

How did we survive and how do we remain resilient?  
Aboriginal women sharing their lived experiences and  
knowledge of lessons learned in life.

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# Abstract

## Background

The aim of this study is to understand what contributes to the resilience of Aboriginal women in Australia. It is a strengths-based study, which draws upon Aboriginal women's stories of survival to investigate the factors which support, or detract from this resilience.

Although Aboriginal women belong to one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australia today, they have survived a very dark history fraught with discrimination, racism, assimilation, sexual exploitation and abuse and the removal of children from their families. The historical narratives written by Aboriginal women and the interviews that were undertaken as part of this research speak of trauma and of triumph. They reveal the strategies used to overcome hardships, providing insight into what makes and keeps our strong women strong.

## Methods

This research, conducted by an Aboriginal Woman using Indigenous methodologies, provides a comprehensive review of the literature relating to resilience, particularly with Indigenous groups around the world and more specifically resilience literature related to Australian Aboriginal people. It examines literature written by Aboriginal women and describes findings from 12 interviews with Aboriginal women conducted to explore the challenges they face, the supports they draw on, the strategies they use and the specific things they avoid to remain strong or resilient.

## Results

This research provides distinct findings with regard to Aboriginal women and resilience in Australia. Most of these insights came from the analysis of the interviews in which women identified some specific factors that support (*protective*) and detract from (*risk factors*) resilience, not previously highlighted in the available literature.

For *protective factors*, these include:

1. The significant influence of Aboriginal matriarchs or strong Aboriginal women on the strength of women; the inner strength of our women is supported by a

strong sense of identity and driven by the responsibility to stay strong for family and community.

2. The ability to operate between two worlds (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) and to use all available resources to enhance strength and resilience; using withdrawal or isolation from extreme situations to heal and re-charge.
3. The utilisation of culturally appropriate counselling to deal with more complex issues relating generally to extreme trauma and unacceptable levels of family violence, alcohol and drugs.

The *risk factors* affecting resilience include:

1. Difficulties accessing information from services;
2. Negative people; compounding challenges and trauma; and the extreme risk these pose to wellbeing of Australian Aboriginal women.

### **Conclusion**

The term ‘resilience’ is not generally used by Aboriginal Australians; the words strong, strength and wellbeing are commonly used. Australian Aboriginal people have many synergies with other Indigenous peoples around the world with regard to research on resilience. The similarities for protective factors include culture, family, land, language, spirituality. For risk factors, they are inter-generational trauma, racism, discrimination, drugs, violence and alcohol.”

The outcomes of this research and the recommendations can be used to guide future policy and program development and assist in the design of programs and interventions to support the development and maintenance of resilience in Aboriginal women.

## **Declaration of Authorship**

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

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This research aimed to uncover strong women's stories. In particular, the 'strong Aboriginal women' from the wider communities within the Midwest of Western Australia. I am absolutely in awe of the strength, resilience and grit they demonstrate every day in supporting their children, family and wider communities.

To the women who participated in this research project, it has been an absolute privilege and honour for me to be allowed to listen to your amazing stories – stories of heartache, strength and survival, told by all sometimes with humour and cheek and sometimes revealing extreme pain and suffering. This experience confirmed for me how a strong spirit can sustain us in times of trouble and help us to remain strong.

For my reference group of Aboriginal women, thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking time out of your busy lives to help guide and interpret the emerging themes – your advice and insights were invaluable. For all of the members of the Midwest community that approached me in the streets, supermarkets and all over the place asking me how the project was progressing, thanks for supporting and believing in me and giving me the encouragement I needed.

To the local elders, young people, men and women and of course our future, our children (the ninny ones). As a people that value family, it is the love for all of them which helps ignite our passions and can be the driving force that helps us to create, achieve and even sometimes to fight and survive. I am grateful that through these stories, younger generations can gain insight into our past, to help prepare for the future.

I acknowledge my own family for the guidance and support they have provided. Thank you to my mother and my aunts and the matriarchs (strong women) in my blood-line for allowing me and my younger sibling and cousins to stand in your shadow, watching in awe at the way you have tackled and overcome almost insurmountable obstacles with undeniable strength and fortitude, allowing me to see first-hand the irrefutable strength and resilience of the Australian Aboriginal woman.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Our past

The survival of Aboriginal women in Australia continues despite the barrage of adversities encountered and overcome since British colonisation.

To appreciate this survival, one must have a good understanding of what it is that has 'been survived'. Aboriginal people have occupied Australia for at least 40,000 years.<sup>(1)</sup> Living as hunters and gatherers and using their intimate knowledge of the land, animals and plants to survive, they moved in accordance with the seasons, and developed a rich and complex ritual life that included language, customs, spirituality and law, with the heart of everything being connection to the land.<sup>(2)</sup>

In 1788, Australia was colonised by the British.<sup>(2)</sup> In the years that followed, significant numbers of Aboriginal people died, with the leading causes being introduced diseases, removal from their land, inability to access food and murder by colonisers during frontier battles and massacres.<sup>(1)</sup>

New laws and policies of protection and control started to be introduced after 1837, under the guise of addressing a growing concern about the general mistreatment of Aboriginal people, but also to effectively regulate Aboriginal labour in pastoral areas.<sup>(1)</sup> These policies were followed by a wave of paternalistic laws and policies reinforcing racial segregation, assimilation, racism and discrimination. The removal of Aboriginal children from their families also began at this time. The devastating effect these policies have had on Aboriginal people are still visible, leaving an intergenerational legacy of trauma that we still contend with today.<sup>(3)</sup>

The historical narratives written by Aboriginal women provide much needed insight into the suffering. These stories describe Aboriginal women being beaten, raped and forced into prostitution, chained, enslaved into domestic service, taken from their parents as children and institutionalised by government.<sup>(3)</sup> They were given food rations loaded with starches and sugar and made to beg the Chief Protector (appointed by the government) for the very basic necessities in life such as food, clothes and shoes. Aboriginal people were controlled and restricted; they were required to get *permission* to travel, *permission*

to see their children and even *permission* to marry. Many were removed from their land and placed onto religious mission settlements or government reserves and then refused the right to practice their language, lore and culture.<sup>(3)</sup>

Aboriginal women were considered to occupy the lowest social class<sup>(4)</sup> and, as a result, racism, inequality, discrimination, physical violence and psychological torment were part of the day-to-day reality of what it was to be an Aboriginal woman in Australia.

Despite this suffering, there are numerous accounts of Aboriginal women who were strong, fought back and continued to work tirelessly for the good of their families and communities. These women outsmarted their oppressors,<sup>(5)</sup> by drawing on the strength of their identity, their cultural knowledge and Aboriginal ways of being and doing,<sup>(6)</sup> even using their sense of humour to survive and ultimately overcome. These women demonstrated undeniable physical and emotional strength,<sup>(5-7)</sup> overcoming the pain of loss, or rape or violence. They were strong women, who went out of their way to help others, when they were suffering themselves.<sup>(8)</sup> These aunties, sisters, mothers and cousins opened their doors to other family members in times of crisis and gave, when they had very little to give. This inner strength and the unity during the hard times, increased their ability to withstand incredible adversity.

## **Our present**

Today, the research on Aboriginal women is dominated by a limited number of studies focusing on problems or risks, relating mostly to child and maternal health, sexual health, violence, abuse and the criminal justice system. Australia's health and socio-economic statistics continue to reflect Aboriginal women as belonging to one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australia. Current data indicate that, when compared with non-Aboriginal women, Aboriginal women are more likely to be single mothers (46% vs 19.4%), less likely to obtain a tertiary education (24% vs 5%), twice as likely to be unemployed, and three times as likely to be earning an income below the award wage. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males are more than twice as likely as females to be working full-time (37.9% vs 18.4%), and are also less likely to be working part-time (13.7% vs 22.6%).<sup>(9)</sup>

The Strong Families, Safe Kids: Family violence response and prevention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children report by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and

Islander Child Care,<sup>(10)</sup> prepared as a response to levels of family violence in Aboriginal communities, states that family violence is interwoven with all spheres of disadvantage and inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This violence remains one of the biggest challenges facing our children, families and communities. The report also states the greatest direct impact of family violence is on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who are 32 times more likely to be hospitalised and 10 times more likely to die from violent assaults than other women in Australia.<sup>(11)</sup>

We cannot ignore that intergenerational trauma and poor education, employment and earning capacity are socio-economic disadvantages that increase vulnerability to discrimination and abuse, leaving Aboriginal women at further risk of suffering continued trauma. The relationship between adverse events and trauma are well documented.<sup>(12)</sup> Aboriginal women are playing the roles of mother, carer and advocate in our families, implying that the likelihood of them supporting others and thus experiencing even more trauma is extremely high. A sad reality is that for many Aboriginal people, dealing with trauma has become part of our day-to-day lives, whether we are affected by it directly or indirectly.

In spite of these statistics, little has changed in the development and delivery of appropriate services to address these needs.<sup>(13)</sup> The Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Sector (ACCHS) has limited resources, yet still continuously seeks innovative ways to address the overwhelming burden of disease.<sup>(14)</sup> For most services in the ACCHS, patients present with physical health problems caused by chronic disease. Diabetes, cancer and heart disease are all complex health problems that require referrals to and follow-up at specialist services, complex care plans and careful coordinated case management, all of which require time and a great deal of effort to deal with effectively.<sup>(14)</sup> Many of the Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing services today contend with alcohol and drug addiction, family violence, suicide, grief and trauma.<sup>(15)</sup>

Limited resources and the burden of dealing with complex health and social problems are just some of the barriers Aboriginal services face, making it very difficult to develop interventions to deal with the causes of these problems. It is widely accepted that we need to develop programs and policies that offer effective interventions and preventive

approaches,<sup>(13)</sup> otherwise, the next generation will be at risk of repeating and generating the same statistical picture evident today.

However, the situation is not entirely without hope. The Australian Government, working with the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector, has taken positive actions over the past 10 years to address some of the key issues affecting Aboriginal people by developing a number of strategies and plans.<sup>(13)</sup>

In December 2007, in response to the Social Justice Report 2005, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) pledged to close key gaps to reduce disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with respect to life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational achievement and employment outcomes. It also facilitated a number of Indigenous-specific National Partnerships.<sup>(16)</sup> The Close the Gap (CTG) strategy included significant funding to address the key targets, and the CTG 2018 report indicates that there has been some progress towards meeting targets in relation to infant mortality, school attendance rates, literacy and numeracy levels, year 12 attendance, employment and life expectancy.<sup>(17)</sup>

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy 2013<sup>(18)</sup> was developed in response to very high numbers of suicides in Aboriginal communities. The strategy was informed by extensive community consultation across Australia and by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' holistic view of health, which encompasses mental health, physical, cultural and spiritual health. It reinforced the need for continuous Aboriginal community engagement and cultural awareness in our wellbeing services. It also emphasised that Social and Emotional Wellbeing Services (SEWB), or projects that seek to address suicide, should be grounded in community, owned by community, based on community needs and accountable to the community.<sup>(18)</sup>

The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (2016–2019) was the third action plan in a series that included an investment of \$25 million in front-line organisations and family violence prevention and legal services to address family violence in Aboriginal communities.<sup>(19)</sup> The 12-year national plan is being delivered through four three-year Action Plans that build on each other over time. The overall aim is a significant and sustained reduction in violence against women and their children during the next 12 years (2010–2022).

To assess whether this target is being achieved, the following four indicators of change will be used to demonstrate progress:

- reduced prevalence of domestic violence and sexual assault
- increased proportion of women who feel safe in their communities
- reduced deaths related to domestic violence and sexual assault
- reduced proportion of children exposed to their mother's or carer's experience of domestic violence.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013–2023 was developed to provide an overarching framework that builds links with other major Commonwealth health activities and identifies areas of focus to guide future investment and effort in relation to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. It is a targeted approach by the Australian Government to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy the same standard of health as other Australians.

The plan primarily seeks to address the key health risks and social determinants affecting health, and is supported by the following principles:

1. health equality and a human rights approach
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community control and engagement
3. partnership
4. accountability.

Examining the number of strategies developed over the past 10 years, all developed to address key areas of Aboriginal disadvantage, it is interesting to note that many of the recommendations, guiding principles or the lessons learned adhere to the following:

1. **A strong focus on Aboriginal community engagement.** A productive working relationship must have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at its core, with Aboriginal people involved in all decision-making processes.<sup>(18-20)</sup>
2. **An acknowledgement of the holistic nature of Aboriginal health and wellbeing and valuing Indigenous knowledge and cultural beliefs and practices,** which are important for promoting positive cultural identity and social and emotional wellbeing for Indigenous Australians.<sup>(16, 20)</sup>

3. **Initiatives should build the strength, resilience and capacity of Indigenous communities, individuals and families** to address health and social issues.<sup>(18, 19)</sup>
4. **Multi-sectoral coordination of services** to build capacity to effectively address issues of concern through a number of services, for example, health, education, housing and employment.<sup>(18-20)</sup>

Although these are positive plans made in consultation with Aboriginal groups, there is still little recognition of those Aboriginal services and people that are already dealing with these issues in their communities. It is often the women who lead these initiatives drawing on their strength and the strength of the community to address the core issues that must be addressed, to enable the more specific health and wellbeing issues to be addressed.

### **A way forward**

Aboriginal women have been portrayed as victims in an oppressive patriarchal social and cultural system. We realised, from personal experience and observation, that Aboriginal women were not always the victims.(p. xvii)<sup>(21)</sup>

As an Aboriginal woman researcher, it is very easy to become overwhelmed by the glaring disparities between ourselves and the rest of Australia. I believe, if Aboriginal women based their worth solely on the available socio-economic status literature, it would seem that the only experience more difficult than being an Aboriginal Australian would be being an Aboriginal Australian woman.

My own experience is that I live in a large, extended Aboriginal family and community setting. As such, I am acutely aware, through my own lived experiences and those of others around me, of many of the day-to-day issues, expectations and life challenges that we, as Aboriginal women, face today.

It is through these experiences that I have also witnessed coping systems and strategies, developed and implemented by our women to manage and overcome the hardships that to many outsiders would seem almost insurmountable.

It is true that we continue to belong to one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australia, and it is also true that we continue to struggle with the dramatic effects of intergenerational trauma.<sup>(3)</sup> However, we are also survivors, and many Aboriginal women today, despite facing continued forms of discrimination based on race and gender, are paving a way for following generations. Examples of strong Aboriginal women who have succeeded in the face of ongoing discrimination and inequality include community leaders (Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue, Pearl Gibbs, Evelyn Scott, June Oscar), magistrates (Pat O'Shane), doctors (Helen Milroy, Christine Clinch), politicians (Linda Burney, Carol Martin, Nova Peris), famous actors (Deborah Mailman, Miranda Tapsell, Leah Purcell), dancers (Ella Havelka), lawyers (Megan Davis), sportspeople (Cathy Freeman, Nova Peris, Evonne Goolagong-Cawley), singers (Jessica Mauboy, Casey Donovan), models (Samantha Harris, Magnolia Maymuru), authors (Jackie Huggins, Sally Morgan, Doris Pilkington) and academics (Terry Dunbar, Marcia Langton, Patricia Dudgeon, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Jackie Huggins, Cheryl Kickett-Tucker). There are many more making considerable in-roads in many different areas across the nation.

