



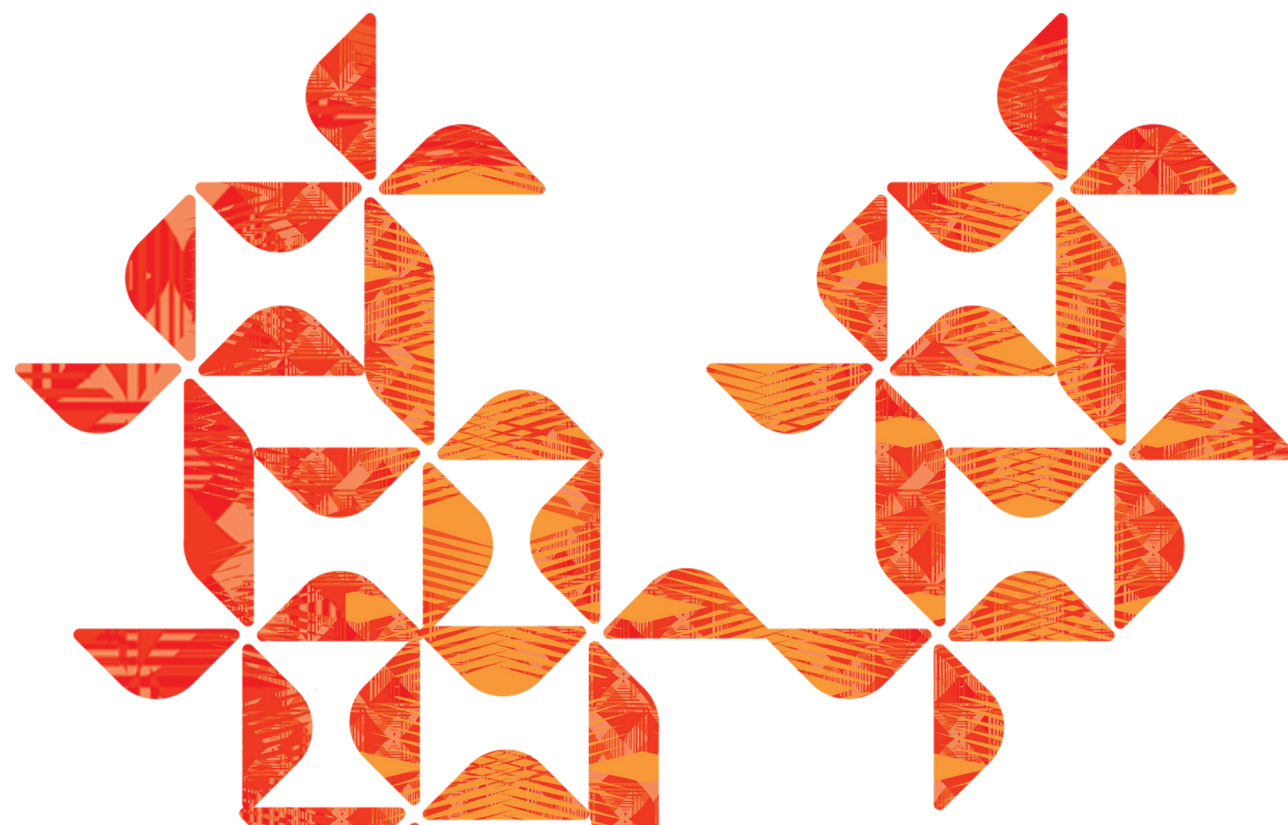
Pacific Research Design

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Introduction and Purpose of Pacific Research Design

