



Relational Ethics and Cultural Safety

“From a Pacific perspective, research outcomes are best framed not simply as deliverables or academic outputs, but as relational, collective, and intergenerational contributions to the wellbeing, empowerment and cultural continuity of Pacific communities. This framing shifts the emphasis from extraction and individual achievement to service, reciprocity, and legacy.”

— Moanaroa member, Moanaroa Talanoa

Relational Ethics and Cultural Safety

Relational ethics and cultural safety are fundamental to Indigenous and Pacific data sovereignty movements advocating for respectful, reciprocal, and culturally appropriate engagement with data and communities. These concepts actively challenge the predominant individualistic and Western-centric approaches to privacy and ethics, pushing for frameworks that prioritise collective wellbeing, dignity, and profound trust. Relational ethics extends beyond procedural ethics, placing relationships at the heart of Pacific research. Matapo and McFall-McCaffery (2022) proposed a vā knowledge ecology as a transformative framework for higher education, advocating for systemic change that has Pacific knowledge systems at the centre.

It is important to ensure that key principles and practices of Pacific data sovereignty guide the ethics process as a foundation. At its core, Pacific data sovereignty asserts the inherent rights of Pacific Peoples to determine how their data is collected, accessed, analysed, interpreted, managed, disseminated, and reused (PDSN, 2021). This ensures that data actively supports and enhances their collective wellbeing (Uasike Allen et al., 2025), directly countering historical tendencies where data was “taken” rather than controlled by Indigenous communities (Walter, 2016).

From a Pacific perspective, privacy is fundamentally collective, making sole focus on individual privacy interests insufficient. Collective privacy stems from Pacific Peoples' inherent rights and interests in their self-determination and control over their information. This collective approach is essential for limiting potential harms to the group that could arise from invasive or discriminatory data processing. The traditional Western focus on individual data protection is considered necessary but insufficient to meet the broader needs of Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa.

Acknowledging collective privacy does not diminish or negate the very real need to protect individual participants. In research areas that involve sensitive topics, for example, domestic violence, sexual health, or trauma, ensuring individual privacy, confidentiality, and safety remains paramount. It is vital that the collective and individual dimensions of privacy work in tandem, protecting the integrity of communities while upholding the rights, dignity, and security of each person involved.

Indigenous Ethical Frameworks

The Global Indigenous Data Alliance, an organisation dedicated to promoting Indigenous data sovereignty and governance, has further developed Indigenous-specific principles, known as CARE principles (Carroll et al., 2020), which extend the FAIR principles developed by Wilkinson et al. (2016). The FAIR principles were introduced by a group of scientists and data stewards, with the purpose of improving the management and stewardship of scientific data, making it easier for machines and humans to find, access, and reuse data (Wilkinson et al., 2016). While FAIR principles are valuable, they do not inherently address issues of inclusion, cultural relevance, or Indigenous data sovereignty.

CARE principles were introduced to ensure that Indigenous Peoples' rights and interests are respected in data governance, complementing the FAIR principles by keeping people and purpose at the fore of any data use (Carroll et al., 2020). FAIR principles focus on data management for all research data, while CARE principles focus on Indigenous data sovereignty and the ethical use of data involving Indigenous Peoples.

The FAIR principles are:

- Findable
- Accessible
- Interoperable
- Reusable

The CARE principles are:

- Collective benefit
- Authority to control
- Responsibility
- Ethics

When applied to Pacific research and ethics, CARE principles and their supporting concepts can be realised when data ecosystems are designed to support the use and reuse of data by Pacific Peoples, utilise data for policy decisions and service evaluations, and create and use data that reflects Pacific values (Carroll et al., 2020). These CARE principles complement the FAIR principles by explicitly addressing power imbalances and historical contexts, grounding data practices in Indigenous worldviews. These principles embed Indigenous worldviews and mandate the nurturing of positive relationships (Walter et al., 2020). Within the context of Pacific research, decolonising research practice requires more than inclusion, it demands a reorientation towards Pacific knowledge systems (Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022).

Empowering Pacific Participation

Cultural safety is significantly enhanced by ensuring meaningful involvement of Pacific Peoples at every stage of the data lifecycle, from conceptualisation of design to collection, analysis, interpretation, reporting and dissemination. This directly counters historical practices where Pacific communities were exploited as mere data sources, with little consideration for their specific needs or potential harm. The cost of complacency in ensuring meaningful participation of Pacific Peoples cannot be understated. Offering appropriate time and space is essential for meaningful participation in Pacific research.