Aboriginal researchers across the world maintain that the focus of research should be on working with Aboriginal people, who hold knowledge and expertise on our circumstances and on positive change.<sup>(22-24)</sup> It is part of a long-held belief by Aboriginal people that we and our communities hold the solutions to our problems and that the paternalistic policies imposed on Aboriginal people in the past have made many of us distrustful and resistant to outsider interference in our lives.

Thus, it is important for us to understand what makes our women strong, as it is these strong women who have helped our communities to survive and grow. Knowing what helps to make Aboriginal women strong will enable younger women to develop the strategies and approaches that will make them strong in the future

### **This research project**

This research explores Aboriginal women's stories of survival, and investigates the factors that contribute to or detract from resilience in the lives of Aboriginal women today. The word resilience, when used within the context of this study, describes an individual's capacity 'to bounce back from adversity'.<sup>(25)</sup> This study uses a strengths-based approach, by providing an opportunity for Aboriginal women to share some of their



own strategies regarding how they remain strong and how they have survived day-to-day, dealing with life's challenges.

The specific research objectives were to investigate:

1. How do Aboriginal women define resilience?
2. What strategies do Aboriginal women employ and what are the internal factors that contribute to the ability of Aboriginal women to remain resilient?
3. What external factors contribute to the ability of Aboriginal women to remain resilient?
4. What external factors diminish the ability of Aboriginal women to remain resilient?

The study was conducted in the Midwest of Western Australia (WA), an area not statistically dissimilar to the rest of the nation with regard to Aboriginal health and social disparities. However, a number of specific characteristics make this area distinct. The Midwest is a vast region, and it includes some of the most remote areas in the state of WA. Aboriginal people comprise 13% of the population in the region, with nearly half of this population under 20. Suicide was the leading cause of death for 15–24 year olds, and there are high rates of Aboriginal teen pregnancy (14% vs the 2.8% WA state average)<sup>(26)</sup>.

The region is lagging in educational participation, in terms of NAPLAN, Year 12, Diploma and Higher Education rates. According to the ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Geraldton, the major regional centre, is one of the most disadvantaged areas in WA; for example, the SEIFA values for education and employment show Rangeway (a suburb of Geraldton) ranking as the seventh most disadvantaged suburb in WA.<sup>(27)</sup>

Despite this, I know the region has many strengths, with a number of Aboriginal groups and individuals still regularly practicing their culture, speaking their language and enjoying access to their land. The majority of the Aboriginal community organisations in the area are well established and long-standing. There are many large family groups within the area, and many are interrelated, and thus, often look after their own family members during times of hardship.

I commenced this research project in this region because I believe that one of the key strengths of the community is the strength demonstrated by the women in the area. Although I know there are also many strong men who have achieved an enormous amount for the region, their families and community, as an Aboriginal woman, I believe it is not culturally appropriate for me to be involved in discussing men's business. The strong women I am talking about are those who hold their family together, who support their communities through misfortune, who raise children and who keep culture and language strong. Therefore, it is their stories of how they keep strong and resilient that I wanted to learn and share.

For this reason, coupled with the fact that I have personal passion and curiosity for what keeps Aboriginal women and their communities strong, the focus of this research is mostly on Aboriginal women. To guide the research project, I established an Aboriginal women's reference group. The members of the reference group are well-known Aboriginal women who are active in the community and have good local knowledge of families and services. Prior to the commencement of the research, I sought and received approval for undertaking the research from the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (WAAHEC) and the Murchison Aboriginal Organisations Alliance (MAOA), the main representative group in the region, comprised of the Chairpersons and Chief Executive Officers of the local Aboriginal organisations. A number of considerations were addressed with regard to safeguarding the women, particularly with regard to protecting their identities and ensuring their stories were reflected in a respectful and truthful way.

This research has been conducted using Indigenous methodologies appropriate for the region, and include the use of community consultation, 'yarning' (an Australian Aboriginal conversational method) and guidance from a reference group of women. Understanding how Aboriginal women define resilience and how we can support this resilience can be of great value to Aboriginal community organisations and government and non-government agencies, particularly when developing policies and programs to improve the lives of Aboriginal women.

This thesis includes a literature review on resilience, providing a brief overview of the history of resilience theory and how resilience relates to Aboriginal people around the world and within Australia. The next chapter offers an overview of the research

methodologies used, and the following chapter reveals the findings resulting from the research. The discussion chapter presents the overall outcomes of the research, as they relate both to the findings and the available literature. The final chapter contains a concluding section discussing the lessons learned, the research journey and insights gained.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The aim of this study is to explore and share the specific factors that make our strong Aboriginal women who they are and what keeps our Aboriginal women strong. This section will examine the existing literature which explores this concept and it consists of two parts. First, I briefly discuss the origins of resilience theory and the emergence of psychological resilience. I then discuss psychological resilience as it relates to Aboriginal cultures around the world and resilience as it relates to Australian Aboriginal people. Second, I investigate the available literature on Australian Aboriginal women that specifically focuses on resilience, survival and strength within an Australian society context.

### Resilience theory

There is much controversy around the definition of resilience; hence, for the purpose of this research project, I discuss how the concept of psychological resilience has emerged and evolved.

The origins of the word ‘resilience’ come from measuring and comparing the strength of materials such as wood and steel and its ability to spring back into shape.<sup>(28, 29)</sup> The word was also used to describe the resilience of ecosystems as a measure of the ability to absorb changes and remain in existence.<sup>(30)</sup> This original definition of resilience was not used to describe human behaviour. Human nature is dynamic; we do not simply spring back to our original form. Rather, we adjust, adapt and transform in response to change, challenges and demands <sup>(44)</sup>.

It was not until the early 1970s that the concept of psychological resilience emerged, the term was used to describe how well individuals cope in traumatic situations. Early work around ‘resilience theory’ was conducted by Garmezy (1974), whom many consider is a pioneer of this type of research. He conducted a study on the children of schizophrenic parents and became interested in the protective factors identified in the children who did well despite being at risk of developing a psychiatric disorder. This involved a shift in focus from pathology to other factors such as an individual’s background or personality that may help prevent the onset of mental illness.<sup>(31)</sup>

This focus on the ‘resilient individual’ broadened when it became apparent that resilience also pertained to how an individual responded to their environment. Werner (1971) conducted a study on a group of 698 children from birth.<sup>(32, 33)</sup> The initial study covered the first 30 years of their lives, monitoring their exposure and responses to stress. Similarly to Garmezy, Werner discovered that not all children who were categorised as at risk did poorly in life.<sup>(33)</sup> She found that resilient children responded to their environments differently, but had common tendencies that included the ability to reason, support outside of the family, inner direction, ability to complete tasks on their own, good social skills and the ability to seize opportunities as they arose. Werner’s work investigated protective and risk factors affecting positive life outcomes and found that resilience in some individuals could be learned or developed, and could even diminish in others over time.<sup>(34)</sup>

Following the work of Garmezy and Werner, more research started to emerge that acknowledged the impact of our environment in building and maintaining individual resilience. Rutter, who also commenced work on resilience in the early 1970s, theorised that resilience is related not just specifically to an individual’s psychological traits or superior functioning, but rather, is an ordinary adaptation given the right resources; it is the environment or the situation, not the child, that is the catalyst for differences.<sup>(35)</sup> Rutter (1987) exposed the complexities around resilience and presented a much less straightforward interpretation of the theory, arguing that depending on the situation, not all protective factors were protective. For example, marriage is not a protective factor if a child is exposed to violence and continuous discord. Similarly, not all risks are detrimental; for example, exposure to low-level risks can encourage a child to learn to troubleshoot situations and stress, and may lead to growth.<sup>(35, 36)</sup>

By the end of the 20th century, there was a further broadening of the theory of resilience to consider the impact of society more broadly on resilience. There now seems to be a further recognition that all aspects of our society—families and communities, governments, services and culture—affect the achievement of good life outcomes. Ungar conducted a study on at-risk youth (n=1500) in 11 countries that concluded that there were common aspects of resilience across all groups; the differences were in how the groups expressed these commonalities. Among the commonalities were positive identity and relationships, access to materials and resources, a sense of cohesion and belonging to their schools and community and adherence to culture.<sup>(37)</sup> Ungar (2011) encouraged

further research on the synergies and differences between other cultural groups, stating that this would contribute to a greater social ecological understanding of resilience.<sup>(37)</sup>

## **Indigenous resilience theory**

Since the turn of the century, there has been a growing body of literature exploring new resilience theories and new insights and representations of resilience, as it relates to different Indigenous groups around the world.

A common thread through much of this literature is the identification of distinct risk factors or traumatic events that significantly affect resilience in Aboriginal communities. The impact of colonisation on Aboriginal people and the historical grief, poverty and displacement caused by racist and paternalistic policies of assimilation and genocide has been recognised throughout the world; for example, in Canada,<sup>(22)</sup> New Zealand,<sup>(38)</sup> and the US.<sup>(39)</sup> Perceived discrimination has also been found to be an important risk factor for decreased resilience outcomes, based on a composite measure of resilience.<sup>(40)</sup> It is also an important predictor of suicidal ideation among American Indian youth.<sup>(41)</sup>

Most research by Aboriginal authors internationally highlights the effectiveness of drawing on our own knowledge and using our culture, traditions and healing practices to maintain strength and restore balance in our communities. This research is now also revealing many other unique protective factors when examining and considering healthy and fully functioning Aboriginal communities, families and individuals. Some of these protective factors include access to traditional lands, practicing our culture and language, support from our extended families and communities, self-government and drawing strength from elders.<sup>(22, 43)</sup> Spiritual and physical connection to land and place is central to Aboriginal culture and wellbeing.<sup>(44)</sup>

These protective factors facilitate positive life outcomes by operating as buffers between individuals and the risk factors that may affect wellbeing.<sup>(45)</sup> The practicing of traditional culture acts as a protective factor in preventing or mitigating alcohol and substance abuse.<sup>(46)</sup> In some studies, the benefits of knowing and practicing culture were also shown to enhance school success and academic outcomes.<sup>(47)</sup> Aboriginal knowledge and use of traditional language is acknowledged as a strong predictor of resistance to youth suicide and juvenile delinquency. Hallett (2007) found that suicide rates dropped almost to zero in those communities in which half of the population had a conversational knowledge of

their native language.<sup>(43)</sup> If an Aboriginal person has access to their land to carry out their traditional customs such as fishing and hunting, this can develop a strong foundation in life.<sup>(23)</sup> The dispossession of land had devastating consequences post-colonisation for Aboriginal groups; hence, the ability for an Aboriginal person to ‘go back to country’ is extremely powerful in maintaining wellbeing, as it fosters a sense of freedom and belonging that can help develop a strong sense of identity and pride.<sup>(42)</sup>

### **Australian Aboriginal resilience theory**

Research by Aboriginal people in Australia demonstrates many synergies and differences with our Indigenous sisters and brothers around the world. We share with them the importance of land, culture, language, spirituality, kinship and lore.<sup>(48)</sup> Research also indicates these are protective factors, particularly when we consider how we maintain wellbeing in our communities. Similarly, as a result of colonisation, we share the distinct risks of racism, discrimination and intergenerational trauma, caused mainly through the process of colonisation.<sup>(22)</sup>

In Australia there is now a developing body of literature that speaks specifically about resilience. A study conducted in WA in 2011 investigated the resilience of Aboriginal children and young people families where there is violence. This study used outcomes from the WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey conducted by Telethon Kids Institute, a survey of 1,021 youths aged 12–17,<sup>(49)</sup> and provided much needed insights into the health and socio-economic status of Aboriginal children in WA. This resilience study based on WA youth analysed the results of the survey and highlighted key risks Aboriginal children are potentially exposed to, including family violence, harsh parenting, education of parents, nurturing of parents, single parent and number of traumatic events experienced.

This information is very useful in providing an overview of the status of our youth; however, the method used to gather this information could have been more nuanced, as yes/no questions do not consider the context of the situation or whether there were other variables at play. For example, self-regulation is indicated by youth self-reports of how often they have been involved in a physical fight over a six-month period,<sup>(49)</sup> this does not take into account context such as ongoing exposure to family violence, poverty, racism and discrimination.

Other research offers another approach to measuring Aboriginal resilience using the holistic concept of social and emotional wellbeing. The term ‘social and emotional wellbeing’ (SEWB) is often used when discussing the mental health of Aboriginal people in Australia. <sup>(18, 50, 51)</sup> An Australian Indigenous psychologist developed the framework below, <sup>(50)</sup> which seeks to illustrate this holistic context of Aboriginality (see Figure 1). It acknowledges Aboriginal Australian world-views and expressions of culture, including the individual self, family, kin, community, traditional lands, ancestors and spiritual dimensions. <sup>(51)</sup> This conception of SEWB represents a collectivist perspective, with self inseparable from, and embedded within, a range of interconnected key domains. <sup>(48)</sup>



**Figure 1: Determinants of social and emotional wellbeing**<sup>(48)</sup>

In this way, we see that all aspects of Aboriginal culture play a central role in maintaining equilibrium or general wellbeing in the lives of Aboriginal people and their communities. Items listed within the inner circle represent the protective factors. It is when these things work in harmony that we are able to develop cultural resilience, which then enhances the resilience of our communities, families and individuals. When these things are disrupted or out of balance, poor health and social problems will persist. <sup>(48)</sup>

Although the Australian literature on Aboriginal resilience is sparse, there are other words that are used in Aboriginal Australian writing that have the same meaning. Aboriginal



authors describe resilience of Aboriginal people using the words ‘strong or strength’<sup>(52-55)</sup> and wellbeing. In the next section, I explore the use of these words in the context of Aboriginal women in Australia.

### **Australian Aboriginal women and resilience**

This section discusses the literature examining resilience in Australian Aboriginal women, focusing on strength and survival. Because there is very little academic literature in this area, I draw on a mixture of academic, autobiographical and biographical literature to explore this concept.