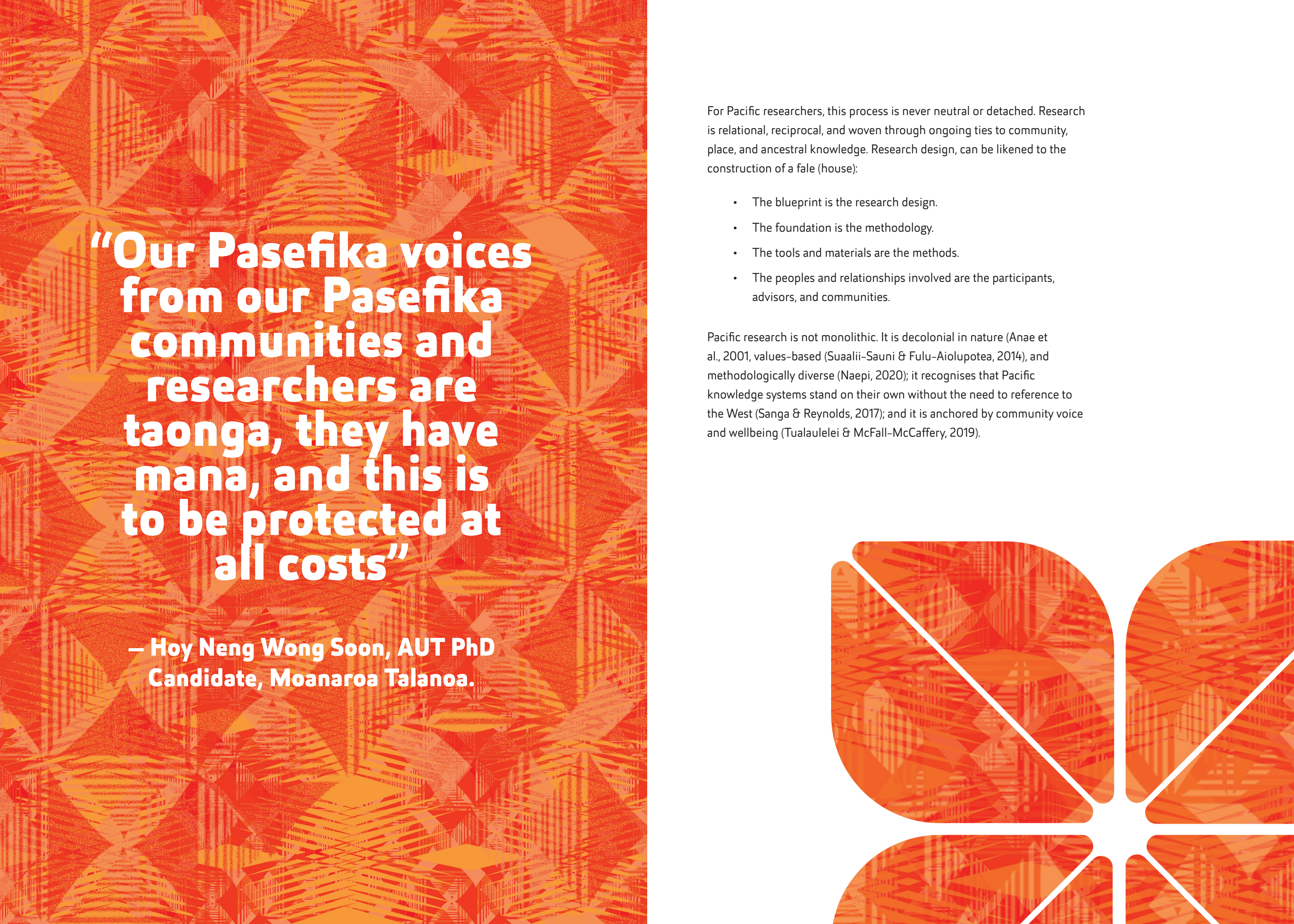
The primary role of Pacific research is to generate knowledge and understanding about and for Pacific Peoples and their environments with their active involvement as researchers, community leaders, advisors, participants, and stakeholders. The Pacific research design approach moves away from outsider perspectives and towards Indigenous interpretations, aiming to be empowering for both researchers and the researched.

Research design is the overall strategy or blueprint for how a research study is conducted. It outlines what the researcher is trying to find out, how the researcher will approach the inquiry, and why the chosen methodologies and methods are best suited to the questions and aims of the study. In simple terms, research design is the plan for finding answers, from the beginning to the end, while honouring relationships, contexts, and responsibilities embedded in the research process.



