

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health

Cultural Identity, Sexuality and Gender Identity

Aboriginal cultures within Australia are the oldest continuous cultures in the world, dating back to more than 50,000 years ago. This factsheet provides an overview of key concepts in cultural identity, sexuality and gender identity.

Cultural Identity

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identity is central to a person's self-identification. It gives an immediate sense of belonging. It can define an individual, a clan of people and an area or region. A person is born into their cultural identity or returns to it in death. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are governed by their own Lore, in addition to Australian Law.

A person's sexuality, age, disability and gender will have specific or multiple roles in knowledge, responsibilities and traditions.

Aboriginal Culture

There were over 250 Aboriginal clan groups and 270 languages across Australia prior to European contact. These clan groups lived peacefully and transiently across what is now the Australian continent.

Clan names are derived from languages, skin groups and different geographical regions.

Aboriginal people have a deep spiritual connection to the ancestral land, sea, waterways and creatures.

Aboriginal people were recognised by the Australian Government in 1967 with a national referendum that granted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the right to vote.

The Aboriginal flag was established in 1971 and is now a symbolic icon within Aboriginal culture.

Torres Strait Islander Culture

Torres Strait Islander cultures have five distinct groups:

- Top Western Group (Boigu, Dauan and Saibai)
- The Near Western Group (Badu, Mabuiag and Moa)
- The Central Group (Yam, Warraber, Coconut and Masig)
- The Eastern Group (Murray, Darnley and Stephen)
- The TI Group (Thursday, Horn, Hammond, Prince of Wales and Friday).

Torres Strait Islanders speak three dialects:

- Kala Kawa Ya (Top Western and Western)
- Kala Lagau Ya (Central)
- Meriam (Eastern) predominate with the 'Creole' language that emerged during and remained after colonisation.

Torres Strait Islander people have a long history and culture of sea farming trade, and engaged in farming and agricultural.

Torres Strait Islander people can have spiritual connections to the land, sea, waterways and animals.

The *Queensland Torres Strait Islanders Act 1939* legally recognised Torres Strait Islander peoples as a separate people.

The Torres Strait Islander flag was established in 1992 and is now a symbolic icon within Torres Strait Islander culture.

Sexuality

All people are born with sexuality. Sexuality is a person's intellectual, emotional, romantic or sexual attraction towards others.

You don't choose it. It is part of your identity, regardless of who you are physically, emotionally and sexually attracted to, and can be expressed in a variety of forms.

It is important to understand that for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, their cultural identity will always be central, regardless of whether they also identify using one of the terms below.

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may identify within any of the global terms below, or within the LGBTIQAP+ acronym.

Some people may use their own language to describe their sexuality and not want to be located within a broader LGBTIQAP+ label.

Asexual

People who experience little or no sexual attraction. Asexual people may experience other forms of attraction but may not need to express that attraction sexually.

Bisexual

A person who is attracted to two or more genders.

Gay Man

A man who identifies as being attracted to men; sometimes used to refer to someone who is attracted to the same gender.

Heterosexual

A person who is sexually attracted to people of a gender other than their own, most commonly sexual attraction between men and women.

Lesbian

A woman whose primary sexual and romantic or emotional attraction is to other women.

Pansexual

An orientation for which gender is not a boundary to attraction. Pansexual people can experience sexual attraction to a person of any or no gender.

Queer

An umbrella term, used by people who may feel that specific labels do not fit their sexuality or identity.

Gender Identity

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have an inner concept of being a man or a woman, a blend of both or neither.

Intersex

Intersex people are born with physical sex characteristics including chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones or genitals that don't fit medical norms for female or male bodies.

This impacts on how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves.

To feel valid and affirmed, this gender identity needs to be respected alongside their cultural identity.

A person's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

It is important to understand for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, who may also identify using one of the terms below, their cultural identity will always be central.

Brotherboy

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander gender diverse man (assigned female at birth). Brotherboys have a male spirit and a distinct cultural identity. Brotherboy's cultural, spiritual, and religious beliefs are pivotal to their lives and identities.

Cisgender

When a person's gender aligns with their sex assigned at birth

Gender Diverse

An umbrella term that reflects gender identities and expressions that do not conform with gender norms or expectations.

Non-binary

An umbrella term or an individual identity for people whose gender exists outside of the gender binary (male/female).

Sistergirl

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander gender diverse woman (assigned male at birth). Sistergirls have a distinct cultural identity and often take on women's roles within the community, including looking after children and family. Sistergirls cultural, spiritual, and religious beliefs are pivotal to their lives and identities.

Trans

A term which someone may use if their gender does not align with their sex assigned at birth.

Understanding that cultural identity is central to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's gender and sexuality is an important factor for inclusive and affirming practice.

Building increasingly inclusive and affirming environments will reduce existing health inequities and lead to enhanced outcomes for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Visit www.true.org.au or contact info@true.org.au for training opportunities or further information.

Disclaimer: True Relationships & Reproductive Health (True) has taken every care to ensure that the information contained in this publication is accurate and up-to-date at the time of being published. As information and knowledge is constantly changing, readers are strongly advised to confirm that the information complies with present research, legislation and policy guidelines. True accepts no responsibility for difficulties that may arise as a result of an individual acting on the advice and recommendations it contains.

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