



Information Paper

**Perspectives on Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander
Identification in Selected
Data Collection Contexts**

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INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

The 2011 Census of Population and Housing recorded a large increase in the number of people identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (compared to the 2006 Census count) (ABS, 2012a; ABS, 2012b). This increase, and other recorded increases in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counts, should be considered with regard to the range of factors that contribute to these changes. Examples of changes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counts include the increase recorded between the 1991 and 1996 Censuses (Ross, 1996) and recorded increases in the uptake of Medicare's Voluntary Indigenous Identification program (AIHW, 2010, appendix A, p.6).

These increases can be attributed to a range of factors: demographic changes such as births and deaths, procedural changes such as enumeration and processing strategies, and changes in the number of people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) plans to undertake further analytical work to understand the demographic and non-demographic factors contributing to changes in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. It is anticipated that the first release of the analytical work will be in June 2013.

This paper explores factors that contribute to an individual's decision to disclose their Indigenous status.

BACKGROUND

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is statistically measured by self-identification. That is, individuals who answer in the affirmative to questions about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin make up the population of people enumerated as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in any data collection instrument.

The Standard Indigenous Question (SIQ) was developed by the ABS and is used across a number of government agencies to collect statistics relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The question is expressed as follows:

<p>Is the person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• For persons of both Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, mark both 'Yes' boxes.	<p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Aboriginal</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Torres Strait Islander</p>
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This self-identification methodology is widely used around the world and is supported by most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and representatives. It requires that individuals a) know their biological ancestry and b) make the decision to disclose it when requested to do so in a specific data collection context (for example, when responding to a survey or enrolling in a course of study).

The ABS has conducted a number of research projects aimed at understanding the factors involved in self-identification as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in data collection contexts. This paper outlines the views offered to the ABS in the course of that research, along with a brief overview of relevant literature. The ABS hopes this contribution to the wider understanding of identification in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics will be of value to those who develop, contribute to and use these measures. While subjective individual factors are difficult to quantify, an understanding of the personal considerations that lead to identification or non-identification can offer another layer of meaning when examining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics.

INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

The Commonwealth definition (Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1981) provides three criteria that determine an individual's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status:

A person is considered Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander if he or she:

- Is of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin
- Identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- Is accepted by an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community.

The Standard Indigenous Question explicitly ascertains the first component of the Commonwealth definition. It is noted that the third component (community acceptance) is rarely assessed in ascertaining an individual's Indigenous status in data collection contexts. The Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is therefore comprised of the people who identify themselves as its members at any point of enumeration.

Populations that are measured in this way can change in a number of ways. Demographic change, the result of births to, and deaths of, existing members of the population, is the primary mechanism for population growth or decline. Others include changes to enumeration and data processing procedures and changes to identification behaviours. Changes to enumeration and data processing procedures can affect the number of people who are included in population counts and estimates, while changes to identification behaviours reflect varying propensity to identify on the part of individuals responding to questions about their Indigenous status.

Propensity to identify is widely considered to be one of the factors in measuring Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, both in administrative and survey data collections. Propensity to identify is defined here as the likelihood that individuals will self-identify as belonging to the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population when asked about their Indigenous status. This paper will focus on propensity to identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in Australian data collection contexts (though international perspectives on identification are canvassed in the literature review).

Further to this definition, it is noted that in some cases, Indigenous status information is disclosed on behalf of respondents by a third party. The most obvious examples of this are a) the population Census, where questions may be answered by one household member on behalf of other household members and b) situations in which parents and/or carers answer on behalf of children or individuals who are unable to provide information themselves (including birth and death registrations).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some settings a person responsible for data collection may enter a response to a question or questions about Indigenous status without asking the question of the individual; this is discussed in the focus group summaries that follow. In these cases, incorrect Indigenous status may be recorded on the basis of physical appearance, name or group/community membership or other factors that are considered inappropriate for determining Indigenous status. Administrative processes are also noted as contributing to data quality issues in this area.

INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

It is necessary for researchers and data users to consider why individuals identify, or choose not to identify, as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in data collection contexts. Changes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population counts (not attributable to demographic increase or changes to enumeration and data processing procedures) suggest that individuals identify differentially across time and contexts. Observed disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander records in administrative data sets and known service use or expected population representation in these data sets also support this notion. The decision to disclose one's Indigenous status is a personal one, and potentially complex. In addition to an individual's assessment of the question and the data collection context, identification may be influenced by attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that the individual is not consciously aware of. To the extent that it is possible to understand the process of identification, however, it is incumbent upon the ABS and relevant data users to consider identification and its antecedents as a key part of the data collection/enumeration process.

An understanding of the factors involved in identification as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander can inform our broader approach to, and interpretation of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics. An example of this is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population growth, beyond what is attributable to demographic factors, observed at the 2011 Census (ABS, 2012a; ABS 2012b). An increase in the number of people identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander is widely considered to be a contributor to growth in that population. This research, along with further analytical work, may contribute to discussions around the recorded population growth observed at the 2011 Census and, more broadly, measurement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes for policy.

PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY RESEARCH PROJECTS

OVERVIEW

The ABS conducted research work in 2010 and 2012 to understand the issues surrounding and contributing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' propensity to identify. This work took the form of focus groups, facilitated by external consultants in locations around Australia. The focus group research conducted in 2010 focused on identification in administrative data collections and the 2012 research sought to understand identification behaviours in survey contexts. The focus group research was supplemented by a brief review of relevant literature in Australia and internationally.

The focus groups explored a range of environments/situations in which participants may have the opportunity to identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Discussion included, but was not limited to, collections administered or accessed by the ABS.

Broadly, the findings of the focus group research were around the following themes:

- Pride in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage as a reason to identify
- Perceptions of benefit, both at the individual and the population level, resulting from identification
- The potential for negative consequences, experiences of discrimination and inappropriate administration of Indigenous status questions as factors discouraging identification
- The desire for information about the need for Indigenous status information, to inform decisions about identification
- The impact of social environment on identification, and change in the environment surrounding identification in recent decades

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Focus groups are not a representative sample; focus group participants are self-selecting. They belong to a specific sub-population of people who have links to the community organisations and contacts involved in the focus group research in each location. Participation was open to people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and as such a bias toward consistent identification is possible in the participants' views. The findings generated by the focus groups are valuable in informing discussion on identification behaviours, but the findings are not representative of the views of any one group.

The views expressed in the focus groups are summarised below without preference. Quantifiers such as 'some', 'most', or 'a few' have been avoided in acknowledgement of the fact that the number of focus group participants expressing a particular view is not necessarily representative of the extent to which that view is held in the wider population. Where views or discussion topics are presented here, they reflect the views of a number of participants, generally across multiple focus group sessions. This paper has been careful to avoid any bias toward the opinions of individual participants.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The ABS would like to thank the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participated in the focus groups. Their knowledge provides valuable insight into the environment in which data is collected and the experiences of clients and stakeholders in data collection contexts. Their contributions to this research form part of an essential dialogue toward a greater shared understanding in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy space.

PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY RESEARCH PROJECTS

LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS IN BRIEF

Note that the word 'Indigenous' is used throughout this discussion of the literature as it pertains to internationally comparable conceptions of Indigenous populations.

A range of research work, both academic and governmental, was assessed to ascertain the current understanding of differential identification both in Australia and overseas. Other countries with large Indigenous populations (USA, Canada and New Zealand) were included, though barriers to direct comparison are noted. Broadly, the literature review found that propensity to identify is discussed as a factor influencing Indigenous statistics in all four countries considered in the review. To varying extents, differential identification patterns (specifically, 'new identifications', where individuals who have not previously identified as Indigenous do so for the first time) are thought to have contributed to non-demographic growth in Indigenous populations in recent decades.

Changing propensity to identify impacts on population counts and on the assessment, for the purposes of social policy, of the needs of the relevant population. There are two key ways in which this is observed. If propensity to identify has a greater impact on either Census counts or administrative data (that is, if the effect of propensity to identify is not uniform across data sets and across time), changes in the population count could create a change in rate statistics. Rate statistics use the population count as the denominator to calculate the frequency of an occurrence (for example, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have completed Year 12) relative to the whole population. If the denominator (the population count) changes because of something that does not impose the same change on the numerator (the variable of interest, e.g., Year 12 completion), the rate statistic changes. This 'denominator shift' could create the impression of a change in some outcome variables when no such shift has in fact occurred in the population being measured (Barnes, 1997). Independent of this, individuals identifying for the first time may share certain characteristics. If a large number of people with a particular characteristic 'appear' in the population for the first time, this could create a change in the measure of that characteristic in the total population. That is, the aggregate measure of that characteristic may change without any real change having occurred in that variable for the population that was last measured.