“Pacific Research contributes to the spiritual, mental, physical and social wellbeing of individuals, families and communities.”

— Moanaroa member, Moanaroa Talanoa



**“Our Pasefika voices
from our Pasefika
communities and
researchers are
taonga, they have
mana, and this is
to be protected at
all costs”**

**— Hoy Neng Wong Soon, AUT PhD
Candidate, Moanaroa Talanoa.**

For Pacific researchers, this process is never neutral or detached. Research is relational, reciprocal, and woven through ongoing ties to community, place, and ancestral knowledge. Research design, can be likened to the construction of a fale (house):

- The blueprint is the research design.
- The foundation is the methodology.
- The tools and materials are the methods.
- The peoples and relationships involved are the participants, advisors, and communities.

Pacific research is not monolithic. It is decolonial in nature (Anae et al., 2001, values-based (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014), and methodologically diverse (Naepi, 2020); it recognises that Pacific knowledge systems stand on their own without the need to reference to the West (Sanga & Reynolds, 2017); and it is anchored by community voice and wellbeing (Tualaulelei & McFall-McCaffery, 2019).



Key Components of the Research Design



Positionality

Locating yourself within the research; stating who are you in relation to the people, knowledges, and place(s) involved, and the obligations that follow.

Describing the knowledge traditions, communities, and lived experiences that shape how your research is interpreted and what counts as evidence.



Purpose/aims

Describing what the research is trying to explore, understand, or change



Research questions

The guiding questions your study is trying to answer.



Methodology

The philosophical and cultural framework/s guiding how you approach knowledge, relationships and ethics.

Methods

The specific techniques for data collection and analysis.



Participants

Who you are working with, and how they are involved.



Ethical framework

How you ensure relational accountability, consent, cultural safety, and reciprocity.



Data analysis

How you make sense of the information collected and interpret the findings.



Dissemination

How findings are shared with communities, policymakers, or academic audiences.

“When designing a quantitative study, Pacific values can inform the data you collect by helping to ensure you collect information that is important to Pacific communities themselves and reflects their priorities.”

— Dr Leon Iusitini, Moanaroa Talanoa.



Core Principles Guiding Pacific Research Design

It is important that all aspects of Pacific research design are underpinned by fundamental Pacific values and principles.



Respect

- For relationships:** Displaying humility, building trust, actively listening, and valuing participants as individuals.
- For knowledge holders:** Prioritising and honouring Pacific knowledge, aspirations, and wellbeing in design and processes.
- For cultural protocols:** Learning and adhering to cultural practices, dress codes and communication styles.
- For intellectual and cultural property:** Addressing ownership of knowledge and data, with primary knowledge belonging to participants.



Reciprocity

Ensuring mutual benefit for researchers and participants or communities through exchange of information, gifts, time, service, and accessible dissemination of findings.



Holism

Understanding and acknowledging the interconnectedness of physical, social, environmental, cultural, and spiritual aspects in research involving Pacific communities. Researchers are encouraged to present themselves as whole persons, engaging in community life where appropriate.



Service or research for good

Ensuring the wellbeing of Pacific Peoples and their environment is central to why and how research is conducted. Research needs to be rigorous, scholarly, and beneficial, contributing to policy and practice outcomes.



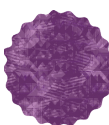
Teu le vā/relationality

Nurturing relationships throughout the entire research process, even beyond the typical timeframes of a research process, involves displaying humility, listening, moving in a trustworthy manner, and taking time to establish genuine connections with interviewees, advisors, and communities.