The word resilience is not widely used by Australian Aboriginal women, even though Aboriginal women demonstrate this concept through the act of surviving and/or the ability to keep going in spite of the difficulties in life we face. The word ‘strong’ is common in the grey literature on Aboriginal women and is used to describe a number of Aboriginal women’s programs; for example, Strong Women Strong Babies Strong Culture<sup>(56)</sup>(Northern Territory), Soul Sistas Living Strong<sup>(53)</sup>(Dandenong), Strong Women Strong Business<sup>(57)</sup> (Indigenous Business Australia), Tiwi Strong Women’s Choir<sup>(52)</sup>(Northern Territory) and Strong Women on Country<sup>(55)</sup> (national publication on the success of Aboriginal women caring for country).

There are also other words used in the literature on our women to describe the characteristics of our ‘strong women’ and their role within the community: nurturer, backbone, passionate, feisty, cheeky, brave, wise, deadly (good, strong woman) and ‘go to woman’.<sup>(5, 7, 8, 21)</sup> Around the nation, some groups use traditional language or mixtures of English and Aboriginal language to describe strong women. For example, Noongar people (Perth) often use the words ‘Moorditj Yorga’ (the Best or Great Woman), and in the Midwest (Geraldton), the term often used is Barndi Ngarlu (Wajarri). Depending on the region and language, terms vary across the many parts of Australia.

Dune et al.<sup>(88)</sup> studied resilience amongst older Aboriginal women in Australia living in Sydney, drawing on resilience theory and other related international research from around the world. However, on reading the article, it does become apparent that the lead

researcher is not writing from an Aboriginal standpoint and this is evident in some of the methodological choices made; for example:

- Recruitment. Women were recruited for the study via a flyer. As the study relates to resilience within an Australian Aboriginal context, to ensure the women recruited were considered especially strong or resilient within their own community, local community consultation may have helped.
- Viewpoint. Use of an Australian Aboriginal viewpoint throughout the research project would have ensured the findings could be translated taking into account an Australian Aboriginal community context, thus enhancing the outcomes of the research project.

A number of Australian Aboriginal women scholars have brought the voice of our women forward in a way that has helped us to start to examine ourselves, to reflect and share our thoughts and opinions on the experiences of Aboriginal women in Australia.<sup>(4, 58-60)</sup>

Moreton's controversial and candid 'Talkin Up to the Whitewoman' challenges the concept of feminism and the feminist movement and notions of the white middle-class woman as the universal woman.<sup>(58)</sup> Moreton challenges feminists to come to terms with their own ideologies around race before there can be real dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women around feminism. In this way, Moreton distinguished or pushed forward the voice of Aboriginal women, setting it apart from non-Indigenous women.

Langton uses the focus of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Day of Celebration (NAIDOC) theme for 2018, 'Because of Her, We Can', to draw attention to Aboriginal women in Australia. In her article 'For her, we must. No excuses, time to act',<sup>(60)</sup> Langton reminds us that there has been little acknowledgement of the powerful role of women, saying 'Indigenous women dominate in [our] history of advocacy and campaigning for policy reforms to address the need for safe communities. Yet, until recently, their work has gone almost unnoticed'. Langton provides a powerful reminder that we should not forget our women, and in particular, violence against Aboriginal women. In this way we see the contemporary issues faced by Aboriginal women brought to the fore by an Aboriginal woman, who is also one of Australia's most respected

academics and has dedicated much of her life to advocating for Aboriginal people's rights across the nation.

Fredericks encourages Aboriginal women to open up and tell their stories unchanged and uninfluenced.<sup>(59)</sup> In this way, Fredericks believes that the telling of our stories provides a sense of our individual and collective experiences in the naming of all that was and is, and all that has been distorted, erased and altered to suit the needs of the coloniser.<sup>(59, 61)</sup>

In her address to Australia's top 100 influencers in the field of women's health at the National Women's Health Summit, Pat Turner, the CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) and one of the most successful Aboriginal women in Australia today, spoke about the pivotal role matriarchs had played in her life.<sup>(62)</sup>

It is important that you know how I became the person I did. I know that my experience was gained from and influenced by my mother.<sup>(62)</sup>

Additional to the academic literature, there are powerful biographical and autobiographical accounts by Aboriginal women, which provide another perspective on strong women and Aboriginal resilience. The narrative approach taken in these accounts is consistent with use of Indigenous methodologies. Rita and Jackie Huggins, Alice Nannup, Lauren Marsh and Stephen Kinnane, Sally Morgan, Doris Pilkington Garimara and Molly Craig Kelly and Olive Knight (Kankawa Nagarra) and Terri-Ann White have all made a remarkable contribution to capturing and sharing the voice of Aboriginal women. These women provide a first-hand account of the lived experiences of our Aboriginal women. Contained within their books are numerous stories of survival, including the heartbreak of being taken away from their country and families at a young age and put into missions, the racism and oppression they have endured, and the poverty and battles they had to fight to survive. The women also speak candidly about the happy times; for example, the experiences of freedom and joy experienced during their childhood, such as swimming all day in local watering holes and dams and going on family hunting trips. They also speak about their love of family, country and people.

In the book 'Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence' (1996),<sup>(5)</sup> Pilkington writes about the experiences of her mother, Molly Craig Kelly (dec), who was removed as a young girl by the government from her home at Jigalong Community, situated in one of the most remote

areas in WA. With two other young girls, she made the physically gruelling journey back home to Jigalong by foot from the Moore River settlement north of Perth, over 2,000 kilometres away. Molly was later captured, and again defied authorities to be reunited with her beloved country and family, returning yet again as an adult. Molly's journey demonstrates both physical and mental resilience:

Then they took me and my kids back to that place, Moore River. And I walked all the way ... back to Jigalong again, carrying Annabelle, the little one.(p.148)<sup>(5)</sup>

The 1994 book 'Auntie Rita' by Rita Huggins (dec) and daughter Jackie Huggins shows that when generations share time and wisdom with each other, they are able to capture a story of survival and reclaim the real history and contributions of our people:

This book is a result of my mother's and my combined efforts and of our mutual Aboriginality. It is born out of so many years of our talking. During the book's writing, we have had so many years of talking ... Recording and publishing the memories of elderly Aboriginals is an especially urgent task, otherwise important aspects of Australian history that our elders can pass on will be lost forever.(p.3)<sup>(7)</sup>

Olive Knights book 'The Bauhinia Tree' (2015)<sup>(63)</sup> talks about her experiences as an Aboriginal child living in a traditional setting on her own country but then removed and placed in a mission. In the book she shares with us the traditional rules that governed the life of her and her people; she also described what she was taught as a child:

For instance, I remember that as children, we were told to respect our elders. We were told to respect people who were strong, who gave information, who were wise people. These were people who passed on the traditional law and culture, who told us stories and kept the tribes and clans in-tact.(p.11)<sup>(63)</sup>

Knight then talks about the day she was taken as a child from her people and put into a mission, where she stayed thereafter for many years (and coerced into adopting the same values):

One day a missionary man came. I remember it was in the morning. Of course, he had to do what he was told to do. Being the policy at the time, the children were to be removed and put into dormitories. So he came one morning, and I understood not a word of English – nothing. I only spoke Gooniyandi. And he came to me and said, 'Would you like to come to school, to the mission?' I had been brought up to respect

people; it was deeply ingrained in me. He came to me and asked me, ‘Do you wanna come?’ And I said yes meaning no (p.27)<sup>(63)</sup> .

Alice Nannup in her 1995 biography, ‘When the Pelican Laughed’,<sup>(8)</sup> demonstrated resistance and bravery at a time when racism against Aboriginal people ran rampant through all aspects of Australian society. While attending a matinee she and her children were subjected to racial taunts by non-Aboriginal children; Alice then describes what happened next:

I’ve got something to say – and I want you all to listen . Everyone just stood there and look at me, and there were quite a few of them too; the foyer was full. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘I’ve been coming here ever Saturday afternoon, bringing my children to enjoy the matinee, just like you people, and what do I get? Nigger, nigger, boong, boong, pull the trigger, this, that, and the other. Well I’ve had it. I want you people to try and understand how it feels. Why don’t you bring your children up, don’t drag them up – it’s a disgrace’.( p.15)<sup>(8)</sup>

These stories of survival, the intimate thoughts and feelings of women who have triumphed despite the oppressive situations imposed on them, give us incredible insight into how strong and resilient these women had to have been.

## **Conclusion**

There is very little research on the resilience of Aboriginal people in Australia. Although some research discusses the strength and social and emotional wellbeing of our people, much of the academic research literature on resilience as it relates to ‘Australian Aboriginal people’ does not celebrate, explore and/or share with the world our inherent strengths. Minister for Indigenous Health, Ken Wyatt, best summarised this in his speech during a leadership lunch for the Centre for Independent Studies, stating that ‘It seems that too often our achievements are overshadowed by health and welfare and stories of deep and understandable concern’.<sup>(64)</sup>

Although there are some books and academic literature on Aboriginal women, there is a desperate need for researchers and Aboriginal women alike to find ways to bring to the fore the voice of our Australian Aboriginal women, in a way that ensures we speak first-hand about our lives, our histories and the issues affecting us.

## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

*Aboriginal people cannot and will not become empowered if Aboriginal people continue to be spoken to, spoken for and spoken about (p.16)<sup>(65)</sup>*

Aboriginal scholars have long critiqued the Western way of doing things when it comes to Aboriginal research, arguing the inappropriate methods and practices used in traditional Western forms of research have caused undue stress and reinforced the paternalistic and exploitive nature of colonialism.<sup>(66)</sup>

Tuhawi Smith, Maori Professor of Indigenous Education and author of *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*,<sup>(67)</sup> encourages Aboriginal researchers to move away from using traditional Western research methodologies when conducting research within our communities. Tuhawi Smith challenges us to develop our own research methodologies, based on tried and proven ways of understanding and translating knowledge within our own cultural contexts. She adds that these methods must be congruent with native values and traditions and accountable to our Indigenous communities, stating that Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviours as an integral part of methodology.<sup>(67)</sup>

Throughout this research project, I have applied Aboriginal methodologies appropriate for conducting research in this region. This includes the use of community consultation throughout the research project, yarning (an Australian Aboriginal conversational method), considerations and adherence to local cultural and community protocols, approval by the local Aboriginal community, the MAOA and the Aboriginal research ethics board that oversees research in the Western Australia Aboriginal Health Ethics Council (WAAHEC)

Indigenous methodologies recognise that who we are and what we do is intricately linked to what we know<sup>(68)</sup> hence, as an Aboriginal woman conducting this research (ontology), it is only fair that I first speak about what I know (epistemology) and how I have come to 'know' it. My ideas, views and understanding of my reality from my lived experiences as an Aboriginal woman growing up and working in the Midwest have informed the way I have undertaken the research (axiology). Applying this methodology has enabled me to draw both on my own knowledge and experience and the knowledge and experience in

my community, in a way that does not compromise the rights of the Aboriginal women who participated in the research. As Nakata asserts, understanding your standpoint requires that you know how the position of Indigenous peoples is understood by others and by themselves as they view their position through the knowledge of others.<sup>(69)</sup>

There is some controversy over the use of the Indigenous methodology, with the main criticism being that the research may lose its objectivity if conducted from the point of view of the researched. However, using Indigenous methodologies allows a more equal and collaborative relationship between the researcher and the researched, especially when it is done to achieve a shared objective or interest, which is usually to benefit the community in which they live. Therefore, this research seeks to represent the voice of Aboriginal women in an honest and respectful way. It has been conducted by an Aboriginal woman using methodologies appropriate for conducting research with Aboriginal women in this region; it is also conducted for the benefit of the community in which it is conducted.

### **Researcher's standpoint**

I am an Aboriginal woman who belongs to the Bard and Kija people from the Kimberley region. Although my family are from the Kimberley, they relocated to a town in the Midwest of WA. I belong to a large but close family and some of my family still live in the Kimberley, so our family members travel to and from the Kimberley and Midwest regularly for work, holidays and funerals.

I was raised in the Midwest of WA with Aboriginal cultural values and beliefs within a large, extended Aboriginal family setting. As a result, I was expected to adhere to Aboriginal cultural protocols, which meant that all of my activities were carried out in a manner that reflected local community and family teachings.<sup>(70)</sup> I was expected to respect and serve my elders, through listening and doing what I was told. In return, my elders and aunts and uncles supported, respected and provided me with guidance throughout my life. This was essential in fostering a shared understanding, where mutual respect and responsibilities were reciprocated.

Growing up, the concept of ownership over material things was almost non-existent and particularly as a child I shared everything I had with other family members: clothes, food, toys and even beds. From a young age, we were taught to care for one another, usually

by caring for and looking after younger cousins and siblings. As a result, we formed very strong bonds. built on respect, loyalty and compassion for one another, that are still very strong today. As a large family group, we are expected by our elders to be tolerant of our different personalities, and even when we did fight, we were almost immediately pushed back together to make peace to ensure we did not cause further irreparable division.

Although we had many responsibilities and protocols to adhere to, we also had rights, even as young children. When I was a child, this made me so glad, when I compared myself to other children. Generally, as children, we were treated like ‘little adults’. If I could use a word that could describe myself and other children, it would be independent. My cousins and I were not housebound and could walk to the beach, town or pool at a young age, so long as we stayed together and looked after one another. During these times, we ‘looked out for one another’ and became independent and streetwise and most of all had lots of fun. If I was upset about something, I could always speak to someone in my family about it, and that someone would be obligated to listen to me. I picked all of my subjects at school, chose which sports I wanted to play and, generally, if I felt strongly about not doing something, then rarely was I made to do it, unless it was one of those cultural responsibilities previously mentioned. I was allowed to occasionally miss school for family visits, funerals or NAIDOC (Aboriginal celebration week). My family loved watching and playing sports, like many other Aboriginal families in the area. This love of sport meant that everyone seemed to have a say about your performance on the field or court.

My family is very community oriented, so many aspects of my life involved getting involved in community events and organisations. My grandmother and grandfather felt a strong desire to serve and support their community and as our leaders they encouraged us or, should I say, forced us to do the same. This community participation and involvement gave us a sense of belonging and ownership within our community and enabled us to get to know other family groups also involved in community activities. These community events were a way we shared, and we continued to share our strengths and practice our traditional and contemporary culture through dance, singing, art and even sports.

I grew up in a suburb that at the time was mostly Aboriginal. The schools that I attended in the area, both primary and high school, had children mainly from low socio-economic backgrounds and were more multi-cultural than other schools in town. It was during my



school years, I believe, that I became more aware of the wider Aboriginal community local protocols, the family dynamics within the community and how my family and I as an individual were situated in this world. At this time, for myself, this information was extremely important for making friends, developing alliances, keeping safe and understanding the diversity of Aboriginal culture, through attending school with children from different regions or areas and witnessing and learning more about their different 'little ways' or cultural protocols.

I was fortunate in that my experience of school was mostly positive, and looking back, I believe I was privileged to be in schools that I was able to be myself in; all who were there were generally accepting and understanding of Aboriginal culture as a whole, because the majority of students were Aboriginal.