The exact amount of non-demographic population change that can be accounted for by changes in propensity to identify is uncertain. Variability in propensity to identify has nonetheless been recognised by the ABS and other research bodies as a key factor in population variability (ABS, 1998; ABS, 2002; ABS & AIHW, 2003; Ross 1996). The ABS has attempted to incorporate differential identification into its population projections, issuing a 'low series' estimate based on the assumption of no change in identification (assuming population change on the basis of measurable demographic factors only) and a 'high series' estimate, which allows for some variability in identification patterns (ABS, 1998).

Factors that are proposed as contributing to propensity to identify include marriages between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and people of non-Indigenous descent, geography and the social environment in which identification occurs. People who have one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous parent are observed as having particularly variable identification behaviours both in Australia (Ross, 1996) and internationally (Chapple, 1999; Gould, 2000), while individuals living in urban areas often represent the populations in which high levels of non-demographic growth are observed (Ross, 1996). Changes in individual propensity to identify were observed in a New Zealand longitudinal study (Carter, Hayward, Blakely & Shaw, 2009); survey respondents reporting multiple ethnicities at wave 1 were among the most likely (alongside those reporting sole Maori ethnicity) to report different ethnicity in subsequent waves.

PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY RESEARCH PROJECTS

Changes in the social environment over time, in particular since the civil rights movements of the 1960s, are cited as contributing to increases in Indigenous identification (Guimond, 2006). Other changes in policy and public opinion are also linked to high rates of Indigenous population growth. This is particularly noticeable in Canada, where changes to legislative definitions of Indigenous groups and the benefits available on the basis of group membership have preceded marked growth in those groups (Guimond, Kerr & Beaujot, 2003).

While not solely focused on Indigenous populations, the work of Duncan and Trejo (2005) on social mobility and inter-marriage highlights a key issue of consideration for ethnic groups – that individuals who marry outside their ethnic group report better economic outcomes, and their children are more variably identified. New Zealand researchers have also found that people who have one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous parent appear to achieve better socioeconomic outcomes than those who solely identify with a disadvantaged sub-population (eg. Maori) (Chapple, 1999; Gould, 2000). Assuming that propensity to identify is most variable in populations with high rates of exogamy, shifts in identification in this sub-population (the population of people with mixed Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous heritage) could have impacts on aggregate outcome measures for the overall Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY RESEARCH PROJECTS

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY AS ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER IN SURVEYS

Focus groups were conducted in 2012 to explore attitudes to identification in census and survey contexts in urban areas. Understanding the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban areas was of particular interest; previous analysis of census counts has identified that, where large increases in the enumerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population occurred, a large proportion of the growth occurred in urban areas (Ross, 1996). More recently, analysis of 2011 Census data (ABS, 2012b) has identified a similar trend. Significant non-demographic growth in urban Indigenous populations has also occurred elsewhere in the world (Eschbach, 1993).

An external consultant with extensive experience in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups was contracted to conduct the research on the ABS' behalf. Focus groups were conducted in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Darwin and Hobart. A range of age groups were represented (though not evenly distributed across groups) and a total of 203 people participated across 18 focus group sessions. Participants were not asked to disclose their residential address. However, with the exception of participants who may have been visiting these urban locations temporarily, it is assumed that these focus groups collected the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban areas only.

Questions were grouped around topics including:

- Reasons for identifying or not identifying
- Impact of collection mode
- Identifying on behalf of a third party (or the experience of having one's identity disclosed by a third party)
- Changes in identification behaviours over time.

The research design sought to understand perspectives on identification for each mode of collection: interview, paper form and online form, however it was observed that discussion tended to refer to general attitudes toward identification. Differences between collection modes were observed, for the most part, only where differences inherent in the collection mode would force a specific opinion. For example, issues to do with interviewers being known to respondents impacted on views about Indigenous identification in interview surveys, whereas pride in identity was reported as a reason for identifying regardless of collection mode.

PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

Factors encouraging identification:

Across all methods of collection, the reasons for disclosing one's Indigenous status information were commonly attributed to:

- A sense of pride and confidence in their identity
- The perception that disclosing this information can lead to benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the individual personally
- The perception that disclosing this information can promote recognition for issues related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY RESEARCH PROJECTS

- Having a 'Confirmation of Aboriginality'¹ to support their identification
- The perception that answering the question was compulsory in certain contexts.

Factors discouraging identification:

Across all methods of collection, the reasons for not disclosing one's Indigenous status information were commonly attributed to:

- The belief and experience that identifying can have negative repercussions for the individual and the wider community
- The belief and experience that identifying may lead to racism, discrimination or differential treatment
- Learned behaviour as a result of past experiences
- Being offended at being asked the identity question in certain contexts
- Needing more information about the reasons the information is being collected.

Participants indicated a number of other factors that affected their propensity to disclose their Indigenous status information. These included:

- Who was conducting the survey
- The content, purpose and relevance of the survey
- The perceived relevance of the identity question to the survey
- Access to the information being collected
- Practical considerations such as timing, duration and setting.

Other notable findings included:

- Participants tended to report that their propensity to identify would be the same regardless of how the survey was enumerated
- Younger participants reported more of a willingness to disclose their Indigenous status than older participants
- Identifying on behalf of another person was generally seen as unacceptable unless that person was an immediate family member.

The perceived benefits of identification, either at the group or individual level, were raised in these focus groups and discussion was similar to that observed in the 2010 focus groups. Participants also spoke of identification promoting recognition of issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The importance of accurate statistics on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was raised. Participants also discussed the commonplace nature of survey research and reported identifying 'automatically' without giving significant consideration to the decision.

Conversely, the belief and experience that identifying can have negative repercussions for the individual and the wider community and may lead to racism, discrimination or 'different' treatment was reported as a motivation not to disclose one's Indigenous status. Some participants also indicated that their reluctance to identify is 'learned behaviour' as a result of negative past experiences.

¹ As outlined by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) a 'Confirmation of Aboriginality' can be in the form of:

- A letter signed by the Chairperson of an incorporated Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisation confirming that you are recognised as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person, OR

- A confirmation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent form executed by an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisation

For more information see: <http://www.apsc.gov.au/indigenous/indigenous-pathways/faq-graduates>

PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY RESEARCH PROJECTS

One reason noted by participants for not identifying was being offended at being asked the Indigenous status question in certain contexts. Participants expressed frustration at the frequency with which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to identify themselves compared with other population groups. The wording of the question was noted as important in obtaining accurate responses.

Participants also noted that they need information about the reasons the information is being collected in order to make an informed decision about identifying. The impression that answering the question was compulsory in certain contexts was also mentioned.

There was discussion about ‘qualifiers’ of Indigenous status. While some participants felt that an individual should be able to identify if they wished to, some expressed a view that an individual is required to possess a ‘Confirmation of Aboriginality’, which is a form of documentary evidence of an individual’s Indigenous status. It is important to note that this tension may exist in the broader population, as it may discourage self-identification dependent on the view of the community an individual resides in. Some participants spoke of being more comfortable with identifying now that they have a ‘Confirmation of Aboriginality’ certificate.

Findings from the focus groups also indicated that it may be difficult for people with newly discovered Indigenous status to disclose their status in a group environment as this can often be treated with scepticism.

DIFFERENCES ACROSS SURVEY METHODOLOGIES

While participants tended to indicate that survey methodology would not have an impact on their response, the following views were offered by participants who held specific views on the different survey approaches.

Paper

Participants cited the anonymity granted by paper surveys as a promoter of identification behaviours; participants noted that considerations related to the perception of the interviewer (for example, the interviewer’s perception of their skin colour) are eliminated in the paper survey context.

Literacy and numeracy issues were cited as barriers to people disclosing their Indigenous status on paper surveys. Participants also mentioned that the absence of an interviewer who could answer questions about the survey content and/or assist with form completion may contribute to non-identification.