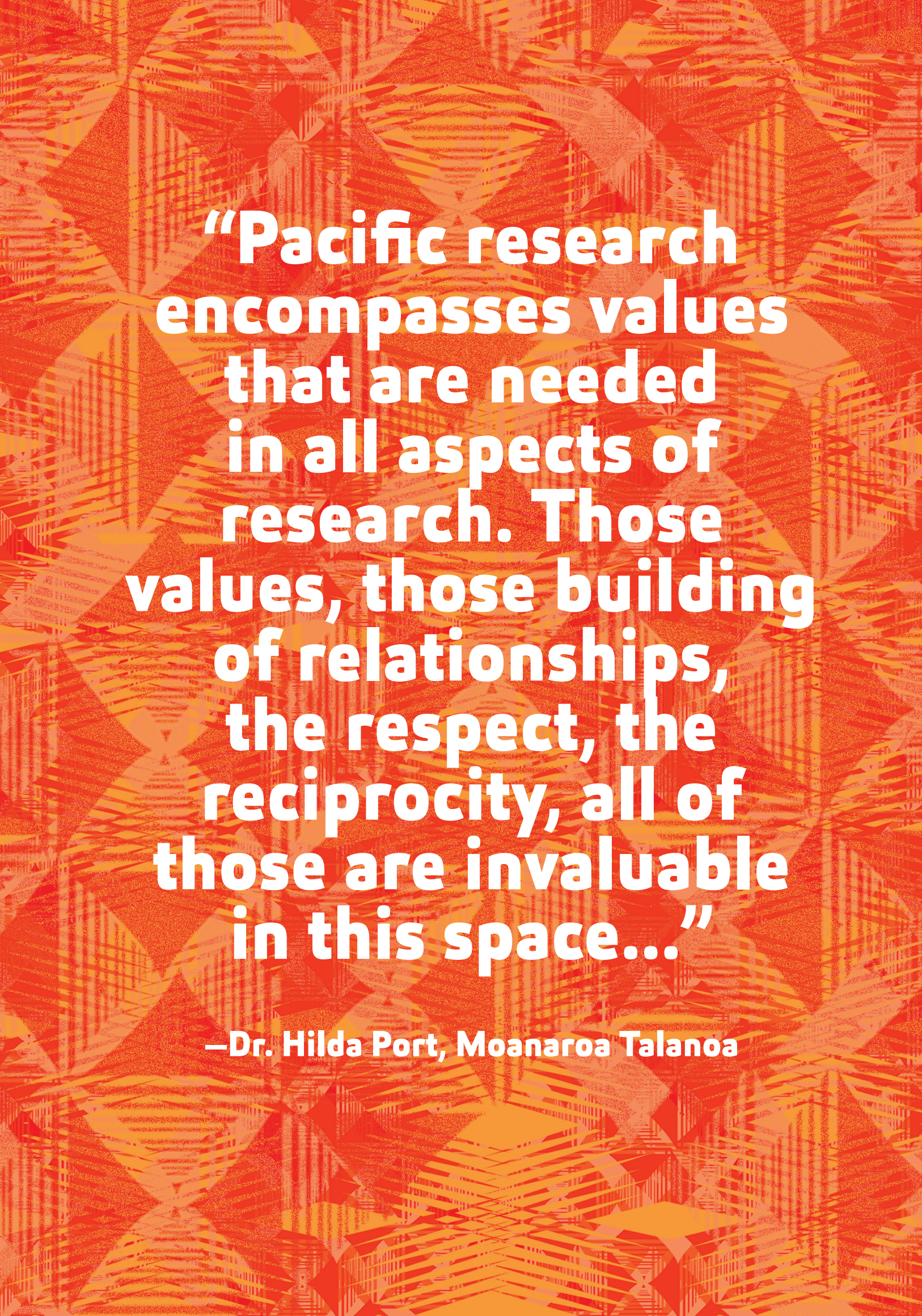
Addressing diversity

“Pacific” is not homogenous but encompasses a diverse range of cultures, languages, and histories. Research needs to advocate for ethnic-specific approaches where appropriate, while also considering intra-ethnic variations like age, gender, New Zealand-born, Island born and mixed-ethnic backgrounds.



Integrity, transparency and accountability

Maintaining an honest exchange of information, clear purpose, disclosure of potential risks, and accurate reporting. Community checks and feedback are essential.



“Pacific research encompasses values that are needed in all aspects of research. Those values, those building of relationships, the respect, the reciprocity, all of those are invaluable in this space...”