My grandparents were only allowed to attend school until the age of nine and were then employed in domestic duties and labouring. My grandfather used to work on the railway, until he was laid off because of a hearing disability. They had 10 children and both did seasonal work, in the local crayfish factory and on farms picking fruit and vegetables for the Italian people in town. Both strongly believed that, as getting an education had become an opportunity available to all, we should make use of it. I think they believed that education was the key to a better life and ensured all of their children attended school and also valued education.

My mother made use of her education and started work at the age of 16. Through commencing work at a young age, my mother demonstrated to my sister and myself a very strong work ethic, always working hard for her community in a number of different roles throughout the state, in community and government. My mother regularly shares the knowledge she has developed through her experiences with my family, along with many other people she has mentored over the years. As a result, I believe I have benefited greatly from having strong community-minded matriarchs in my family, who were also willing to impart their knowledge to ensure that I too would strive and thrive.

I completed Year 12 and went on to university to complete a BA in journalism. This was not without experiencing the difficulties of leaving home and having to attend an institution that had a value system that was completely different to my own. I was very thankful for the Aboriginal enclave there and the fantastic support that they provide to

assist Aboriginal students to complete their studies. I must say I enjoyed the education structure at university more, where the onus to study and learn is put on the student and there is a level of 'freedom from authority' that is not present at high school.

After this, I worked mostly in the area of Aboriginal affairs and was employed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the Department of Health and with a number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations, always in Aboriginal programs and/or service delivery.

During my seven years at ATSIC, the nation's Aboriginal representative body, I learned a great deal about the political nature of Aboriginal affairs and the constant tug-of-war between each new government and our Aboriginal leaders, many of whom were just trying to maintain and secure the same rights as everyone else in Australia. For me, the demise of ATSIC, the last elected Aboriginal representative body in Australia, meant that Aboriginal people, who to this day are a minority in this country, had lost their collective voice and thus were at the mercy of the non-Aboriginal majority. Many Aboriginal people had been employed by ATSIC and other Aboriginal-specific government agencies over the years (that have since been closed or made mainstream), and have received invaluable training and experience that would hold them in good stead for their future. Today, government agencies with a mandate to deliver services to Aboriginal people employ mostly non-Aboriginal people, and the area that they work in is called 'Indigenous Affairs', a government phrase not generally accepted or widely used by Aboriginal people in Australia. The most common term Aboriginal people used to describe themselves as a united race of people is Aboriginal.

During my working life, I also came to understand more about the wider 'non-Aboriginal' world and about the meaning of 'operating within two worlds'. While working in government, I came to understand the never-ending cycle of bureaucracy, policies and programs, which would always change with each new government, leaving many Aboriginal organisations struggling with the pressures of completely altering their operations to fit the programs, policies or guidelines set by the new regime. I know that many people in the community were often confused as well about the changes, and personally, I cannot remember the countless times I heard someone say, 'Why did that program close? It was working'.

While working in Aboriginal organisations and sitting on Aboriginal Organisation's boards, I experienced first-hand the frustrations of working with funding agencies. In many cases, even if organisations were not happy with changes, they rarely complained, just in case their funding was cut. In my experience, the terms and conditions of grants and tenders to provide Aboriginal services were very rarely negotiated or even discussed with Aboriginal organisations or groups. Often, we would be told what was culturally appropriate by government representatives, which seemed ironic considering the ones with the cultural knowledge and expertise were the ones being dictated to.

I have witnessed and also supported services that have had to try to balance their service delivery with significant administrative and financial obstacles or difficulties, which included funding reductions and re-allocations and increased and/or unrealistic key performance indicators in their service contracts, while also having to engage in the continuous processes of quality control and meeting due diligence requirements without additional resources. I know that now, Aboriginal organisations are engaging in competitive tender processes, pitted against each other, sometimes larger non-government organisations, just to be able to maintain the resources to deliver their existing services.

Despite this, the fact remains that Aboriginal people are more likely to present to an Aboriginal service and that Aboriginal services are more likely to employ Aboriginal staff,<sup>(71)</sup> thus having an impact on the local economy of Aboriginal people and families in the area.

I have sat on Aboriginal boards that were approached by non-Aboriginal organisations who, after winning tenders, wanted the Aboriginal organisations to assist them to engage with the community. From what I have witnessed throughout all of my working life, the organisations rarely employ Aboriginal people to deliver these services. The funding was then for the most re-absorbed into maintaining their mainstream services.

Unfortunately, as a result, this means that the Aboriginal organisations and the Aboriginal community are left with few resources to address the very issues they are already addressing, such as complex life-threatening disease, overwhelming social problems and political power-plays with each new government. So then I wonder, how are they

adequately able to develop interventions to deal with the root causes of these problems, for which they have all the solutions?

It is through my lived experiences both personal and within my community and working life that I have come to completely understand that we, the Aboriginal people of this country, know what works and what does not work, so it should then be up to us to make change in our communities. I am guessing many would say ‘We have heard this all before, this is nothing new’, and to those I would respond ‘You are right, I have heard it too’, but what else can we say when it is the truth and the only way forward?

It is with this in mind that I started this research project, as I strongly believe that we should find our own solutions to our own problems and that we should celebrate our culture and use our stories and strengths to build a better future for our people, a future determined and developed by us.

Most of what has been said is from my own perspective and is what I have come to believe through my lived experiences. I acknowledge that for other Aboriginal people, their lived experiences with their families and communities and work life may have been very different from my own. However, I feel that for many of us, the values of caring for family, practicing our culture and fighting for our rights are still very strong today.

Why did I choose to conduct a study on Aboriginal women and resilience? I have always had a genuine curiosity and a passion for people and what makes them the way they are. I enjoy engaging in in-depth conversations and would often ask people ‘why’ they did what they did and how they achieved what they had achieved. After a while, I came to learn that different people used different strategies to stay strong and this intrigued me; as a result, I would apply these same strategies that I had been taught by others, many times with positive and surprising results. When I got older, I supported many younger women that were struggling, by imparting that same advice that had served me well throughout my own life. After a while, I started to realise the benefits of sharing strategies of strength and survival.

## **Aboriginal community involvement and consultation processes undertaken**

This research project was undertaken using Indigenous research methodologies or ways of working, which include the need for local Aboriginal community consultation,<sup>(24)</sup> working in line with community protocols and the use of yarning, referred to by some as the conversation method.<sup>(70, 72)</sup>

Prior to the commencement of this research, I yarned to many women that I know, including family, friends and work colleagues, about the project. This initial yarning could be likened to what non-Indigenous people would refer to as ‘putting the feelers out’, ‘a scoping exercise’ or a ‘small feasibility exercise’. I wanted to see what the community’s reaction to this research proposal might be before I proceeded with the research. During this yarning, I would discuss my title and the aim of the research. There were at least 30 Aboriginal women with whom I had informal discussions with prior to commencing the research.

In the community discussions, the majority of concerns raised included the following. Who would be interviewed? Who would I choose to interview? Who did I think were strong women? What would be the criteria for choosing the women? Other concerns related to how would or could resilience be defined, as it relates to our Aboriginal women in Australia. Another concern raised was about protecting our women: how would I ensure that, if our women are opening up their hearts and lives, their identities and wellbeing could be protected? Some of the questions I could answer; others I just flagged as concerns and ensured they were taken into consideration during the research development and implementation process.

Although these discussions were not part of any of the ‘formal’ research project milestones or requirements, I believe these discussions were absolutely necessary from a cultural protocol point of view. I think, most importantly, I had the conversations, I listened to the concerns raised and I know that those discussions have influenced the way I have conducted the research. What was most interesting was the very positive response I received when I spoke about the aim of the project and the need for Aboriginal women to impart their knowledge to our younger women, to help them become strong and resilient.

I also looked to other Aboriginal Australian researchers and examined how they conducted research in their areas and the steps they took to address concerns around cultural protocols within a research context, including Bessarab (2010), Fredericks (2011), Dudgeon (2014) and Dunbar (2006). I was very interested in researchers who moved forward carefully, ensuring they conducted their research in a way that did not compromise the rights of the Aboriginal group or peoples in the area in which they were conducting research. As there was little literature specifically on Australian Aboriginal people and resilience in Australia, I looked to other Aboriginal researchers around the world and considered the strategies they also used to conduct research in their communities, as per my literature review.

After this, I approached the local Aboriginal representative group in the region, which consisted of all of the Chairpersons in the region. I provided the group with a detailed overview of my project, including details about ethical considerations and how I planned to protect the participants involved in the study. I also asked the group to provide in-principle support and permission to conduct interviews with Aboriginal women in the region, in line with the aim of the research project. The representative group shortly wrote back giving me full support for the project and commended me on the respect and sensitivity I had shown in approaching them first.

Shortly after this, I applied for ethics approval from the WAAHEC. As this research primarily involves Aboriginal people, it is a requirement for researchers in Western Australia to obtain approval from this ethics council before conducting research. My project was also approved by this group, with the only recommendation being to provide an annual progress report and notify them of any changes to the research methodology (WAAHEC approval: reference: 751). I also obtained approval from the University of Adelaide's Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number H-2016-250).

The next step was establishing my Aboriginal women's reference group. I approached a strong community-minded group of Aboriginal women. There were five women that agreed to be part of my reference group. At the first meeting, we discussed the draft terms of reference for the group. The women suggested that they would assist with identifying women to be interviewed and help translate the themes, using their own local Aboriginal knowledge, and provide advice about cultural and or community perspectives or considerations.

## **Participant interviews: Methods and approaches**

Yarning was used both as a consultative method and an information-gathering tool continuously throughout the research project. Yarning has similarities to Aboriginal storytelling and is a feature of Aboriginal societies where oral tradition is the main form of transmitting and sharing knowledge with individuals.<sup>(73)</sup>

For Australian Aboriginal people, yarning is an extremely powerful way for our mob to communicate and make sense of our world as we see and experience it. It is the conversations we have among ourselves, which provide us with a way of finding out what has been happening in our families, in our communities and in our world. It is also a way of passing knowledge from one generation to the next, and is one of the most effective ways of communicating in our culture.

Having grown up within a large extended family and also within a larger local Aboriginal community, yarning was part of a day-to-day, moment-to-moment ritual that took place with almost everyone I came in contact with. I learned that through yarning, I could decide what I wanted to share and who I wanted to share it with. I was the gatekeeper of my stories and it was up to me to decide whether to share them. If I did decide to share my stories, a level of trust came into play, as I hoped they would be used for the betterment of my family or my people.

As a result of this, I was very mindful of what other women might fear when asking them for their stories. This personal insight provided a sensitivity or an empathy, which guided how the women were approached for the interviews and how I was able to share and/or translate the information.

Five semi-structured interview questions were asked, seeking answers to the challenging situations women faced and the strategies and support systems they used to deal with these. Women were also asked what could have supported them better if available and what to avoid during challenging times (see Appendix B on interview questions).

To access this information, all of the women were asked the following questions:

- 1) Can you tell me a little bit about a difficult or challenging situation you have been involved in?

- 2) What strategies did you use to overcome these difficult and challenging times?
- 3) What has or could have supported you to overcome difficult and challenging times?
- 4) What should be avoided during a challenging time?

The interview questions were asked in a yarning style fashion. Aboriginal people are adept communicators and in most cases will share as little as possible or may avoid answering questions if they feel it will reflect poorly on them or their families. As an Aboriginal woman myself, I will not share stories that I don't want to share regardless of the interview techniques used. It was after the interviews were over and the recorder was off that often the real yarns (conversation) started; there was a shared understanding that this information was between us and not to be shared with the rest of the world. All of the women were advised that only the recorded stories would be used and that the interviews would be de-identified; this gave the women the confidence to open up about what is really happening in their lives and communities.

Twelve Aboriginal women were interviewed as part of this research project. Seven women were recommended by the Aboriginal women's reference group and the researcher identified five. The main criteria applied when deciding on those to be interviewed were that they were recognised within their families and/or the community in which they live as being strong and resilient women.

Once a woman agreed to do the interview, I contacted them, usually via phone. I asked them how they had been, then had a quick chat about the project and let them know the interviews would be de-identified. I asked them where they would like the interview to take place, and the women suggested either meeting in their homes or out for coffee, depending on where they felt comfortable. I would then meet with the women and, in most cases, buy them or make them a coffee. After we were comfortable, we would have a general or social yarn<sup>(73)</sup>, usually about our families, work or what was going on in the community or about the aim of the research. This chat usually lasted about 5–10 minutes before the interview.

Prior to the interviews, I provided a participant information sheet (Appendix 3), which provided an overview of the project, and a participant consent form (Appendix 3), which



provided participants with an overview of their rights as interview participants and contact details of my supervisors and the ethics board, if they wished to make a complaint.

Once I felt the participant was comfortable enough to share, I commenced the interview. The interviews could be as short as five minutes and as long as 30 minutes, depending on how much the participant wanted to share. I used active listening and words of encouragement and support within the interviews; very rarely did I push for too much more, as this would not be culturally appropriate and would be considered disrespectful in this area. This 'not pushing' yielded more results further on through the interview, with women feeling more comfortable to talk more in-depth and even happy to revisit other questions later. This resulted in all of the women willingly progressing through the questions and talking freely and openly when answering the questions.

### **Data analysis**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. The transcripts of interviews were entered into NVIVO to facilitate the thematic analysis. The transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework<sup>(74)</sup>. When all the transcripts were completed, I went through them to familiarise myself with the data. I then set up an Excel spreadsheet that provided a list of the answers to the question, and beside this, I categorised these into a general theme or code; for example, separating husband (response), relationship breakdown (theme). With my supervisors, we went through the interview responses and developed suitable themes that they could be categorised into. After this, I went through the transcripts and cut and paste all of the findings under the themes. This process allowed us to identify the most prominent themes arising out of the interviews; it also allowed me to again re-familiarise myself with all of the content of the interviews. NVIVO was very useful to store this information, as the number of interviewees could be shown through NVIVO on clicking on the theme. As a result, we could also refer to the number of people that had common themes and distinguish between strong and weaker themes.

### **Data privacy and protection**

Stringent processes were put in place to protect the privacy of those who participated in the interview process. These steps ensured confidentiality of all information, including

the tape recordings of interviews. To ensure privacy, participants were given a number rather than referred to by name when quoted. The information can only be accessed by myself and hardcopies of the transcripts are stored in a locked secured cabinet. The tape recordings of interviews are also stored electronically on a secure, password- and firewall-protected computer. I will retain the transcripts and interview recordings for a minimum of five years, which is a requirement for data retention. I have ensured that participants will not be identified in reference to other information they have provided, and I have deleted all information that reveals the identity of the participants in an indirect way. The information resulting from the interviews will not be used for any other purposes except for the purposes of this study, unless I obtain participants' permission to do so.