Online

Similar issues, particularly in relation to confidentiality and the privacy afforded by completing the survey alone, were discussed in relation to online surveys. Additional concerns relating to online privacy and the use and security of data were raised, along with computer literacy and internet access as potential impediments to identification.

Interviews

Interview-based surveys raised some complex issues for enumeration design. Participants noted that the presence of an interviewer can assist with understanding the survey and the purpose of individual questions, but they also expressed that identification may be more sensitive in this context because interviewers may make judgements about a respondent’s Indigenous status on the basis of their physical appearance (or other factors). Participants also noted that for individuals who are sensitive about their Indigenous status (for example, because of recently having discovered their heritage or because of negative past experiences), an interview may be a more confronting context in which to consider disclosing their Indigenous status than a paper or online survey.

PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY RESEARCH PROJECTS

When considering 'in person' and telephone interviews, participants stated that in person interviews are preferred for a range of reasons, including privacy and security and the ability to be sure of a data collector's credentials.

PERSON COLLECTING THE DATA

Discussion points included whether participants would feel more comfortable identifying if interviewed by a person known to them as opposed to a stranger, and if interviewed by an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person as opposed to a non-Indigenous person. Views were mixed, and included the perceptions that a known interviewer was preferable because of the trust inherent in an established relationship; conversely, that a known interviewer may discourage identification because of privacy concerns within established social networks. Participants also noted that, when interviewed by a stranger, they could choose to withhold information that may otherwise be already known to an interviewer with whom they are acquainted.

The impact of the Indigenous status of the interviewer was mixed. Participants variously expressed that an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander interviewer may be preferable in some contexts (depending on survey content) and, conversely, that a non-Indigenous interviewer may encourage identification (this appeared to be related to the social/familial networks issues raised above). Participants also indicated that the Indigenous status of the interviewer would have no impact on their propensity to identify.

ORGANISATION COLLECTING THE DATA

Participants expressed mixed views on the impact/s of the organisation collecting the data. Where the organisation was a consideration in the decision to identify, issues involved included:

- The level of trust in the data collection organisation
- Whether the organisation was 'known' to the individual
- Who was representing the organisation
- Whether or not that organisation asked for 'proof' of identity
- Perceived negative or positive implications of identification for the individual and/or the broader community
- The reputation the organisation has with Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander peoples.

Views about government organisations in the context of data collection included the high demand placed on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities and groups to participate in government research. Both trust and distrust in government organisations were expressed in relation to disclosing Indigenous status.

Where the ABS was referenced specifically, recognition of the Census of Population and Housing was particularly noted and participants expressed that they would identify on the Census. Participants reported that the ABS' work is important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and that the ABS can be seen as safer and more trustworthy than other organisations. The understanding that participation in ABS surveys is required by law was also raised, as was the perception that the ABS is somewhat separate from, and different to, other government organisations.

PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY RESEARCH PROJECTS

THIRD PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Views around identifying on behalf of others tended to centre on family connections. Where participants commented on identifying on behalf of others, they spoke about their willingness to identify on behalf of members of their family and about the importance of having another person's permission to identify on their behalf. Where participants held the view that they would not identify on behalf of another person, reasons tended to be associated with privacy and the right of the individual to make their own decision about identifying. Participants suggested that views on third party identification may vary across geographical areas – specifically, that views on identifying on behalf of others may be different in remote areas.

Where participants spoke about having had their Indigenous status disclosed on their behalf by someone else, they tended to report that this had been done by family members or an elder in their community. This was perceived, by the participants who described it, as acceptable. Inappropriate examples of third party identification, such as where an external body had reported a person's Indigenous status without their consent, were mentioned.

INTERGENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND CHANGES OVER TIME

Participants expressed the view that young people may be more likely to identify, and to do so consistently, than older people. Past experiences and changes in the socio-political environment around identification were discussed, namely that young people may have had less experiences of negative or prejudicial treatment and that identifying is encouraged more now than in the relatively recent past.

Changes in the environment surrounding identification were also discussed in relation to changes over time in an individual's identification behaviours. Participants spoke about increased confidence in their identity as they grew older leading to increasing identification behaviours. Participants' knowledge of the importance of identifying (for the purposes of social policy and population enumeration) and their increasing comfort with research questions were also mentioned. When discussing changes in identification behaviours over time at the population level, young participants compared negative experiences of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people known to them with their own more positive or neutral experiences. Participants commonly expressed the view that it is easier and more beneficial, both at the group and the individual level, to identify these days.

PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY RESEARCH PROJECTS

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY AS ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER IN ADMINISTRATIVE DATA COLLECTIONS

Focus group research was conducted in 2010 to explore attitudes toward identification in administrative data sets. An external consultant with extensive experience in conducting research with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities and groups was contracted to conduct the research on the ABS' behalf. Focus groups were conducted in Darwin, Nowra (regional NSW), Western Sydney, Redfern (NSW), Brisbane, Logan City (Qld), Melbourne and Perth. A range of age groups were represented (though not evenly distributed across groups) and a total of 189 people participated across 20 focus group sessions. Participants were not asked to disclose their residential address. It is therefore assumed that, with the exception of participants who may have been visiting these non-remote locations temporarily, these focus groups collected the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in non-remote areas only.

Participant responses

Focus group participants offered a range of reasons for their decisions to identify, or not identify, as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

FACTORS ENCOURAGING IDENTIFICATION

Across a range of administrative data collection contexts the reasons for disclosing one's Indigenous status tended to be associated with:

- Pride in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage
- The perception of positive consequences (for the individual) of identifying, for example:
- access to specialised services (including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander liaison staff)
- referrals to appropriate services
- An understanding of the use of statistics in determining funding allocations, particularly for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander services.

The view that participants would tend to identify consistently across contexts was expressed. The principal reason given for identifying as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person was pride in this heritage.

FACTORS DISCOURAGING IDENTIFICATION

Conversely, reasons for not identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in these contexts included:

- The risk of prejudicial treatment as a result of identifying
- Habits based on negative past experiences or learned behaviours
- Discomfort with the manner in which the question is asked
- A lack of understanding about the reason the information is being collected.

Participants spoke of procedural issues such as incorrect or inappropriate terminology, including the use of the word 'Indigenous' or the use of a single, combined 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander' response, as factors leading to differential identification.

Participants also expressed the importance of understanding the reason for collection of data on Indigenous status. If organisations appear to be collecting the information for their own benefit only, participants suggested they may be less likely to identify. Literacy and language issues were also raised, with particular reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may have travelled from remote areas to access services, and may need additional assistance with reading forms or with understanding questions in English.

PROPENSITY TO IDENTIFY RESEARCH PROJECTS

Participants gave examples of situations in which identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander had led to negative, or 'double-edged' consequences; these included employment and education contexts. Participants also discussed being conscious of the potential consequences of identification when answering questions about their Indigenous status. For example, older participants discussed experiences related to the Stolen Generation and their subsequent distrust of government organisations.

Participants also described situations in which their Indigenous status had been 'assumed' by data collectors and they had not been given an opportunity to disclose (or withhold) this information.

Participants expressed concerns about confidentiality and privacy, and discussed discomfort with the amount of information requested by some organisations. Related to this, the need for clear information about the reasons for collecting Indigenous status data was raised. Respondents suggested that, where the need for the information is clear, identification is a more straightforward issue.

Documentation and 'proof' of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage was also discussed. Difficulties with obtaining 'Confirmation of Aboriginality' certificates were raised, particularly for people who had been removed from their families. Fostering, adoption and the death of family knowledge holders were also mentioned as reasons why some people are unable to obtain documentation confirming their Indigenous status. Internal politics within communities and groups can also contribute to difficulties with documentation.

Participants discussed 'respondent fatigue' (resulting from past experiences of being asked to disclose their Indigenous status) leading to inconsistent identification. Where respondents had been asked about their Indigenous status, or had been asked to justify their response to questions about their Indigenous status, they reported becoming frustrated and ceasing to identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in some contexts.

A range of social factors contributing to decisions about identification were also mentioned. Experiences of racism and discrimination, peer pressure (particularly in discouraging identification among young people), embarrassment and shame in the context of data collection, and the extent to which an individual identifies with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture were discussed.

Participants indicated that if they felt that discrimination and stereotyping would result from their choice to identify, they were less likely to do so. Employment and housing contexts were offered as an example of participants choosing not to disclose their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage due to fear of discrimination.