—Dr. Hilda Port, Moanaroa Talanoa

Conceptual Frameworks and Methodologies



Researchers are encouraged to actively embed Pacific knowledge systems and conceptual frameworks in their Pacific research design to ensure perspectives of Pacific Peoples are represented in culturally appropriate ways. Importantly, Pacific methodologies are not just instruments of data collection, they are living philosophies, relational ways of knowing and expressions of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty. They reflect the deep interconnectedness of people, land, ocean, spirituality, and history. During a Moanaroa Talanoa, Fa’alogo Associate Professor Jacoba Matapo described Pacific methodologies as a way of,

...bringing our ancestral wisdoms to the fore; it brings opportunities to innovate spaces where Eurocentric thinking can't go. The exciting part of Pacific Indigenous thinking is that you're able to enter into different problems or different contexts, but with a completely different lens or paradigm and ...you're able to generate new ways of understanding.

Pacific researchers in Aotearoa have had to navigate both Western and Pacific research methodologies. Pacific research is not so much about distinguishing “quantitative” from “qualitative,” or “deductive” from “inductive” methods (Henry & Pene, 2001), but of recognising that Pacific research is first grounded in what is deemed real, true, and of value to Pacific Peoples. The selection of methodology and its integration needs to be fit for purpose, so it can provide the most robust research framework.

Pacific values can inform the entire research process. If you’re conducting research with humans, then collecting quantitative data with research participants should be respectful, and participants’ time and contribution acknowledged appropriately – Dr. Leon Lusitini, Moanaroa Talanoa.

Working with Pasifika communities is a challenge due to negative experiences that communities have had with researchers in the past. Without saying it, they see research as a waste of time given the belief that they have been part of disempowering research historically as Pacific communities – Moanaroa member, Moanaroa Talanoa.

Hau’ofa (1994) reminds us that no people are more suited to be the guardians of the world’s largest oceans than those from whom it has been home to for generations (p. 158). Western academic traditions have historically framed the Pacific as isolated, primitive, and dependent, ignoring the rich histories of navigation, trade, and relational knowledge systems. One of the most cited examples of misrepresentation and stereotyping in research is Mead’s 1928 anthropological work titled *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which portrayed Samoan women as sexually free and deviant and had very real and ongoing repercussions for Pacific communities, particularly in dehumanising and objectifying the lived experience of Pacific women (Naepi, 2020). Though research carried out by non-Pacific scholars can have intentions to “help” Pacific Peoples, sidelining Pacific voices and knowledge systems can lead to policies and academic narratives that misunderstand or misrepresent Pacific realities (Naepi, 2020).

A lot of the archives and the work that have been done up until maybe the year 2000 have been mainly by outsiders. We have as our responsibility to create new archives for the future – Leali’ifano Professor Albert Refiti, Moanaroa Talanoa.

We draw from the writings of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) in her seminal work on decolonising methodologies:

What happens to research ... when the researched become the researchers? (Smith, 2012, p. 185)

“What happens to research ... when the researched become the researchers?”

(Smith, 2012, p. 185)



Drawn from wider Indigenous thought that guides the methodology as a resistance to the colonial heritage and hegemony of New Zealand's colonial past, Henry and Pene (2001) offer a foundational sense-making of philosophical paradigms that guide Indigenous research design and methodology. When applied to Pacific research design, it's important to grapple with ontology or assumptions about assumptions about human nature and being. What, then, is real for Pacific Peoples? Pacific ethics and philosophy drive Pacific epistemology; what is true according to Pacific practices and protocols? When considering axiology, the question then becomes, what is of value in Pacific knowledge and inquiry? These notions of ontology (what is real), epistemology (what counts as knowledge), and axiology (what is of value) not only inform the Pacific methodology but also shape perceptions of what is "science" and how we do it (Henry & Pene, 2001).