### **Reporting and dissemination plan**

The results will be shared with those involved in the project. The reference group was provided with a copy of the final thesis, prior to submission. A final copy will also be sent to WAAHEC and MAOA. After submission, an oral presentation of the outcomes of the project will be provided to the community, and those in the community interested in the results will be invited. A presentation will also be offered to MAOA. I aim to produce a journal article of the results on completion of the research

### **Conclusion**

This research has been conducted by an Aboriginal woman using Indigenous methodologies. The researcher has grown up in the region, so has an intimate knowledge of the local protocols and family dynamics. An Aboriginal stand-point is important particularly when applying the appropriate methodologies such as yarning, community consultation and translation of the themes arising from the interviews, using Aboriginal cultural context and understanding. The process of gaining approval through WAAHEC and the University of Adelaide's HREC has ensured that all measures have been taken to address the ethical concerns relating to this research. This has been further strengthened by support provided by MAOA, the local community representative group and also the incorporation of a local reference group, which has assisted in interpreting the themes and guiding the study. The use of the Indigenous Methodology meant that I was able to

collect a significant amount of rich data, and in the next chapter I will present the results obtained through my thematic analysis of this data.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

In this chapter, I discuss the context of the interviews and the findings, which were analysed using a thematic analysis framework. The purpose of conducting interviews was to explore the strategies and supports used by Aboriginal women to stay strong and resilient and to identify the factors or challenges our women face that negatively affect their strength and resilience. To achieve the research objectives, the women were asked the following questions:

- Can you tell me a little bit about a difficult or challenging situation you have been involved in?
- What strategies have you used to overcome difficult and challenging times?
- What has or could have supported you to overcome difficult and challenging times?
- What should be avoided during a challenging time?

I identified a number of themes and sub themes arising from the discussions we had as the women answered these questions. I will discuss these themes, using the questions as a framework and I will begin the chapter by describing the demographics of the women who participated in the project

### **Demographics of interviewees**

The women who participated in the research project are all Aboriginal and, at the time of the research, living in the Midwest region. Most had a traditional connection to the region. The women were all over the age of 30 and under the age of 65, with the average age around 50 years old. Most were members of larger extended families and all had children themselves. They are women who strongly identify as Aboriginal and are accepted by the community in which they live as Aboriginal. The women are all very active in their communities and families. As you will read further on through this thesis, the interviews revealed that all of the women were dealing either directly or indirectly with problems or issues that could be associated with the legacy of historical trauma and/or the current social and health challenges previously mentioned in the introduction.

## **Interview context**

Arranging interviews with these strong women sometimes presented challenges and often took time, as they all had very busy lives and/or work schedules. There were also other factors that needed to be taken into consideration, such as family loss or family commitments. To address these issues required much patience, time and understanding. One very busy interviewee required two months to set aside some time to talk to me. At times, as a researcher, I often felt frustrated and let down, but I knew that I must be patient and respectful and let the women set the pace and the scene with regard to the whole interview process. Additionally, once women knew that I did not want their whole life story, they were happy to participate. For some women, I believe patience and respect was almost a pre-requisite I had to demonstrate before being allowed to capture their stories.

Almost all women were contacted either via the reference group members, approached by me face-to-face or by Facebook. I found Facebook a good way to contact people without them feeling cornered and obligated to be involved in the project. I would message the potential interviewee, giving her some information on the project and then ask if she would like to be involved. Those who responded, which was the majority of those contacted, were more than happy to be involved.

After the interviews commenced, I began to better understand that my approach sometimes needed to change. It was interesting to recognise that when the first question was asked about the challenges the women faced in their lives, there was often a silent pause before the question was answered. Interviewees appeared to dig-deep to find an appropriate challenge to speak about. I realised that this question was perceived by the women to be the most personal and the most difficult to answer; I believe this was because strong women don't often like to talk about their problems:

Um, [pause] I do have one on a personal note and I – I – my best way of tackling it is to not talk about it. (#2)

After this woman made this comment, I gave her more time to think of another appropriate challenge. Following this, the discussion about the second challenge flowed much better and the conversation was in-depth, as the interviewee felt much more comfortable with the new topic. The new challenge was not any less challenging than the

old one, it was just not as private or personal. After this experience, I started to provide the questions beforehand, so the women could think about what they would be comfortable answering. This change yielded better results.

## The interview results

Table 1 is a diagrammatic representation of the major and subthemes arising from the interviews.

**Table 1: Major and subthemes**

Questions	Theme description and number
What are the challenges?	1. Numerous challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Anxiety and self-doubt</i></li> <li>• <i>Financial issues</i></li> <li>• <i>Balancing work and culture</i></li> </ul> 2. Supporting family 3. Access to information 4. Relationship breakdowns
What are the strategies we use to overcome challenges?	1. Our culture, our language, our spirituality 2. Our strong women, past and present 3. Never give up, stand strong 4. Assess situations before acting 5. Take care of yourself (self-care) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Do what you enjoy</i></li> <li>• <i>Take time out</i></li> </ul> 6. Religion 7. Helping family, helping others 8. Our sense of humour
What has or could have supported us to overcome challenges?	Current supports 1. Drawing strength from our family and friends <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Staying strong for the next generation</i></li> <li>• <i>Other Aboriginal women</i></li> <li>• <i>Our friends</i></li> </ul> 2. Seek professional help when you need it

What should we avoid during challenging times?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Drugs and alcohol</li> <li>2. Negative or aggressive people</li> </ol>
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### **What are the challenges?**

The purpose of asking this question at the beginning of the interviews was to gain a sense of what the current issues or challenges were in lives of the women, and second, to help the women prepare for the next question, which related to the strategies they used to address these challenges.

The major themes relating to the challenges the women faced included 1) numerous challenges, 2) supporting family, 3) relationship breakdowns and 4) access to information.

### **Theme 1: Numerous challenges**

Although this question asked for just one challenge or situation, not one person interviewed responded with just one ‘challenge’. Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that no challenge was viewed in isolation; there were always other issues running concurrently and, in some cases, what seemed to be a secondary issue or challenge was almost more traumatic or challenging than the primary one.

Where do I start? (#2)

I have challenging situations every day and so that’s – it’s become a norm for me. (#1)

I’ve got a couple of things that support me through difficult times, because we have a lot of stressors and they just seem to back up one after the other. (#6)

I’m just trying to think of which one. There’s so many of them recently that’s happened in the last year. (#5)

The subthemes that were identified under this theme were some of the competing daily challenges the women faced or juggled in their lives.

### *Anxiety and self-doubt*

Although all of the women seemed quite confident within themselves and were able to express their thoughts and feelings quite articulately, some talked about the internal battles they faced to move through challenges.

I never get frustrated with anything but I was really, really frustrated, and I, ah, felt like it was getting, ah, to my self-esteem, yeah, so that was challenging me yeah. (#11)

The anxiety kicked in, um, um, it would be about two years ago. (#11)

Self-doubt for sure. In my – in my situation, self-doubt. Like, you know, if I didn't doubt myself I probably would have been – I probably would have done this a while – a long time ago. (#4)

For the majority, these struggles represented obstacles that usually presented before, after or during extreme trauma or a personal challenge. There was a general consensus that the women all understood the need to work through these issues and also identified them as risks to their general wellbeing:

So I have a tendency to keep to myself, become inverted, self-supportive and keep busy, set goals each day as a way of managing any stress. (#7)

### *Financial issues*

Four women indicated that financial stress was an issue and that it presented a challenge in either their lives or in the lives of others close to them. It was interesting to note that money was only mentioned a handful of times and in the times that it was mentioned, it was discussed as means to survive or support one another. Financial problems associated with supporting family demonstrate the interrelatedness of some of the themes:

I come from that background where you help the rest of your family, so Sundays is one of the days when I get a lot of people calling for food. And, if you don't have money, you can't help people. (#6)

Now I just survive on my money for work, and that's it, because my child is, um, well the [delete] child will be finishing school [delete]. Yeah. (#3)



### *Balancing work and culture*

Some women found it difficult to balance their family and cultural obligations with their work commitments. This was especially true for one woman, who could not attend a funeral of a friend because of work responsibilities. Sorry time and attending funerals for Aboriginal people that you know in this area helps to develop and maintain relationships with other community groups and families. Attending funerals is also seen as a cultural obligation, especially if it is for a family member, be it close or extended family. However, the ability to attend all funerals of friends and family members is a difficulty faced by many Aboriginal people who have work responsibilities:

I was experiencing you know, the loss of my friend and wanted to pay my respects but I – I also had responsibility with this – with my work, not to let the [work] down. (#1)

### **Theme 2: Supporting family**

Through the interviews, four women spoke specifically about the challenges faced in supporting family members. The majority of the women interviewed belong to large extended families and most had children and grandchildren. Some found supporting family to be a challenge:

Just getting my family through this difficult situation for a beautiful young [gender] that had died and I think, maybe unnecessarily over things. So, that's a recent and difficult challenge for me, was to remain stable during that process and be that support person for the family who weren't living [close by]. (#6)

I've had a lot of challenges in regards to, um, a family member as an in-law person [but] I'd ring her, to talk about it, than to end up in a bing-bong fight. (#3)

### **Theme 3: Access to information**

Issues associated with access to information were raised by five of the women. In the interviews, the women spoke about the concerns and frustrations they experienced with regard to accessing information and the obstacle this often presented in their lives. The types of information identified included access to rules, guidelines and policies for work and sporting activities. One woman summed it up nicely, describing her frustrations at being drip-fed, rather than being given all the information she needed when going through an employment process:

[You are] Jumping through the hoops, yeah, like you know, do this now, now you've done this, now do this, now do that, now do that, now do that, it's very, um, it yeah, it crushes you. (#12)

Another woman described her frustration at not being able to start a sporting group because of a particular 'gatekeeper' whom she believed was making it difficult for her by withholding key information. This woman dealt with this challenge by taking the matter to a higher power and getting it addressed at this level; her actions to remove the barrier ensured the Aboriginal youth, with her support, continued to have access to sport:

Because I had to speak to the president (of the sporting association) [because] you can't talk to someone [the gatekeeper], um, about an issue when they talk to you in a, um, not a nice way. (#3)

#### **Theme 4: Relationship breakdowns**

For four women, the breakdown of their relationship with their partner or ex-partner was a major challenge they faced.

I done a lot of the grieving for the loss during the separation – during – before we broke up. (#5)

When I had to go last year, um, when I left my partner. (#6)

[I need to] leave [partner's name] because I believe he's part of the problem. (#11)

#### **What were the strategies used to overcome these challenges?**

Although the majority of strategies the women used when faced with challenges were identified when the women were asked directly the question 'What strategies do you use to stay resilient or strong', it was apparent that, as with the question relating to the challenges, more strategies emerged as the interviews progressed.

All of the women interviewed at some time or another spoke of specific personal strategies they used to confront or deal with stressful situations or challenges. These strategies were a mixture of strategies learned from others and strategies that they developed by themselves to stay strong and resilient.

The following items were the main strategies used by women to overcome challenges.

## **Theme 1: Our culture – What we do to stay strong**

Through the interviews, the women spoke openly about how practicing their culture keeps them strong. The women would talk about how being on or visiting country helped them to heal when challenges became overwhelming:

I love going back to country; going back out bush, mainly over to [delete place], or to where I was born at [delete place]. I spend a fair bit of time out there sitting. (#6)

Wellbeing out here (on country) my dear, part of being resilient and being out here is you know. (#2)

It should also be noted that for those women who lived off country, returning to their traditional land was very important as a way they could escape, a place they could return to that enabled them to rest, recharge and even sometimes heal from trauma or life's difficulties and challenges:

(After traumatic event), I just left the [place] and eventually we got it tenanted, um, and came up to [back to their country]. (#11)

During the interviews some of the women also discussed engaging in other cultural activities as a strategy to deal with challenges.

The other thing I do culturally is I do smoking ceremony on myself, my house and my car and my children and I do that every – every couple of months to cleanse the energy. (#6)

Three women spoke specifically about the importance of language and the need to practice and maintain these for future generations:

So, it's another thing – we need our children to have our – their own tongue. Their language to help, because it will make them strong. (#3).

I sit there just listening to her voice and she's singing an Aboriginal song and I get happy from that, I come home and I'm good. (#9)

## **Theme 2: Our strong women, past and present**

Of the 12 women interviewed, seven said a strategy they used to stay strong was to draw strength from other strong Aboriginal women or family matriarchs. Some would visit the

graves of passed family members, or remember the advice they had given them and others, or even listen to their recorded voices. As an interviewer, the impact that past strong women have had on the strong women of today became very apparent. The complete reverence and sincerity that the women demonstrated while talking about their role models, some who had passed on, was sad but lovely to witness:

We go out to country where my grandmother and her two daughters are laid to rest, we go out there. My nanna's anniversary is coming up this weekend. (#9)

But also, my two grandmothers are buried here, so I spend a lot of time at their graves. My mum's mum was buried in [delete year] and unfortunately, there was no money at the time to take her back to (place), so she's buried in (place) and my dad's mum is buried here as well. That is great comfort for me. I spend a fair bit of time there. (#6)

You've just got to move forward. And that's what she said to me, she said, you know, about the grannies and that? She said, 'They'll understand when they get older that you were tough for a reason, that you're going to be tough for a reason'. (#8)

That's – that's got a lot to do with why I'm so strong now, because of her [deceased matriarch]. (#3)

Surrounding themselves with other like-minded strong Aboriginal women was also seen as a support system or important way of dealing with present-day challenges:

Um, well look, having my escape for the last three or four months I suppose has been being around those strong resilient black women. That has certainly helped me. So being around like-minded people, I suppose. (#2)

It was a cohesive group of Aboriginal women that did it and I mean I – I worked there at the [delete], and it was such a supportive group and the [delete] learning and stuff just amazing for that group of ladies. (#4)

### **Theme 3: Never give up, stand strong**

Over half of the women interviewed spoke about the need to stand firm and stay strong during challenging times:

And – and – and just say, well, no way in the world that I'm going to get pushed over. I'm going to stand there. (#8)

Thought about it, what went on, but can't change anything so I just be strong for me and be strong for my kids and grandchildren. (#9)

#### **Theme 4: Assess situations before acting**

One of the most commonly used strategies related to critically looking, talking about and or assessing situations before dealing with them. This was important because it allowed the women to consider the consequences before acting:

[I would] find out as much information as I possibly can, seeing what I'm dealing with, ah, I need to have all the information; not just part of the information. [I] need to have the whole story, the whole picture, um – to be able to deal with it, I find. Um, cause [if] it's a difficult and a challenging issue, I think the more information you have you're able to go out and seek assistance. That's what I think for strategies, um, the next one (next question)? (#10)

I think in my head first, about [issues] – especially with that difficult time. (#3)

#### **Theme 5: Take care of yourself – Self-care**

Self-care was also raised as a key strategy that women need to take into account to stay strong.