“The Pacific concept of time is different to palagi research expectations, and I’ve often had to negotiate about the amount of time needed regarding research project timelines and relationship building ... are we allowing sufficient time and space for relationship building, consultation, and cultural process to guide our work?”

— Dr Betty Ofe-Grant, Moanaroa Talanoa.

Addressing the “Recognition Gap”

Official statistics have historically and frequently failed to recognise or adequately measure social and cultural phenomena that are crucial to Indigenous wellbeing, often perpetuating a “deficit data/problematic people” narrative (Walter, 2016, p. 82). Relational ethics requires reframing data narratives from a Pacific perspective, focusing on strengths and the depth of Pacific knowledge systems, rather than solely on disadvantage. This is not to suggest that Indigenous statistics exist in opposition to those shaped by Western epistemologies, nor that their distinctiveness lies solely in how they differ from Western-framed approaches (Walter, 2016). Statistical techniques and ways of measuring are also not what delineate data from Indigenous-framed data. Official statistical systems have been shaped by Western frameworks, often overlooking or misrepresenting the social, cultural, spiritual, and relational aspects that are critical to Pacific wellbeing (Fa’avae et al., 2016). This mismatch is referred to as the “recognition gap” (Walter, 2016, p. 93), reflecting the persistent failure of statistical agencies to recognise and measure what truly matters to Indigenous communities.

Researchers need to ensure a paradigmatic shift that moves away from these narrow, externally imposed measures, towards approaches that acknowledge Pacific worldviews and values, capture data that reflects the lived realities and priorities of Pacific Peoples, and empower Pacific communities to define what wellbeing and success means to them (Uasike Allen et al., 2025). Expanding the “recognition space” involves creating a shared domain where Pacific and non-Pacific understandings of wellbeing coexist and inform one another (Walter, 2016, p. 93). By doing so, Pacific communities gain the capacity to respond to governments and institutions using statistical evidence that resonates in both cultural and policy contexts. This not only addresses deficit-driven narratives but also asserts Pacific authority over how their realities are represented, fostering more equitable and culturally respectful decision-making (Uasike Allen et al., 2025; Walter, 2016).

Repatriation and Control of Data

Drawing from broader scholarship on Indigenous data sovereignty, principles and practices of ownership, control, access, and possession remain critical to advancing Indigenous research locally and globally (Walter, 2016). These principles and practices will vary across Indigenous contexts. For Māori in Aotearoa, these principles include:

- rangatiratanga/authority
- whakapapa/relationships
- whanaungatanga/obligations
- kotahitanga/collective benefit
- manaakitanga/reciprocity
- kaitiakitanga/guardianship

Māori data sovereignty principles, as described by Te Mana Raraunga, emphasise the importance of respecting the rights of Māori communities in Aotearoa when it comes to their data (as cited in Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2020). These principles have informed and are supported by AUT’s data management policies and guidelines. These policies and principles aim to ensure that Māori data is treated with respect, that Māori communities are actively involved in decisions regarding their data, and that the use of this data contributes positively to Māori wellbeing and development.

The PDSN (2021) has developed guiding principles that can inform Pacific research in Aotearoa, including:

- Pacific Peoples—our interests, rights, values, and knowledge
- Authority of autonomy for Pacific Peoples
- Facilitating relationships and authentic engagement
- Collective action for collective gains
- Integrity and ethics
- Influencing and informing policy and practice
- Pacific data frameworks and relevant models

Ensuring cultural safety involves addressing the ownership and location of Pacific data and ensuring that autonomy and authority are exerted, ideally through repatriation of data or through robust data governance agreements, and data-sharing contracts (Walter, 2016). This includes explicitly recognising and protecting Pacific cultural intellectual property rights. Researchers are urged to consider:

- Repatriation of data—return historical and contemporary datasets to Pacific custodians, so they can manage and use this information in ways that align with their cultural values and aspirations. If this is not possible, researchers are encouraged to consider robust data governance structures.
- Robust data governance—establish agreements and frameworks that clearly articulate Pacific authority over data, including rights to veto, negotiate terms of use, and dictate how findings are disseminated.
- Protection of cultural intellectual property—recognise that data often embodies Pacific knowledge systems, language, and cultural heritage, which need to be safeguarded against misuse or exploitation.

By embedding these practices, data becomes a tool for empowerment rather than a source of harm. It strengthens self-determination, enabling communities to shape narratives, influence policies, and safeguard their cultural legacy on their own terms.

