we are all deaf/alcoholics/illiterate/poor/dumb and all the other dignity-related stereotypes.”

“Because I have fair skin I do not always get asked if I am Aboriginal. Staff need to be aware not all Aboriginal people have black skin.”

Clarifying how the information will be used

The group suggested Aboriginal people could be reassured about how the information is to be used by clear answers to basic questions such as:

- Why is the question being asked? (Is it for statistical purposes only, or will the answers be used to improve service provision?)
- What are the personal benefits of identifying? (Will identifying allow a person access to more tailored services, or to services specifically for Aboriginal people?)
- Will the answers be shared with others? (Who will have access to them, and in what circumstances?)
- Where will the information be stored and how will privacy be maintained?

Two fundamental points underlay all the suggestions from the sometimes-identify group. First, an open conversation, to which all are encouraged to contribute, is needed about identification. Second, service policy and codes of conduct should reflect ethical practice.

“Explain and give context.”

“Be explicit about the use of the data.”

“Explain why you are asking the question. Give context. Let people know what will happen to them if they answer that question. Will they be offered supports if they choose to take them? Will they be forced to use Aboriginal services?”

“...by treating us as [a] family first and foremost, not just somebody who is Aboriginal or Islander...”

“Programs should be optional not forced upon people just because they identify.”

The never-identify group

The primary focus of the never-identify group was on clarifying how the information would be used, and cultural competency and safety. Together these accounted for almost 60 per cent of all suggestions (Figure 7). In the words of participants:

“Tell people why they need to identify as Aboriginal. Why is it important?”

“Why do I need to identify??? - Just provide better services to all Australians regardless of background.”

“Support non-Aboriginal staff with Aboriginal cultural awareness.”

“Make government officers more welcoming.”

“Train people in cross-cultural awareness so they understand why people behave differently, it is not wrong.”

“This was personal journey for me and support and understanding from frontline staff would be beneficial.”



DISCUSSION

Much has been achieved since the July 2009 NIRA commitment to improve Aboriginal identification data in key administrative data sets.

In NSW, the Ministries of Health, and Attorney General and Justice; the Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, and the Department of Education have adopted the SIQ; policies and procedures have actively promoted Aboriginal identification; and a 2013–2014 regional strategy has been implemented to raise the Aboriginal peoples' awareness of the importance of identifying when seeking or receiving a government service. In relation to cultural competency, training packages have been audited to identify gaps and areas where they may be improved; and staff cultural competency training and culturally safe work practices have been developed and delivered. These include the NSW Aboriginal Health Plan (NSW Ministry for Health, 2012, p. 15), and under OCHRE, a cultural competence framework which the NSW Public Service Commission has undertaken to develop for the NSW public service (Aboriginal Affairs, 2013 p.17).

At a national level, the *National best practice guidelines for collecting Indigenous status in health data sets*, developed in 2010 (AIHW, 2010a), represent the most comprehensive attempt to date to promote accurate health statistics. The recommendations of the ABS arising from the 2011 review of the quality of Indigenous status information in school enrolments, birth registrations and death registrations are being implemented (AIHW, 2014).

While significant headway has been made, problems persist (AIHW, 2010; Kelaher et al., 2010; ABS, 2012). The present study has examined the patterns in identification of nearly 500 Aboriginal people in NSW when accessing government services. In doing so, it has helped to define the barriers to identification more clearly, and has shed some light on how they may be addressed.

The findings suggest that the road to identification is different for different people and different groups. While the majority of participants (71%) always identified, eight per cent never did so. The latter group feeling a disconnection from their culture – a legacy of past government policies and practices. A further 21 per cent changed their identification according to time, location and environment. This group assessed the risks in identifying, only choosing to do so when the situation was favourable.

In addition, the act of identifying is complex. For many, the transaction is not simple, but raises a number of profound personal and cultural questions. The solutions are similarly complex, and require those who provide government services to pay particular attention both to service practice and to the values and beliefs held about Aboriginality in general and Aboriginal persons in particular.

Government practice

As noted above, NSW Government agencies have made considerable headway in developing and implementing legislation, policies and procedures that aim to support their staff in engaging with Aboriginal people including on the issue of identification.