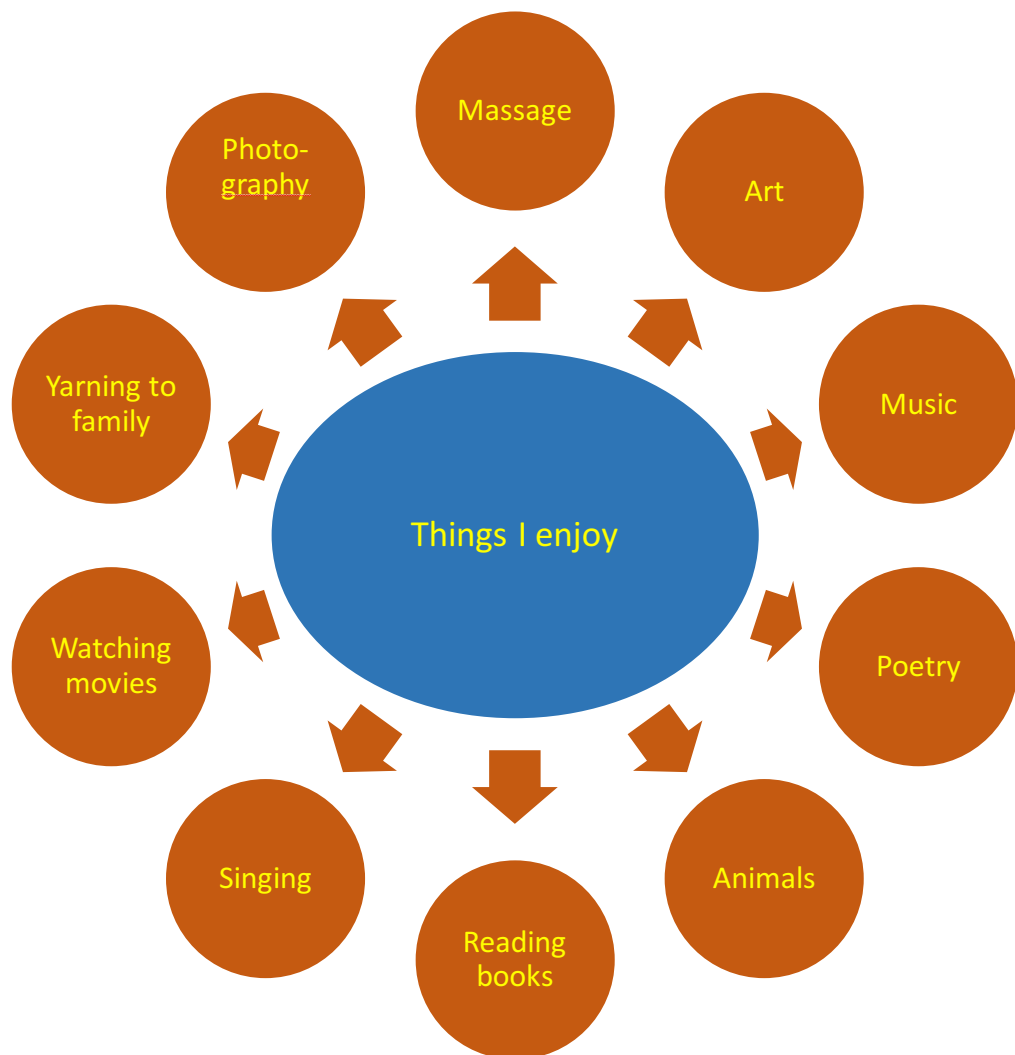
Um, situations that appear stressful when you're already going through a stressful situation. I think you have to be kind to yourself and um, I'm learning – I'm in my mid-50s now – and it's taken me this long to learn that you can't deal, and you can't save and you can't do everything. (#6)

You can't do it, because we're human and we have to look after ourselves as well. Even though Aboriginal people, you know, we've got that nature of wanting to care and nurture everyone, a lot of us women don't even look after ourselves. And, that's one of the things that's taken me a long, long time to get there. (#6).

The two key sub themes that arose from the discussions about self-care were: engaging in activities you enjoy and taking time out

*Do what you enjoy*

One of the most common self-care strategies to promote strength and resilience was taking time out to do something enjoyable; engaging in a hobby or area of interest was a strategy for restoring, relaxing and managing stress for eight of the women interviewed. Engaging in a relaxing activity was also a way to distract themselves from their busy and often stressful lives. Figure 2 illustrates some of the things that women enjoyed doing as a strategy to deal with stress.



**Figure 2: The things I enjoy**

Music is and always has been a release for me, I love singing. (#7)

Doing gardening, going for walks in the bush, walking my dog and, um, listening to music, and ah, basically every day set little goals of how to keep busy, so I didn't like have time to sit around and worry or um, have anxiety about it, yeah. (#12)

What I do to support difficult and challenging times is I really take a lot of photographs and I spend a lot of time at the beach, or looking at wildlife; that sort of stuff. (#6)

### *Take time out*

The level of trauma that had been experienced by the majority of the women interviewed was at times very concerning. Throughout their interviews, five women spoke about using the strategy of removing themselves from the challenging situation, by withdrawing or isolating themselves, as a way to maintain their wellbeing:

I do use isolation, I isolate myself a fair bit from other things that would seem really stressful. (#6)

I jump back in that 'pink bubble' (advice from a counsellor) is what she put me in all the time. So, when I'm in my pink bubble it means, nobody – is in the same bubble as me or is with me, and it will by-pass. (#3)

As a person who has experienced high levels of trauma and neglect as a child I had always learned [or] manage and deal with any stressors in isolation. (#7)

One woman noted that she couldn't stay in a traumatic situation anymore and to save herself from going under, left the situation and went back to her own country to heal and restore:

Well I had to just pack up and leave the, my lovely house in [place], um, and just leave everything behind. I mean furniture and everything I brought, but I just had to stop working. I even was a [occupation] at the [place of employment] for a while and I realised I couldn't do it. (#11)

### **Theme 6: Christian spirituality**

During the interviews, a number of women spoke about their belief in God and how this provided them with support:

(Dealing with challenges) Um, well first of all, um, I'd probably say my Christian faith. I'm a – I'm a Christian woman, and I pray, um, all the time. Um, my faith, um, has been my strength. (#1)

I think, ah, faith in god and, um, having, having friends, um, talking to your life. (#12)

She's old now. That's why God took her. (#3)

### **Theme 7: Helping family, helping others**

Helping and supporting family and friends was a strategy that was used to maintain strength and re-focus during difficult times:

I guess, me helping other people and them appreciating what I was doing, was good enough for me. That was my support. By them – me helping other people, I was feeling appreciated for it. Yep. (#5)

Keep my kids grounded and supported plus helping everyone else who needed it. Looking back I honestly don't know (how) I managed to get through it. (#7)

Well – well I do work – casual work; going to work was good, you had different people to talk to and you see what other people are – and you're helping them as well, you're helping yourself. (#9)

### **Theme 8: Maintain your sense of humour**

The use of humour was cited often by the women, and it was evident that it was used to defuse fear and stress; this was perceived to be intrinsic to Aboriginal women, as one participant explained:

Aboriginal women have a sense of humour that is just above everything else. They can laugh in the face of their illness and sicknesses and stuff like that. (#12)

Two women said they used humour to deal with difficult situations:

A lot of [women] just prefer you to be joking and things like that, because they say, 'Well, you know what? That was a good therapy. I had a really good laugh and I let off all my steam' [...] So it is kind of a therapy. It is not counselling, but it is a therapy thing. (#9)

[I use] Humour! If you ain't dead, laugh! (#7)

### **What supported us to overcome these challenges?**



This question was asked to get a sense of how women were supported during their challenging times. The major source of support was their family. Women also identified the importance of seeking professional help. The three sub themes arising were: staying strong for their children and families, which was also discussed as being a driving force behind the women remaining strong, staying strong so they could care for their children and continue to support their other family members and support from other strong Aboriginal women and their friends.

### **Theme 1: Our family**

Not all of the women said support from family was a strategy they used to deal with challenging situations; however, all of the women mentioned getting support from family somewhere through the interview.

Although the role of family seemed pivotal to the wellbeing of these women, the role of their families seemed more of a support and caring role than one of providing advice or guidance on matters the women felt strongly about:

I'd have to say that's my biggest, um, support, um, my family. I have a really supportive husband and supportive children. (#1)

Um, my parents have been a very big support, um, so I've also had a yarn to them as well. (#4)

So, family's very important. I have a lovely circle of [family members] who check on me and stop and ask, 'How are you?' or get a bit horrified if my blood pressure goes up or something, so, you know, 'What are you doing? Why are you getting involved in that [delete]? Why are you getting involved in that event?' So, family's very important. (#6)

Other people talking to your life, like friends and family that talk, ah, like truthfully hey, and helping to see a different, like a perspective, it's like, um, helping you to see beyond that problem and look beyond it, yeah. (#12)

### *Staying strong for the next generation*

The majority of the women interviewed had children and/or grandchildren. Throughout, before and even after the interviews, women would speak about their children and the

support and motivation they provided for them to stay strong. They were the most common topic discussed across a number of themes. As a result, for some women, their children and grandchildren motivated them to stay strong:

It's my grandchildren that's made me really strong. (#8)

Um, my kids. My kids helped me – gave me support, especially my young son and his missus 'cause I kept being told that I'm stronger than I think. (#9).

And you've got a lot of [challenges] going on in your [life] – with your children but I think what helped me most is helping my kids – never mind they're adult children but with their kids helping them. (#9)

### *Support from other Aboriginal women*

Surrounding themselves with other Aboriginal women was also a way two women identified to maintain strength:

Um, well look, having – having – having my – my escape for the last [number] months I suppose has been being around those strong resilient black women. That has certainly helped me. So being around like-minded people, I suppose. (#2)

I think – ah, like do the study back then because it was a cohesive group of Aboriginal women that did it and I mean I – I worked there at the [place] that they had at, um, [place] and it was such a supportive group and the student support and the learning and stuff there was just amazing for that group of ladies and I'd look at them now. (#2).

### *Support from friends*

Three women spoke about the role of friendship in helping them overcome challenging periods in their lives:

I have some – a close network of some good friends that I can and debrief to, every now and then if – I become overwhelmed with – with pressures. (#1)

Having reliable family and friends, friends particularly as they can support you objectively whereas when you talk to family about issues they become emotionally invested in it and try to 'fix' it rather than listen. Sometimes you just want people to listen to you. (#7)

## **Theme 2: Seek professional help**

All but two of the women at some time of their lives sought the help of a counsellor or professional to help them work through issues. Of those two people that stated they did not access a counsellor, both talked about having strong and ongoing support from their families.

Throughout the interviews, women spoke about accessing relevant services to address challenges that seemed to overwhelm them and used a counsellor at some point to deal with concerns or problems such as anxiety, depression, grief or relationship difficulties:

I've accessed counselling in the past not just for this occasion but for other historical issues particularly when my previous coping mechanism don't work. This is usually my last option. (#7)

Although family was generally seen as a source of support, they were also on occasion a source of grief or trauma, and it was usually in this instance that women would look outside their family to get advice:

Booking myself in to see the health professionals as well, when I need to. Like the psychiatrist or a psychologist just to – you know, just to vent. 'Cause a lot of the stuff I see in [place of employment] I can't go and tell anybody and everybody about. (#2)

For these women, a counsellor helped them deal with problems in a positive and confidential way. They helped to clarify the issues, explore options, develop strategies and increase self-awareness:

I hear lots of people saying that they go and get counselling all the time and I hear other people saying that they don't believe in counsellors. But I think that, um, counselling offers you a lot, it's like peeling an onion when you're getting counselled. They'll peel things from you which you've probably never faced yourself and, um, you can gain lots from it and it gives you strategies in how to deal with things. Um, and it's good to keep going back to the counsellor not just go once or twice and then not go back again. 'Cause they're there to help you – to help you become a stronger person. (#10)

One issue regarding accessing support that the women raised was around the affordability of services that help address social and emotional wellbeing issues. Some women felt that the cost of accessing these services was a barrier for many women needing the service:

I have on one or two occasions gone to see a psychologist, um, to talk or really just to help me make some, um, important decisions, um, you know a psychologist service made available which could be affordable to people because they're – a lot of people don't go and see a psychologist because they don't – they can't afford it. (#1)

When the subject of mental health issues or illnesses came up, it was felt that it was important that those suffering were able to access appropriate mental health care or services:

Also listening to professionals, I've got, ah, you know, obviously – with [delete] you need to, you know, keep on top of your – I guess you could say your health care plan, like with your medication and getting out and staying active in the community and stuff like that, so, yeah. (#5)

Referring family to a counsellor was also done, particularly when the trauma was too great to deal with and experienced by a number of people in the one family at the same time:

(After a death) For the trauma with people around me, because I'm seeing so much happen and there's no support for them and I try ... as families, we help each other by talking to each other, but sometimes it's not good offloading to another family member. That's why I try and tell my family to go and see counsellors. (#6)

### **What should be avoided during challenging times?**

All of the women recognised that there were certain things they needed to avoid, particularly during challenging times, to help them to maintain their strength. Of the things stated that one should avoid, alcohol, drugs and aggressive and negative people were the key themes that were identified. The answers were generally provided quickly and without hesitation, as if the women had learned through trial and error about the impact these things had on their lives.