“When it comes to statistical analysis, Pacific values can inform how you interpret the data and how you frame the results. Results that find Pacific peoples (or some Pacific subgroup) have poorer outcomes than another population or group should be interpreted in the social, economic, and historical context in which such disparities arose, not used to pathologise Pacific peoples, moralise inequalities, and individualise structural problems.”

—Dr Leon Iusitini, Moanaroa Talanoa.

Growing Pacific Expertise in Research

Pacific researchers have been at the forefront of developing innovative, culturally grounded methodologies and frameworks that have reshaped research practice to better reflect Pacific values, knowledge systems, and aspirations. Despite the significant progress, innovation, and preservation of Pacific knowledge systems from a relatively small workforce pool, there is underrepresentation across research spheres, which require active support, investment, and capacity-building opportunities for current and up-and-coming Pacific researchers.

The briefing paper 'The Research Workforce of Aotearoa New Zealand' (Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2020) revealed that domestic PhD graduates in recent years (2010–2020) have comprised about 71% NZ European, 9% Māori, 4% Pacific, and 17% Asian. In 2018, the 25 Pacific PhD graduates were primarily from health, society, and culture, with low participation in engineering and science (p. 14). Though Pacific representation in the research workforce continues to be relatively low (McAllister et al., 2022), engineering technology and molecular, cellular and whole organism biology have the lowest proportion of Pacific researchers, with Pacific research and public health having the highest proportion of Pacific researchers (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment [MBIE], 2021).

“Without Māori and Pacific voices, the science system will never reach its full potential.”

(McAllister et al., 2020)



McAllister et al. (2022) found that any increases in the pool of Māori and Pacific PhD graduates did not lead to significant increases in their representation in the research workforce overall, and that women, Māori, and Pacific researchers are less likely to be promoted than their male, non-Pacific and non-Māori colleagues (McAllister et al., 2020). Māori and Pacific early career researchers tend to be older and tend to commence their doctoral studies later in life. Māori and Pacific researchers are often working in fields that, despite their importance, are disproportionately affected by precarious employment and workforce risk (Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2020, p. 16).

“Things like humility sometimes get in the way because we don’t want to push ourselves forward in this very cutthroat academic world... it’s very individual and you push yourself forward ... you promote yourself ... the university is not set up for Pacific ways of being and doing” —Dr Ali Glasgow, Moanaroa Talanoa.

“Service, tautua ... we are serving our communities” —Dr Hilda Port, Moanaroa Talanoa

Echoing the thoughts shared in Moanaroa Talanoa, the workforce report found that Pacific PhD graduates’ key motivations are service to their community rather than economic outcomes, with aspirations to seek employment that reflects this ethos (Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2020). This can mean opportunities are limited if available research funding is strongly directed to achieving economic outcomes (p. 29).

“People who dish out the research funding ... need to be called to task.” —Dr. Ali Glasgow, Moanaroa Talanoa

Pacific Postgraduate Research at AUT

A scoping review⁷ conducted between 2020 and 2025 of Pacific Masters and Doctoral studies at AUT identified key trends and emerging priorities in postgraduate research. Five key areas of focus have emerged:

- Pacific and Indigenous Identity, Culture, and Arts – Cultural revitalisation, identity including diaspora identity, traditional knowledge systems, and heritage through traditional and contemporary lenses.
- Technology, Innovation, and Sustainability – Digital transformation, assistive technologies, sustainable design, environmental and community thriving, and the use of AI and data science.
- Education and Youth – Educational experiences, identity formation, and youth empowerment.
- Governance, Leadership & Public Sector Innovation – Leadership models, organisational transformation, and public service.

The AUT scoping review for Pacific postgraduate research has shown a fairly consistent focus on health and wellbeing, as well as culture and identity, which remain the most prominent areas of inquiry. More recently, there has been a noticeable rise in research exploring technology, innovation, and sustainability, reflecting growing interest in digital transformation, assistive technologies, and sustainable practice. There is an increasing emphasis on culturally grounded research methodologies and participatory approaches that affirm community voices and indigenous knowledge systems.

⁷ Data sourced from the Office of Pacific Advancement, AUT Scoping Review of Pacific Masters and Doctoral Studies (June 2025).