Numerous examples however were cited where staff lacked the knowledge, skill, or inclination to discuss

the issue, or where the process that participants felt to be necessary was in place. The SIQ is a case in point. Many participants indicated that they were not given the information they needed to make an informed choice. The missing information included the purpose of identifying, the benefits of doing so, and the privacy and security of their data. Knowledge of the *Privacy and Personal Protection Act 1998* (NSW) and the *Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002* (NSW) would have helped here. This finding is supported by other research including Kelaher et al. (2010), who established that a number of health service providers did not know the purpose of the SIQ.

Information on Aboriginal identification helps both government to monitor how services are performing, and service providers to design services for specific needs. These two purposes are often not aligned. For statistics and reporting, clear and consistent information is required; service providers on the other hand require more nuanced information that focuses on the individual rather than the statistical aggregate. In practice the SIQ has been used for both.

In this study the SIQ presented a particular barrier to many participants who believed it does not account for the diversity of Aboriginal experience. Binary in nature, it cannot record the multiple identities of persons born of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal partnerships. It precludes the recording of nations, language groups or clans – or a person's choice not to identify. The results of this study suggest a different methodology is needed – one that can record the diversity of each individual's experience.

Although agencies recognise that the SIQ does not capture the diversity of the Aboriginal community, they have been reluctant to change it. The ABS noted in its 2014 review that “While there was acknowledgement from some agencies that the wording of the current SIQ is not optimal, agencies specifically noted that changing the measurement concept would equate to a break in time series” (ABS, 2014, p.2). The ABS has undertaken to investigate whether a new question is needed for the 2021 Census, and in doing so to consult with a view to devising a question that reflects the diversity of

Aboriginal peoples by eliciting information such as language group, clan, tribe, nation or mob. The findings of the present study suggest change is needed urgently, as the current disconnect between the 'person and the code' is leaving some Aboriginal people unwilling to identify and others willing to do so only when they consider the question relevant and feel that identifying is culturally safe. Yet change must be undertaken with great care: it will affect the comparability of data over time and across administrative data collections, and by requiring new forms and software, will inevitably increase costs.

In considering the SIQ we must also consider the information systems used to record answers to it. Some scholars have argued that information technology has reduced the discretionary power of professionals in what is called 'screen-level bureaucracy' (see for example Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). An unintended consequence of asking the SIQ and using an unvariable computerised template to record the answer may be compromised data. Information systems and the processes that support them must become flexible enough to take account of the difficulties the question poses for Aboriginal people and service providers alike, and also its voluntary nature.

Values and beliefs

This study has highlighted the effect of others' values and beliefs on participants' decisions to identify.

Reflecting on the issues discussed at a 2009 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies workshop, Scott Gorringer and his colleagues have noted that negative perceptions of Aboriginality reflected in emotive and deficit language (e.g. 'drunks', 'lazy', 'welfare dependent', '[given] favouritism' and 'under-achievers') both are of continuing concern to Aboriginal peoples and affect their health, well-being and social and economic development (Gorringer et al., 2011). For many study participants this ever-present negative stereotyping explained their choice never or only sometimes to disclose their Aboriginal identity.

Experiences of, or concerns about stereotyping, racism and discrimination at service centres acted to

create a culturally unsafe environment for participants. Establishing a different environment requires both a culturally competent workforce and a culturally safe service centre. Achieving this is likely to be complex.

NSW government agencies have shown they are committed to cultural competency. Policies exist to articulate the shared set of core values and beliefs about Aboriginal Australians that underpin cross-cultural practice; procedures and guidelines detail how these are to be implemented at a local level; and ongoing professional development supports workers in their practice. The evidence from this study however indicates that this commitment is not always on display at service centres or by individual workers. This must change. There is considerable scholarship suggesting that cultural competence requires a commitment to an ongoing process that involves both motivation and willingness to improve cross-cultural communication and practice (see for example Hanley, 1999; Walker, Schultz, & Sonn, 2014). The solutions will necessarily be localised and whatever the resolution, participants were clear that respect for Aboriginal people, understanding and empathy were essential.