When discussing the issue of stereotyping, the portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the media was raised. Participants spoke about at times feeling 'second class' as a result of negative portrayals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Some participants also indicated that Aboriginal culture is not understood or respected. This may or may not be consistent with the views of Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In some cases, particularly for young people, the perception that extra benefits are available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be a disincentive to identifying. The desire to be accepted in new environments (where young people have moved to a new location for work or study) was also raised as a reason for some young people not identifying.

Participants mentioned other factors as potential causes of differential or non-identification, including:

- Marriages between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and people of non-Indigenous descent can lead to children with fairer appearance, which may reduce their willingness to identify
- Younger Aboriginal individuals, who were not raised in a community setting, may be less inclined to identify
- Learned family behaviour was noted to be an important factor in the decision to identify

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- The issue of proving Aboriginality was thought to be possibly more difficult for fair-skinned Aboriginal people, even where there is community acceptance
- It was expressed that Aboriginality is not about the colour of an individual's skin, and this bias in perception of Aboriginal people (i.e., that they have dark-coloured skin) could make identification difficult for Aboriginal people with fair skin
- Individuals not knowing their heritage until later in life could contribute to differential identification.

It should be noted that some of the factors identified above refer specifically to the Aboriginal culture and may or may not reflect the views of Torres Strait Islander people.

Generational differences in attitudes to identification were discussed; the range of comments made across the focus groups indicated that age is a key factor in identification issues. Pride in one's culture and confidence to disclose your descent was noted to 'come with age' and may result in an individual's propensity to identify changing over time. Participants acknowledged the issues facing young people, who were thought to be less confident and more subject to peer pressure. It was suggested that as a result of these factors, young people may not consistently disclose their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin.

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SUGGESTIONS OFFERED BY PARTICIPANTS FOR IMPROVING IDENTIFICATION

QUESTION DESIGN

Participants spoke of the importance of appropriate question wording and response options. In particular, the grouping of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples under the umbrella term 'Indigenous' is seen as unacceptable. Participants also indicated a single, 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander' response category is unacceptable, and called for an opportunity to report regional/linguistic group membership as part of the identification process. Any review of the current wording of the Standard Indigenous Question or other questions about Indigenous status should involve a thorough consultation process. It was noted that the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, both as respondents and as data users, are integral to developing an effective and appropriate instrument for ascertaining Indigenous status. Participants also suggested that consistency (in the question and response options) across data collections may result in more consistent responses.

DATA COLLECTION APPROACHES

The contribution of data collection staff to factors influencing identification cannot be overlooked. Specifically participants recommended cultural awareness training for data collection staff. The need for such training to be frequent, thorough and delivered by appropriate facilitators was also discussed.

The attitude of data collection staff in relation to the Indigenous status question was also highlighted as a key part of the identification process. Participants discussed the need for staff to understand, and be able to explain, the reason for collecting the data, and the need for a positive interaction around identification. The impact of these factors on the process of collecting information about Indigenous status is not easy to quantify, but participants saw them as important in terms of encouraging and facilitating identification.

AWARENESS ON THE PART OF DATA COLLECTION AGENCIES

Participants discussed, at the broader level, the need for data collection organisations to be aware of the impact of identification on respondents. Potential consequences of identification (both intended and unintended consequences) should be known to, and acknowledged by, data collection organisations, and actions taken to create a safe, encouraging environment. If trends are apparent in service delivery, staff conduct, outcome or client experience on the basis of Indigenous status, it is the responsibility of the relevant organisation to understand these. It is also incumbent upon the data collection organisation to take appropriate action to remove impediments to identifying and/or negative impacts of identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in their data collection.

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CONCLUSION

Many of the views offered by participants in the focus groups are consistent with those offered anecdotally, both to the ABS and to other data collection organisations, on the topic of propensity to identify. The need to understand this issue is clear, and is underscored by the growing importance of administrative data collections in the Australian statistical landscape. In order to achieve accurate and meaningful statistics on the issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, it is the responsibility of all organisations involved in the collection of data to encourage accurate and consistent identification. A number of procedural issues have been identified through this focus group research which, if assessed in greater detail and with appropriate advice from relevant stakeholders, could improve the quality of both administrative and survey data holdings on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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