### **Theme 1: Alcohol and drugs**

The issues caused by alcohol and drugs were discussed during a number of interviews:

Mmm, oh drugs and alcohol. Obviously. But then I think there needs to be a healthy balance between fun as well. Like if you want to go out and have a good time on the weekend, go out and enjoy yourself, and don't feel guilty the next day. Do you know

what I mean? Like you need to still have a social life; but just with the right people and the right environment. (#5)

I think alcohol and drugs, or any sort of things like that, I get very uptight after funerals, when people drink, or when there's a difficult time, the culture gets – where people get together and just start drinking and smoking dope. Because, I can see that this will lead to other stresses in their lives. So, I think these are things that should be avoided. (#6)

I had to think about me, so when I came up here, they had to move out into some other place and find somewhere else, you know, I need you know, get [drug] around the corner, next door if you want and that's when [person] committed suicide, when I left them to their own devices. (#11)

## **Theme 2: Negative or aggressive people**

Some women spoke about distancing themselves from people who were too negative or even physically aggressive during difficult times. The suggestion that people should stay away from negative people was also seen as a protective strategy to ensure that they did not drain energy or influence you to take on negative mindsets:

Being around negative people, um, is not going to help. (#1)

Negative people were described as those that take your energy:

Negative people. People who take energy from you and give you nothing back. Because you are wasting your energy on them and you don't get appreciated. So, you – you need to avoid [them], you need to hang around positive people who actually – you can feed [off] the energy too so you feel appreciated and you've got energy and my biggest advice would just to be, stay away from negative people. Mmm. Energy taxers. Stay away from them. Easier said than done. It's hard. But you've got to put yourself first. (#5)

That would be top of the list, negative, um, environments. Being away from negative people and environments, um, anyone within your family or with your friends. Staying away from negative people that impacts you a lot and just, um, people getting help, keep on going and going and going, you know? It's time – it all takes time to heal, it's not going to happen overnight so, um. (#10)

Another participant was strong about remaining in a safe space when her husband was acting in a very negative way:

Yeah, stay away from people with negative attitudes. I get like that with my partner and I'll say, you know, 'Stay where you are if you're going to be negative all the time', because he, he really gets to me when he's thinking negative all the time. (#8)

Along with negative people, the women also spoke about the need to avoid negative thinking and negative behaviours and attitudes:

Oh. Self-doubt for sure [should be avoided] and just probably for myself is the self-doubt of not having the ability to think that you can do it. (#4)

[Avoid during separation] going where you know that the other person is and going to places where you [have] been when you were in a relationship and sometimes it's a bit hard 'cause you – something might happen at that place and you remember it. (#9)

It seems that people generally feel that creating and maintaining a positive outlook on life is hard given the levels of negative speak. Positive self-talk helps but sometimes it's hard to find anything positive! (#7)

Avoiding aggressive people and violence was raised as a key concern and something the women needed to stay away from:

Violence is a big thing. And that's what I don't like. Even growing up, my parents kept us away from the violence. (#3)

Um, domestic violence. Stay away from that if you know it's happening, um, keep right away from it. Never be afraid to report if you have to report, that's what I believe in. (#10)

Another interviewee noted she was able to sense when people were being aggressive:

Aggressive people, I tend to try and stay away from aggressive people, because I pick up people's energies really quickly and I will pick up their aggression, so I tend to stay away. (#6)

## **Reference group input and interpretation of outcomes of the interviews**

As noted in the research methodology, I gained the support of a reference group comprised of Aboriginal women to help guide this study. The first meeting was to develop the terms of reference with the group and to compose a list of potential interviewees that I could approach. This step was done after the meeting, with individual members, to protect the participants privacy. During the second meeting, I gave the women a copy of the draft themes that arose from the interviews. The list of themes also had adjacent to it the number of times the theme came up in the interview. The third meeting was more about presenting the group with the final findings and the conclusions—this meeting was more of a review of the final draft of the thesis. Below is an overview of the main outcomes of these meetings.

### **Review and feedback on major themes**

We discussed the draft themes and there was a general consensus that the majority of the themes were recognised trends or issues within the community. The reference group did see the theme of ‘accessing information’ as a theme or challenge that they would not have anticipated, but after discussion, all could see why this was an issue as it related to living in two worlds and the general frustrations involved in accessing services and information.

In our review of the themes, it was also noted that almost all of the women interviewed had accessed counselling services at one time or another. The reference group acknowledged and agreed that counselling could be very beneficial during challenging times, but they did stress that it would be more effective if the counsellor was providing a culturally appropriate service. The women agreed that, where possible, counselling should be conducted by Aboriginal counsellors, as they are more likely to provide culturally appropriate care and are more aware of ongoing issues in the community.

### **Suggestions to heal and support our women**

The women also talked about strategies for healing, and two key suggestions were made: 1.) Healing camps for women to take time out from the daily stress of life to meet with other women and reflect and share their journeys in an effort to heal and recharge 2) to set up an informal women’s group that met regularly and went out to dinner and attended

events together, to draw our women closer to each other, so they are able to support one another; this would also give the women a break from the daily grind.

At the last (third) meeting, the women went through the final draft of the findings and conclusion from this thesis. One was absent and another was on holidays (end of year); so they asked me to send them the documents for review. I went through the major themes and conclusions demonstrated in the diagrams (see Table 1 and Figure 1). There were no concerns raised; however, one of the women noted that the quotes were numbered and I advised that this was to protect the privacy of the women. This woman was happy with this response. The women were sent a final copy of the thesis prior to submission and were asked for feedback.

### **Conclusion of findings**

The interviews I undertook enabled me to identify a wealth of information relating to the challenges Aboriginal women face and how they deal with them. The themes and sub themes I identified provided insight into how women stay resilient and what the issues are affecting resilience. Some findings were surprising, such as the use of counsellors by almost all women at some time, the heavy influence of matriarchs on wellbeing, the problem accessing information poses for women and the use self-care activities (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) that women were engaging in to stay strong. The use of culture, family and language were also strategies they used to remain resilient. Women stated that alcohol, drugs and negative or aggressive people were to be avoided to overcome challenges. These findings, together with the results from the literature review, provide a detailed picture of how Aboriginal women in Australia remain strong. In the next chapter I will discuss the implications of these findings and how they can contribute to future policy and practice



## Chapter 5: Discussion

This study was undertaken to understand what contributes to the resilience of Aboriginal women, with an overall aim of sharing this knowledge and insights to guide future program and policy development for Aboriginal women. The specific research objectives were to investigate:

1. How do Aboriginal women define resilience?
2. What strategies do Aboriginal women employ and what are the internal factors that contribute to the ability of Aboriginal women to remain resilient?
3. What external factors contribute to the ability of Aboriginal women to remain resilient?
4. What external factors diminish the ability of Aboriginal women to remain resilient?

This chapter revisits these research objectives, collates the findings of this research and offer conclusions based on both the literature and the research findings. Recommendations for future research are also discussed, in terms of how to progress this area of research and its contribution to the development of this research around Aboriginal women and resilience.

### **Objective 1: How do Aboriginal women define resilience?**

Although there are Aboriginal Australian women throughout the literature and in my findings who demonstrate resilience, the ‘ability to bounce back from adversity’<sup>(25)</sup>, the term ‘resilience’ is not generally used by Aboriginal Australians to describe strength. The common term or word that tends to arise on review of the literature on Aboriginal women and in the interviews is ‘strong women’ (collective) or ‘strong woman’ (individual).

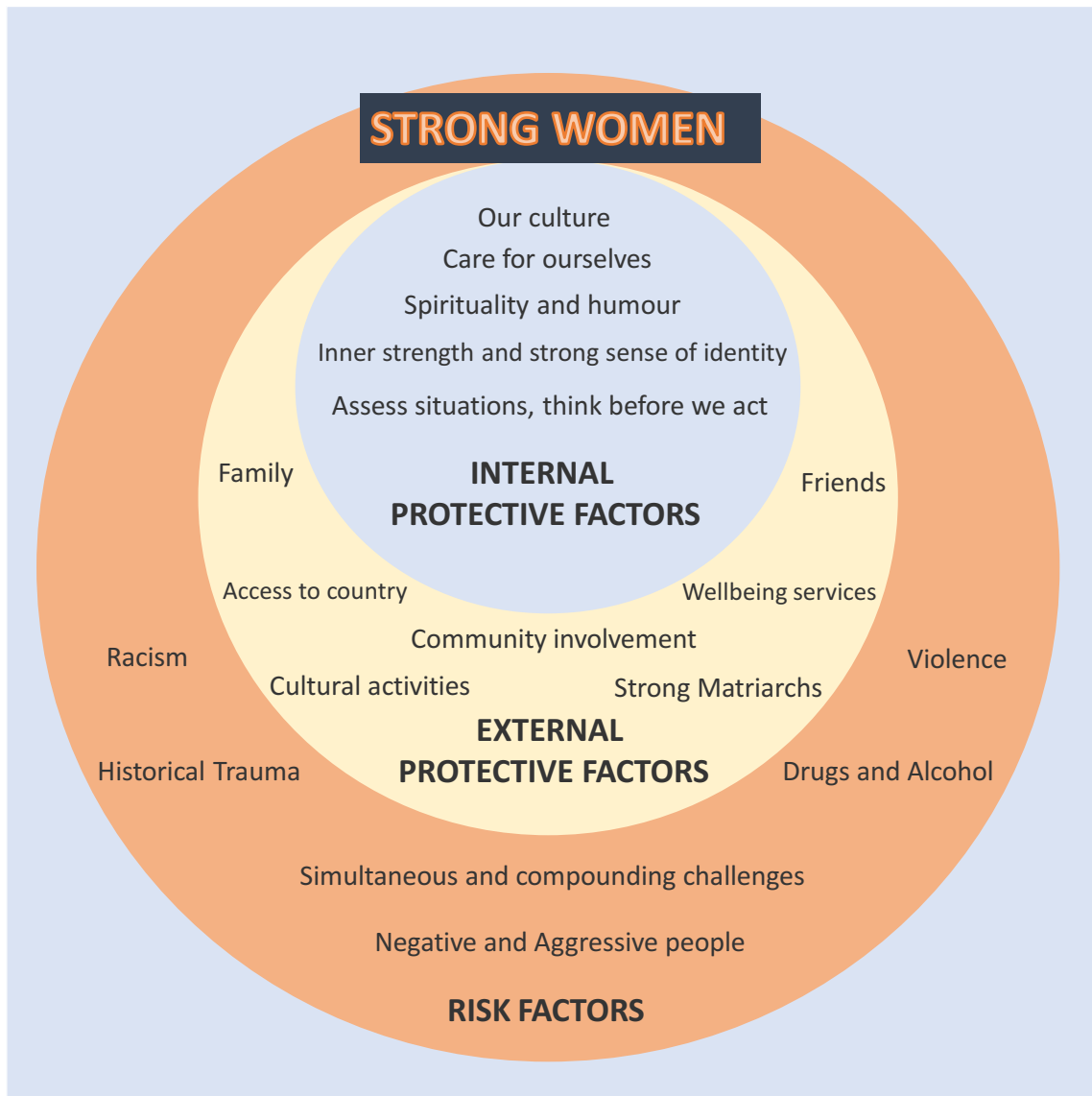
Other words that have been used by Aboriginal people to describe strength are nurturer, backbone, tough, passionate, feisty, dignified, cheeky, brave, wise, deadly (good strong woman) and ‘go to woman’.<sup>(6-8, 21)</sup> Some areas still use traditional language, and

sometimes, a mix of language and English to describe strong women in their respective areas.

As a result of reviewing the literature and through analysing the interviews, I found that being identified as a strong Aboriginal woman by members of your own community is not a stripe easily earned. In the literature written by Aboriginal women about Aboriginal women, there is a strong sense that although we experience many hardships, we are resilient, strong and survivors. Additionally, reviewing biographies and autobiographies, Aboriginal women demonstrate strength in how they were able to overcome almost insurmountable trauma and obstacles in their lives.<sup>(5, 21)</sup>

Often known in my experience as the 'go to women', these women are always seen trying to balance their cultural, family and community responsibilities. For example, when I asked my reference group who they thought were strong or resilient women, there seemed to be an understanding that all Aboriginal women are strong or resilient in some way, because we have survived the effects of historical trauma, racism and discrimination over many generations and continue to be faced everyday with multiple social issues. However, when asked to suggest who they thought was a 'strong Aboriginal woman' in their own community, there was always a story before or after that was used to substantiate this claim eg. strong women support their own families and or their communities.

Yes [name] is a strong one, she helps her own [big] family and even helps out in the community too. (reference group member)



**Figure 3: Risk and protective factors of strong Aboriginal women**

The figure above offers a visual representation of the outcomes of the research in relation to the risk factors and the internal and external protective factors identified as a result of the interviews. This diagram and the circles within it are not in any order, nor does the size of the circle or the number of items within them have any weight or priority. The outer orange circle highlights the risk factors, which include the health and social issues or obstacles that can detract from resilience. The second yellow circle, external protective factors, represents things in the women’s environment or around them that provide support, for example, family, access to country and counsellors. The blue circle illustrates the internal protective factors—the personal attributes or learned behaviours that are within the women, that enhance their ability to stay strong and resilient.

## **Objective(s) 2/3: What are the strategies or factors that contribute to resilience, internal and external?**

### **Internal protective strategies or factors**

The women interviewed identified a number of different strategies that they drew from their own internal resources to help them maintain strength. These included the importance of culture in supporting renewal and resilience, the need to care for themselves in a variety of ways, the need not to react quickly to situations but to consider the context and implications of their actions and the importance of spirituality.

*Inner strength and strong sense of identity.* The women had a strong sense of self; this included acceptance of who they are and what their strengths and limitations are. They were resourceful and would act when they needed to in order to address a problem or challenge. They demonstrated a strong internal locus of control, which is often regarded as an attribute of resilient people.<sup>(75)</sup> Facing challenges completely outside of their control, particularly when dealing with issues relating to drugs and alcohol or complex family issues, was when the women truly felt challenged. After this, their ability to know about and use the services and resources around them became important in addressing a challenge.

The women all strongly identified as Aboriginal, and although the women experienced challenges with their family, their sense of belonging and love for their family gave them the passion and strength to overcome these challenges. Throughout the interviews, I recognised that all of the women spoke fondly of and were proud of their family, their community, their culture and themselves.

*Our culture* enables us to stay resilient, to stay strong. There were a number of women who spoke specifically about how practicing their culture helped them to maintain strength. The women talked about engaging in cultural activities such as Aboriginal art, smoking ceremonies, language and returning to country to maintain their culture and also as a strategy to deal with stress or challenges. Three women described how language should or could be used to stay strong, such as maintaining language for the next generation. Listening to language gives them a sense of comfort.

Resilience literature for Aboriginal groups across the world, including Australia, describes the strong relationship between wellbeing and practicing culture and access to traditional country.<sup>(22, 43, 76)</sup> Other research also notes the importance of language as a protective factor for young Aboriginal people.<sup>(41)</sup> Both my findings and the literature reveal that we use our culture to stay strong and resilient. The women interviewed would use ‘going back to country’ not just as a cultural activity, but as a protective intervention, which enabled them to rest and recharge during difficult times.

***Care for ourselves***, which included taking time out and doing things they enjoyed, were strategies the women used to help themselves cope with the many challenges they identified in their lives.

The concept of self-care is not uncommon in current wellbeing and resilience literature; generally, people who are stressed are encouraged to engage in yoga, massages, self-help books and others.<sup>(77)</sup>

While it is not a strong theme in the Indigenous literature on resilience, the women I spoke to were well aware of the importance of self-care. The self-care strategies were a mixture of Western and Aboriginal strategies, for example, Aboriginal art and photography. It was interesting to note that many of the women conveyed a sense of passion and excitement when talking about doing the things that they enjoyed, and the types of activities were influenced by the personality and talents of the women. The variation in the activities they engaged in also demonstrated the diversity of our women, for example, bushwalking, photography, Aboriginal art, reading, singing, music and poetry.