As noted earlier, the design of waiting spaces, rooms and offices deliver powerful messages and directly affect Aboriginal people's feelings of cultural safety and their assessment of the cultural competence of service staff. Physical spaces that reflect a service centre's values and beliefs and are appropriate to the Aboriginal nation on which the service centre sits are therefore important. Given that there is no one Aboriginal culture, a one-design-fits-all approach will do little to address the issue. Designs need to be informed by the local Aboriginal community and locally appropriate solutions determined.

Together, departmental policies and the way staff observe them, the cultural competence of staff, the cultural safety of the service environment, and community stereotyping all shape a person's self-knowledge and self-esteem. The participants in the present study who always identified were proud of their culture and confident and connected to it. Conversely those who never identified were



disconnected. For this group, and to a lesser degree the sometimes-identify group, tracing their identity continues to be a challenge. Assisting these individuals to trace their Aboriginal family history remains of paramount importance. Services which can help with this include Link-Up NSW and Aboriginal Affairs, which holds the records of the former Aborigines Welfare Board (previously known as the Aborigines Protection Board).



CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show identification is a process which reflects each individual's personal journey. The decision to identify differs from person to person and group to group. For some, it is simple. There is no choice: their standing in the community, their history with government services, or their physical appearance make the decision for them. For others, however, the question is far from clear cut. As this study has shown, for some individuals identification varies with time, place and circumstances. Someone who has not identified previously as Aboriginal may do so; someone else who has identified in the past may cease doing so. And as individuals' propensity to identify alters, so does the data. If the variations this produces in the data are not understood and allowed for, inappropriate conclusions may be drawn.

For many to be asked a question about identification is not a simple matter. Being asked can cause personal pain for some; it may prompt others to assess the risk which answering may pose to themselves or their community. This finding points to the need for a multifaceted response that addresses both current service practice and the prevailing negative discourse about Australia's First Peoples.

Efforts to address service practice need to be local and could usefully focus on the cultural competency of staff and the cultural safety of service centres – including providing a culturally safe physical environment; identifying racist and discriminatory behaviour and taking action to address it; providing staff with the knowledge needed to support an individual to make an informed choice about whether to identify; and engaging in a better informed dialogue at both national and local levels about the purpose and process of identification including the SIQ.

Changing the negative discourse requires sustained commitment at all levels and across and within Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Nigel Parbury (2005) concluded that awareness raising and education in Australia had little impact on attitudes. A different approach is needed if we are to break out of this stalemate.

There appears to be no shortage of willingness on the part of study participants to address the barriers to identification. Many are keen to continue the dialogue that commenced for them with this study.

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APPENDIX 1: KEY HISTORICAL EVENTS RELEVANT TO DEFINITIONS OF ABORIGINALITY