Pacific Data Professionals, Statisticians, and Analysts

Over the past two decades, Pacific communities in Aotearoa have made significant strides in advancing quantitative research that is culturally grounded, community-led, and methodologically innovative. Landmark initiatives such as the Pacific Islands Family study have demonstrated the power of longitudinal, Pacific-led research to generate rich, policy-relevant insights across health, education, and social wellbeing (Paterson et al., 2013; Tautolo et al., 2020). Frameworks like Tivaivai (Kokaua et al., 2020), and Faikava (Aporosa et al., 2021) have redefined how quantitative methods can be decolonised and aligned with Pacific values. These efforts reflect a growing ecosystem of Pacific scholars, practitioners and communities who are not only participating in data conversations but shaping them (Tualaulelei & McFall-McCaffery, 2019). Yet despite this progress, systemic barriers remain.

There is a shortage of statistical expertise and data capacity among Indigenous and Pacific Peoples. Across the education pipeline, academic and professional landscape, we know that:

- Statistical agencies often struggle to attract, retain, and develop staff with strong statistical and technical skills (South Pacific Community, 2017).
- There is low representation of Pacific Peoples in high-skill, quantitative, and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) professions (International Labour Organization, 2017).
- Educational pathways reinforce the gaps with Pacific students less likely to take advanced science and mathematics, signalling limited progression into statistics careers (Turnball & O'Neale, 2021).
- Within Pacific communities, a lack of data literacy and analytical capacity further limits control and ownership of data for health, social, and economic decision making (MPP, 2023).

It is essential to prioritise investment in strengthening Pacific statistical capacity across the entire data ecosystem. This includes developing expertise in data production, governance, management, and culturally grounded analysis. Building this capacity is critical to ensuring that data reflects Pacific worldviews, supports self-determination, and advances Pacific priorities and aspirations rather than external agendas.

It is important that partnerships focus on capability building and knowledge transfer, while ensuring Pacific Peoples lead and define the standards of how their data is collected, interpreted, applied, reported, and disseminated.

Indicators of Relational Ethics

There's a real thing around being values-led, and the way that we are, we conduct our research, how we build relationships and of course, that's grounded in the way that we know to be true...that's reciprocity

— Dagmar Dyck, Moanaroa Talanoa.

Relational ethics in Pacific research is a lived practice grounded in Pacific values, upholding the dignity, sovereignty and aspirations of Pacific peoples. Accountability is expressed through respectful, enduring and reciprocal relationships and by walking alongside communities in ways that aim for lasting, positive outcomes. Indicators of relational ethics include:

- Communities describe their relationship with researchers as trusting and respectful.
- Research processes demonstrate care for participants and cultural protocols.
- Ethical responsibilities are being met through reciprocal actions, not just compliance paperwork.
- The research contributes positively to the wellbeing of the people and places involved.



Ethical and Cultural Safety Guide for Pacific Research



Research Stage

Practical actions for researchers



Planning and design

Initial Talanoa with communities and leaders.

Include Pacific advisory group in governance.

Co-design questions and methods.

Respect local protocols.



Data collection and relationships

Maintain open and transparent communication.

Protect both community and individual privacy.

Use culturally safe engagement (face-to-face, respectful dialogue).

Offer modes of engagement that accommodate participants' settings (phone call, video call, in person).

Offer reciprocity (koha ⁸/me'alofo ⁹, shared learning).



Analysis and interpretation

Engage communities in interpreting findings.

Safeguard cultural intellectual property.

Apply CARE principles for data sovereignty.



Dissemination

Share findings first with communities through accessible formats.

Honour narrative ownership; this may include ongoing consent beyond initial consent forms.

Ensure policy use reflects Pacific perspectives.



Beyond the project

Formally acknowledge participants and advisors.

Maintain ongoing, rather than transactional, relationships.

Share skills and resources to build Pacific capacity.

⁸ Koha (Māori) is a gift, present, offering, donation, contribution, especially one maintaining social relationships and has connotations of reciprocity (Moorfield, 2011).

⁹ Me'alofo (Samoan) is a heartfelt gift or offering, often given in the spirit of alofa (love), respect (fa'aaloalo), and reciprocity (feosia'i). It is a gesture of connection, service, and cultural responsibility.

Check list for Researchers

-  Are Pacific voices embedded at every stage of the research?
-  Have CARE principles been applied alongside FAIR principles?
-  Does the project strengthen Pacific knowledge, affirming collective aspirations and responsibility of data?
-  Are outcomes designed to serve communities and uphold their intergenerational aspirations?
-  Does the project allow enough time and space for deeper, reciprocal relational engagement with the participant communities?