"Why hound me with a question when you don't care for an answer, why play for a pair when there is only one dancer?" (Vaiioleti, 1999, as cited in Vaiioleti, 2006, p. 21)

While this Pacific research inquiry is open to multiple perspectives, dominant frameworks shaping understandings of ontology, epistemology, and axiology in research have largely been influenced by Western and Eurocentric thought. It is risky to assume that these foundations originate from a single worldview. The common experience of Indigenous Peoples in the Pacific, is that outsiders have ignored or made light of the idea that Pacific Islands cultures have philosophies, "in part because our knowledge was oral rather than written until very lately—yet philosophy predates literacy" (Gegeo, 2001, p. 504). This assumption can lead to the use of standardised tools for data collection and analysis that, while methodologically consistent, may fall short in reflecting the lived realities, values, and ways of being specific to Pacific Peoples (Vaiioleti, 2006).

Claiming universal applicability across disciplines, cultures, and historical periods, through a process of colonial imposition, can be considered as "epistemic violence" (Henry & Pene, 2001). Epistemic violence refers to the harm done through systems of knowledge that marginalise, silence, or misrepresent certain groups, especially those historically colonised or oppressed (Brunner, 2021).

This highlights how academic, political, and cultural institutions can perpetuate colonial power structures by controlling whose knowledge is considered legitimate (Henry & Pene, 2001). For emerging Pacific researchers, this highlights the importance of critically engaging with and privileging Pacific knowledge systems and methodologies that are

culturally grounded, relational, and reflective of Pacific ways of knowing and being.

Though not an exhaustive list, Appendix 1 provides a selection of Pacific frameworks and methodologies developed by

Pacific research communities in their respective fields. Pacific research is "on the move" (Sanga & Reynolds, 2017), and critical engagement and discourse exists within the Pacific academy that strengthens the use of each of these methodologies (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014) and researchers are encouraged to explore beyond these Pacific research guidelines. Appendix 1 is merely a presentation of different methodologies, and not a command of their use. How a researcher engages with these methodologies will depend on positionality, the context or field, and the research aims and objectives.

"It's just giving our people a voice and using our position of privilege as academics, researchers, for the people who don't have a voice ... so it's up to us to give our people that voice."

— Brianna Heremaia, AUT PhD Candidate, Moanaroa Talanoa

“Pacific methodologies are more than the method. They are more than just the practice of data collection. Pacific methodologies have a particular genealogy or whakapapa to an epistemology, to a knowledge system.”

**— Assoc Prof Fa’alogo Jacoba Matapo,
Moanaroa Talanoa**

Over time, an evolving ecosystem of Pacific research methodologies has emerged, each grounded in specific cultural contexts yet often resonating across diverse island communities. Some of the pioneering methodologies include, but are not limited to, the Talanoa methodology (Halapua, 2000; Vaioleti, 2006); the Cook Islands Māori Tivaevae by Teremoana Maua-Hodges (Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges, 2019); the Fijian Vanua Framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008); the Tongan Kakala framework (Thaman, 2003), and the Fonua (Taufe’ulungaki, 2004); the Samoan Fa’afaletui (Tamasese et al., 2005), Ula (Sauni, 2011), and Fonofale (Pulotu-Endemann, 2009); and the Marshallese Kanne Lobal (Jim et al., 2021).

Comprehensive reviews of Pacific research development can be found in the works of Sanga and Reynolds (2017), and Naepi (2015), who highlighted the growing record of sophistication and intergenerational contributions of Pacific scholars, keeping in mind that many of these approaches have been preserved through many generations in oral knowledge traditions and transfer (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001). There are also more recent emergent frameworks such as the Soalaupulega Samoa model (Talen, 2023), Vukumuni vuku ni vanua of Fiji (Ramala & Ruwhiu, 2024), Talanoa as a methodology under the Fijian iTaukei cultural paradigm (Cammock et al., 2021), Boutokaan te mweeraoi of Kiribati (Kiribati Working Group, 2015), Hiapo of Niue (Pasisi, 2020), Mana Moana (Mila, 2017), the Masi methodology (Naepi, 2019), the Tokelauan framework Kāiga Māopoopo (Fuli, 2012), the Hihi framework (Matenga-Ikihele, 2023), and many more (see Appendix 1).