- 1901** The Australian Commonwealth Constitution is introduced, stating that “in reckoning the numbers of people ... Aboriginal natives shall not be counted”.
- 1909** The NSW Aborigines Protection Act excludes Aboriginal children from public schools and makes it illegal for ‘half-castes’ to live on reserves. Amendments to the Act in 1915 give the NSW Aborigines Protection Board greater power to remove Aboriginal children without parental consent, and without a court hearing. Although children had been removed from their families for almost a century before, the amendments recognise the practice in law.
- 1911** The first national Census is held. All Aboriginal people are invited to complete the Census but those who are ‘more than half Aboriginal’ in heritage are excluded from published Census results.
- 1934** Under the Aborigines Act, Aboriginal people can apply to ‘cease being Aboriginal’ and therefore gain access to the same rights as non-Aboriginal people.
- 1937** The National Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities agree on the policy of Assimilation. Aboriginal people of mixed descent are to be removed and assimilated into wider society, and all others forced to stay on reserves.
- 1940** The Aborigines Protection Board is replaced by the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board.
- 1943** An exemption certificate is introduced for certain Aboriginal people which entitles them to vote, drink alcohol and move freely, but at the same time prohibiting them from associating with those who are not exempt. Many Aboriginal people refer to the certificates by the derogatory term ‘dog tag’.
- 1943** The NSW Aborigines Welfare Board begins to board out children to foster parents.
- 1967** More than 90 per cent of Australians vote to allow the Commonwealth to legislate for Aboriginal people, opening the way for all Aboriginal people to be counted in the Census.
- 1969** The Aborigines Welfare Board is abolished; by this time all states have repealed legislation allowing the removal of children under the policy of ‘Protection’.
- 1971** The ‘Race Question’ in the Census is changed to allow people to identify according to what they felt their ‘racial origin’ to be, rather than referring to ‘blood’, ‘race’, or ‘caste’ as in pre-1967 Censuses.
- 1972** The Aboriginal Tent Embassy is set up on the lawns of Parliament House, Canberra, and the Aboriginal flag becomes a national symbol.
- 1973** The Commonwealth Self Determination policy is announced.
- 1978** Federal Cabinet endorses the three-part definition of Aboriginality previously used by the Commonwealth as a working definition.
- 1983** The NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act (ALRA) is introduced, containing the three-part definition of Aboriginality.
- 1992** High Court in *Mabo (No.2)* holds that Aboriginal people may hold native title rights in land, water and natural resources.
- 1993** Native Title Act 1993 (Commonwealth) codifies native title law including the process for Aboriginal people to claim, prove and exercise their native title rights and interests, creating two new categories of identity – native title claimants and native title holders.
- 1995** Aboriginal ownership provisions inserted into ALRA and National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974, creating two further categories of identity – Aboriginal people with cultural association with particular lands, and Aboriginal Owners of particular lands.
- 1990s-2000s** Several leading cases are heard involving ATSIC elections in Tasmania. The cases establish strong judicial precedents on all three elements of the Aboriginality test. In response to the ongoing controversy, Tasmania introduces an ATSIC election roll that lists Aboriginal Tasmanians eligible to vote. However the roll itself then becomes the source of much controversy.
- 2010** NSW Constitutional recognition of Aboriginal people.

APPENDIX 2: NSW COMMUNITIES VISITED

The communities visited represent a diversity of Aboriginal nations including Nganyaywana, Awabakal, Barkindji, Biripi, Bundjalung, Dadi Dadi, Dangali, Darkinjung, Dharug, Daingatti, , Gumbainggir, Gundungurra, Kamilaroi, Ngunawal, Tharawal, Wailwan, Wiljali, Wiradjuri, Gunu, Wonnaru, Worimi, Yuin (The spelling of the nations reflects that used in the NSW Area Health Services Aboriginal Nations Map; see <http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/key-resources/promotion-resources/?lid=21358>)

The towns and cities visited are as follows with those revisited indicated in **bold**.

| | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Armidale | Ivanhoe | Taree |
| Ballina | Kempsey | Trangie |
| Balranald | Kiama | Tweed Heads |
| Batemans Bay | Kurri Kurri | Ulladulla |
| Bathurst | Lake Cargelligo | Wagga Wagga |
| Blue Mountains | Lake Macquarie | Walgett |
| Bourke | Lightning Ridge | Wallaga Lake |
| Bowraville | Lismore | Wauchope |
| Brewarrina | Lithgow | Wellington |
| Broken Hill | Macksville | West Wyalong |
| Campbelltown | Maitland | Wilcannia |
| Casino | Menindee | Wingecarribee |
| Cessnock | Moree | Wollongong |
| Cobar | Mt Druit | |
| Cobar | Mudgee | |
| Coffs Harbour | Nambucca Heads | |
| Collarenebri | Narrabri | |
| Condobolin | Narromine | |
| Coonabarabran | Newcastle | |
| Coonamble | Nyngan | |
| Cootamundra | Orange | |
| Dareton | Parkes | |
| Dubbo | Parramatta | |
| Forbes | Port Macquarie | |
| Forster | Queanbeyan | |
| Gerringong | Sawtell | |
| Gilgandra | Shellharbour | |
| Gloucester | Shoalhaven | |
| Grafton | Sydney | |
| Griffith | Tamworth | |
| Hay | Tanilba Bay | |