These methodologies are metaphor-rich, dialogic in nature, and prioritise ethical relationships, collective knowledge building, and the honouring of Pacific epistemologies. These methodologies do not merely serve as frameworks for data collection or analysis; they are lived philosophies and Indigenous knowledge systems that reflect the interconnectedness of people, place, spirituality, and history in the Pacific, and may extend a Pacific researcher’s involvement beyond the confines of traditional research timeframes.

Key Stages of Pacific Research Design

Effective Pacific research design and practice involve careful consideration and culturally sensitive approaches at every stage.

Stage 1

Methodologies, Research Topics and Questions

It is important that research is community-driven and responsive to the priorities voiced by Pacific Peoples and communities while still being strategic in its approach to prioritising resources and areas for investigation. Being strategic in approach is not synonymous with extractive research design; it is ensuring that methodologies are appropriate for the topic, research aims and Pacific priorities and contexts. It is critical that the research topics have the appropriate resources and collective support to accomplish key research areas and topics that are relevant to the aspirations of Pacific communities. Key practices to ensure alignment may include:

- Negotiating and refining the research topic to meet local Pacific community needs, priorities, and aspirations based on consultation, relevant literature, intra-team discussions, and input from advisory groups and funders.
- The relevance of the final research questions to the concerns and aspirations of Pacific representatives remains an area of focus throughout all stages of the research process.

Stage 2

Consultation and Engagement

Include consultation and fully immersed engagement throughout the research, from conception and initial formation of projects to outputs and dissemination of findings/learnings. Cut the tokenism that we often read about in a thesis when an Advisory group only contributed to the ethics approval phase —Moanaroa member, Moanaroa written submission.

Consultation is a vital, continuous and two-way communication process that begins early and extends throughout the project life cycle, including dissemination. It is important to recognise that Pacific knowledge seeking, knowledge creation, and validation of knowledge in terms of rigour, credibility, and measure are not limited to the academy (Matapo 2021; Tualaulelei & McFall-McCaffery, 2019). This requires researchers to:

- Identify and consult with appropriate stakeholders, including, for example, community leaders, health providers, women, youth, church leaders, professionals, and academic colleagues.
- Face-to-face consultation is key for establishing meaningful relationships, as is allowing sufficient time for multiple meetings and negotiations. It should be kept in mind that consultation is not meant to be a burden on those who are consulted. Allow the time commitment and mode of engagement (online or in person) for consultation to accommodate the vā (relational space) of the individual or group being consulted with (Matapo & Enari, 2020; Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022).
- Consider establishing a Pacific advisory committee or reference group to enhance ongoing guidance and community checks.
- Ensure that language is not a barrier. Researchers fluent in the researched group's language(s) can enhance the richness of Pacific research. Where feasible, ensure translation services are budgeted for and provided, considering linguistic and cultural nuances.

Stage 3

Research Team Composition

Pacific management and control of the research project at all levels is important. It is preferable to include a Pacific researcher, with clear roles and limitations for non-Pacific researchers, who may also act as mentors. This requires researchers to:

- Ensure the research team reflects the communities involved in the study (this might include the involvement of New Zealand-born Pacific, Island-born Pacific etc.).
- Recruit and train culturally appropriate information collectors and analysts.
- Consider co-supervision agreements for postgraduate students undertaking research in Pacific countries.

Stage 4

Navigating Method with Cultural Care

Dr. Radilaite Cammock (Moanaroa Talanoa) reminds us that “taboo subjects often make communities or Pacific Peoples feel [cautious]... or make them more careful in what they share and require more nuanced language that reflect cultural practices associated with the topic. For example, for topics around sexual intimacy, making considerations around gender ... and cultural, religious ... or spiritual factors often require more careful wording and thinking.”

When working with Pacific Peoples, research design must move beyond technical accuracy to embrace cultural sensitivity. Whether using questionnaires, surveys or qualitative topic guides, careful phrasing is essential to avoid offending cultural sensitivities, particularly for “taboo” subjects. From this foundation, several strategies can strengthen the cultural appropriateness of research tools:

- Qualitative topics need to offer flexibility for culturally sensitive framing.
- Pilot runs are recommended to test questions and gather feedback for refinement.
- In some contexts, researcher-assisted techniques may be more effective than self-administered questionnaires, ensuring approaches maintain rigour while being responsive to cultural nuances.
- To remove prejudices and stereotypes, it is important that questions are screened by people familiar with the community’s culture.

Stage 5

Sampling

Sampling is critical for the overall usefulness and impact of the research findings. Over-sampling may be necessary to achieve sufficient statistical power for separate analysis of Pacific data. To uphold both rigour and cultural respect, researchers are encouraged to:

- Balance the need to adequately address research questions with the need to respect the values and culture of potential participants.
- Ensure participants are representative of all key groups and knowledge holders within the community.

Stage 6

Ethical Considerations in Design

Researchers should obtain ethics approval from relevant institutional committees, but beyond institutional approval, ethics must be lived out in the research relationship. Respect, protection and transparency should be embedded throughout the research process. This means that:

- Informed and relational consent is a two-way process grounded in dialogue and trust, and goes beyond the act of signing a form. In some contexts, “turning up” can signal consent, but it remains essential that participants are provided with accessible information and opportunities to ask questions throughout the study (HRC, 2014).
- Researchers must recognise that information in Pacific communities is often shared verbally or relationally. The participants’ privacy and confidentiality must be respected, and researchers should take care to uphold participants’ dignity when handling sensitive knowledge.
- Safeguarding participants’ wellbeing means ensuring research does not cause harm. While additional care may be needed for children, youth, women, disabled people, or those with lived experiences of violence, it is equally important to acknowledge that Pacific Peoples have historically faced discrimination in education, health, and social services. This context makes many Pacific participants vulnerable in spaces where power is unequally exercised. As a baseline, researchers should actively uphold the safety, dignity, and mana of all Pacific participants.

Stage 7

Addressing Diversity and Context

Researchers are encouraged to develop a deeper understanding of Pacific communities, approaching their work in ways that recognise the diversity and richness of Pacific identities without essentialising or reducing them to a single narrative. While many Pacific Peoples may share values such as spirituality or ancestral connection, these are not universal. Researchers can reflect this diversity in the language they use in their project, through qualifiers such as “many” or “some”. They should recognise that there is a plurality of Pacific experiences shaped by migration, urbanisation, and personal beliefs. In this sense, Pacific research identities are woven into a collective, rather than representing a singular voice (Vaai & Casimira, 2017). To ensure this, researchers need to:

- Conduct literature reviews and engage with experts to understand cultural psychology, social structure, normative values, and expectations of specific communities. It is key that researchers acknowledge intra-communal diversity and practice cultural sensitivity in all interactions.
- Design questions that reflect that diversities within Pacific ethnic groups (gender, age, education, language, religion, socioeconomic class), as these shape worldviews and identities.
- Be mindful of words, mannerisms, and body language to avoid offence.

Stage 8

Outcomes and Impact of Research Design

“For me, when I go back home to Samoa ... I am the outcome”

— Pacific postgraduate student, Moanaroa Talanoa

This statement speaks to the heart of Pacific research; it must be lived, embodied, and returned to our communities. Research involving Pacific Peoples must go beyond observation. It must improve lives, inform policy, and build pathways for change.

To honour this, researchers can:

- Build Pacific research capacity and capability through mentoring, training, employment, and formal qualifications.
- Ensure accessible and reciprocal dissemination, including returning to villages and communities to gift findings in meaningful formats. Organising a fono or community meeting is an effective way to share outcomes; timing, location, and budgeting for catering and dissemination must be thoughtfully planned.
- Use Pacific media and social platforms wisely, tailoring messages to each audience. Communicating findings through media, including social media, requires a clear, engaging approach that resonates with non-academic audiences. Short bursts of information paired with strong imagery can be powerful tools for engagement and storytelling.
- Embed feedback and validation from participants and advisory groups throughout the research process.
- Catalyse action, not just analysis.