Another self-care strategy was to remove themselves from difficult situations, especially when there was the threat of violence or when they sensed they were being overwhelmed by a challenge or trauma. This was a major finding; seven women spoke about either isolating themselves or completely withdrawing. This removal of self highlights two things. First, the women were aware of their emotional and physical limitations and used this as a protective strategy to maintain wellbeing. Second, the women recognised that they needed time to heal, reflect and recharge.

***Assess a situation, think before we act***. All of the women interviewed had the ability to assess a situation or challenge before they responded. This ability to critically assess a situation and make decisions after careful deliberation was demonstrated continuously

throughout the interview process and in the findings. There is resilience literature that recognises the benefits of individuals assessing a situation before responding, particularly in the research that recognises individual attributes as also enhancing resilience.<sup>(33, 78)</sup>

As an Aboriginal woman researcher, I believe that when we think before we act within an Aboriginal community and extended family setting, people are exercising forethought about how they might deal with challenging situations without compromising important relationships. The implications of destroying important relationships within the family and community can sometimes mean there is a chain reaction, as the person you are dealing with may have their own support network and alliances. Hence, as a consequence, it may not be one relationship you are compromising, but it may mean a number of relationships at jeopardy, thus causing more conflict. Aboriginal culture is built around a 'collectivist' kinship system, meaning that people think of themselves in terms of their affiliations with other people and their community;<sup>(79)</sup> in this way, it is a general rule that Aboriginal families are aligned with, defend and support their own extended family members and close communities.

*Spirituality and humour* were also used to maintained strength. Some women engaged in activities that enhanced their spirituality wellbeing. Aboriginal spirituality methods were spoken about, such as smoking ceremonies, singing stories in language, being on and at one with country.

Some women also spoke about being Christian or believing in God and the role this played in their lives. The women believe their faith in God and also the support from their Christian community or friends was an important source of support during challenging times.

The role of humour to *lift spirits* may seem like a trivial thing to include under this theme, but the women demonstrated it through their use of humour, mostly to deal with difficult topics or challenges. Humour is not a new strategy we have employed to remain strong; historically, it has been used by Aboriginal Australians and Indigenous people worldwide to resist oppression, an expression of identity and a means for survival and healing.<sup>(80)</sup>

### ***Recommendations***

- Including cultural maintenance, practising culture and access to our traditional country in the development of programs that seek to build and maintain resilience in Aboriginal Women.
- Self-care activities for women to maintain general wellbeing should be considered in the development of wellbeing programs to enhance resilience.
- Funding support for the development of language programs for young Aboriginal women is recommended to help build resilience and pride in their Aboriginal cultural heritage, as language was recognised as a strategy to maintain resilience.
- Aboriginal humour should be recognised and celebrated as a strategy for survival.

### **External protective factors or supports**

The women identified a number of strategies that they drew from their external environment to help them maintain strength. These included the importance of their family, friends and culture as sources of support and strength, the positive influence of other strong Aboriginal women in their lives and the need to access suitable wellbeing services to deal with trauma and confidential issues.

***Our culture*** is an internal and external protective factor as it is all encompassing, including elements such as our country, our extended family and close communities, the values we share of caring for family and respect for our elders and the advice that they give us.

***Our family*** as a source of support was the most dominant theme that emerged from the interviews. All of the women who were interviewed spoke about the role their families played in their lives, helping them to keep strong or ‘on-track’. Aboriginal families and the support and comfort they provide in times of adversity is well recognised by authors around the world as a protective factor in keeping our people strong and resilient.<sup>(3, 37)</sup> Although family dynamics and structure may differ, Aboriginal people in Australia are well known for living within an extended family setting.

In my experience, if I was approached by a family member to support them through a difficult or challenging time, as part of my role in my family, I would be obligated to listen and support them in some way. This may mean active listening, providing the odd suggestion or piece of advice, or it could just have meant up-lifting them by reminding them of their strengths, their talents and the good deeds that they have done in the past. If I do not do this, the person may feel that I did not care for them or that I did not love them. In this way, our close and extended family can act as a primary source of support.

The findings from the interviews reveal that, in most instances strong women get support from their families when they need it. However, it was also noted that supporting family members that engage in self-destructive behaviour can become a challenge itself, particularly when they engage in activities that the women have said should be avoided eg: drugs, alcohol, aggressive behaviour.

***Our friends*** are an important source of support for women. Having someone outside of the family to confide in and provide support is sometimes a way strong women work through issues. This practice was useful particularly if the issue involved family members. The findings describe the role of friend as usually there to listen and offer impartial advice. The role and use of friends to support individuals to stay strong is a common strategy used in the wider community also.

***Our strong women's stories*** and the influence they have on our lives are important. These include stories from the interviews and stories from other strong Aboriginal women in our literature; from women who had the ability to influence others, who cared for their families and communities, who remained strong for their families and did what they had to do to survive during times of trouble.

The women spoke of the importance of matriarchs, older woman who are powerful within a family or community. The research has emphasised the authority and influence Aboriginal matriarchs have in the lives of the next generation of Aboriginal women and should never be underestimated. During the interviews, 10 of the 12 women spoke respectfully and with great admiration about another strong Aboriginal woman, who throughout their lives, helped shape who they are and what they stand for today. Often in times of trouble and when self-doubt was rising to pull them down the women would



remember the wise words of their role models, our own strong Aboriginal women past and present, the survivors.

The very act of capturing the amazing life stories of strong Aboriginal women, as written by their own daughters (for example, D. Pilkington and J. Huggins), in itself demonstrates the level of influence these matriarchs had on their lives. *The Rabbit Proof Fence*<sup>(5)</sup> and *Aunty Rita*<sup>(7)</sup> are books but also a symbol of reverence and dedication, honouring the amazing life journeys of powerful strong and resilient women.

Throughout my own life, I have witnessed Aboriginal women draw strength from other strong Aboriginal women. Usually, it was a woman who was influential within their own family or community. I have been fortunate to be surrounded by strong Aboriginal women, who have protected, supported and provided me with advice and knowledge. This care and guidance supported me during very challenging times in my life. For me, these other women played a very pivotal role in shaping who I am today.

### **Wellbeing services**

Accessing professional help to deal with trauma or challenges was identified as a main source of support, second only to seeking support from family. The women generally sought the support and advice of a counsellor or psychologist when dealing with traumatic events, challenges or problems that they were experiencing and had difficulties working through on their own.

Similar to other Indigenous groups around the world who have been affected by colonisation, Aboriginal Australians share with our other Indigenous brothers and sisters the distinct risks of racism and trauma already present in our lives from the day we are born. Resilience literature from Indigenous groups around the world recognises this as a risk factor that we need to acknowledge and address before we move forward.

The women I interviewed were resourceful enough to seek help on issues they knew they could not deal with. Seeking counselling support in this way appeared to help the women work through traumatic situations and family and community issues in a confidential and impartial way. On review of this information the reference group believed that having a culturally appropriate service that ensured confidentiality, could only further enhance outcomes for those Aboriginal women accessing counselling in the future.

## ***Recommendations***

- The agencies that have a mandate to provide services to Aboriginal women such as: Office for Women, Department of Health, Australian Government Department of Human services (commonwealth agencies) and the relevant state based agencies. To recognise these protective factors and incorporate preventative measures in the **development of future programs and policies** for young Aboriginal women, the agencies need to:
  - 1) Recognise the importance of culture and maintaining family links and its impact on resilience;
  - 2) Promotion of families as an important source of building and maintaining resilience.
  - 3) Support and educate young Women on behaviours that are part of our culture, such as tolerance and kindness and how our ways, and our *culture and families* can be effective in supporting people that are struggling.
- The agencies that have a mandate to improve the lives of Aboriginal women such as: Office for Women, Department of Health, Department of Human services (commonwealth departments) and the relevant state based agencies. They should **provide in-principle support and funding** to deliver the following for younger Aboriginal women:
  - 1) *Design and delivery of a 'Building Resilience, Creating Young Leaders' program* – specifically designed for young women (ages 15–18). A two-day program that provides strategies for resilience and practical advice on how to overcome challenges. Also using current research along with tried and proven healthy resilience strategies, to enhance resilience in our women.
  - 2) *Strong Aboriginal women* from different backgrounds (career/life) to travel the country and speak to groups of young women. Discussions to be meaningful and share their life journey, their highs and lows, and impart practical advice on how to stay strong, while also staying connected to their families and communities.
  - 3) *Developing a multi-media strategy* that provides videos and webinars for young women to develop resources (e.g., Facebook, webinars and emails) to share insights into issues around mental health and resilience

building would be extremely powerful. As with other young Australians, many of our Aboriginal youth are connected via Facebook with friends and close and distant relatives. Young women already share their experiences and 'life insights' through quotes and memes, so using Facebook to share positive mental health messages through creative sayings and memes could also be very effective in educating our younger women.

4) *A refuge for young Aboriginal women*, run by Aboriginal women by Aboriginal organisations. A refuge could be developed in the Midwest as part of a trial. This would be a place to escape the challenges of life for 18–25-year olds, to reset and recharge, a safe-haven where they can be supported to access necessary services, a place where they can remove themselves from abusive or unhealthy situations or relationships and be supported by strong matriarchs with their interest at heart. A place where their children will be as welcomed as they are, and assisted to rebuild their lives, supported by other Aboriginal women.

5) *Healing camps for young Aboriginal Women at risk*, 18-25 to remove them from risks and deal with trauma on country, supported by other strong Aboriginal Women who are role models in their community they could develop a plan for their future and access the services they need.

- The Universities, government, Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) should develop policies and provide greater support for opportunities for resilience-related research in collaboration with other Indigenous countries, with a focus on Aboriginal women.
- The Universities, government, ARC and NHMRC should provide specific funding to support longitudinal studies to track resilience, with follow-up interviews of those who received training, education or peer support.
- The Department of Health, Office for Women and respective state based services to provide affordable, culturally safe and appropriate counselling services for Aboriginal women. Each state should identify and fund the appropriate services to provide specific, affordable, culturally safe and appropriate counselling services for Aboriginal women.

- State and Commonwealth agencies to support the development of packages for Aboriginal women that provides *specific information on trauma*, to educate people to identify what they are dealing with and when they should seek help. This information should be *developed* by our Aboriginal professionals eg. psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors, with our communities, to ensure the information can be translated and applied in a practical ‘Aboriginal-specific’ way. This information should be accessible by all around Australia, as there are some areas that have great support and a wealth of information and others that have near to nothing.
- Researchers working with Aboriginal people need to have training on trauma, so they can be alerted to any red flags identifying trauma and cease the interview or refer the person for counselling support where needed.
- Commonwealth and state funding for scholarships to enhance opportunities for young Aboriginal women to get involved in behavioural science careers, not just as counsellors but as psychiatrists and psychologists. This will enhance access to culturally safe or appropriate care.

#### **Objective 4. What external factors diminish the ability of Aboriginal women to remain resilient?**

What should women avoid to stay strong? The responses from the women related to drugs and alcohol, violence and negative people and situations.

**Drugs and Alcohol.** Avoiding the use of drugs and avoiding or minimising the use of alcohol were the dominant messages conveyed when the women were asked what should be avoided during challenging times.

Over the past 10 years, there has been increased recognition of the social determinants that affect Aboriginal health and wellbeing <sup>(81)</sup>. The detrimental effects that drugs and harmful levels of alcohol have on our lives, and the lives of our families and communities is reflected in many of the statistics and health and wellbeing literature in Australia.

This was also substantiated throughout the interviews, that drugs and alcohol are definite risk factors affecting the resilience and strength of women. It is with this in mind that the women suggested avoiding drugs and alcohol, or for some minimising the use of alcohol,

as they create or contribute to the challenges they were dealing with in their lives (e.g., excessive alcohol causing family issues or fighting at funerals, supporting relatives with drug and alcohol addictions).

The high levels of illness and social issues that are caused by engaging in life-damaging behaviours such as excessive drug and alcohol use. The influence of alcohol and drugs and how they contribute to : the high rates of violence against women, including death by violence<sup>(11)</sup>, the high levels of suicide and hospitalisations for injuries,<sup>(82)</sup> and the high levels of interaction with the justice system, suggest that violence, drugs and alcohol are causing damage. These are issues the Aboriginal community need to address themselves if we wish to overcome life's challenges and maintain good health and general wellbeing.

It is also evident that drugs and alcohol are represented in literature in other Indigenous Nations around the world, as key risk factors affecting the lives and resilience of our Aboriginal sisters and brothers <sup>(83, 84)</sup>

**Violence and negative people.** Women spoke about the need to avoid negative or aggressive people when dealing with a challenge. This is important to maintain strength and resilience, as taking on other peoples' problems or negativity makes the situation more difficult to deal with. There was a general sense that people should avoid violence if they wish to remain strong or resilient.

The unacceptable level of violence Aboriginal people are dealing with is an issue that is widely recognised, and as such is outlined within the national Strong Families, Safe Kids: Family violence strategy<sup>(10)</sup> a report by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care.

## **Future research**

This study has provided original insights into the concept of resilience as it relates to Australian Aboriginal women. This research journey has revealed there is very limited literature on resilience, as it relates to Aboriginal people in Australia. It also highlights there is a desperate need for strength-based research that includes the voice of our Australian Aboriginal women. Therefore, I have developed a number of recommendations for future research.

### ***Research recommendation 1: Focus on our strengths***

Strength-based approaches value the capacity, skills, knowledge and connections and potential in individuals and communities <sup>(85)</sup>This research project investigated what makes our women strong and resilient. It also asked women about the issues or challenges they faced and the strategies they recommended to overcome or address these. The focus on our women and ‘our strengths’ supports my intention of taking a strengths-based research approach.

There is enough literature on Aboriginal women and people in Australia that has a ‘deficit’ focus.<sup>(86)</sup> Although the intention is often to highlight ‘health or social’ risk areas within the Aboriginal community, this can also contribute to racism and reinforces negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people.

As an Aboriginal woman researcher, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the glaring disparities between us and the rest of Australia. If I had to rely only on the socio-economic status literature to provide me with a representation of Aboriginal women in Australia, it would be a dismal picture. Fortunately, I was encouraged by strong elders, who revealed to me another reality.

The value of conducting strengths-based research is to focus on the solutions to the problems rather than just highlighting the problem or stating that risks just exist. The majority of the issues affecting our health and wellbeing are already known to Aboriginal people and using a strengths-based approach in research, particularly whilst incorporating an Indigenous methodology, can allow us to examine these issues from all sides and offer culturally relevant interventions or solutions.

### ***Research recommendation 2: Listen to our voices***

I was absolutely inspired by the many stories told to me by the women who participated in this research. The yarns provided a wealth of information including lessons learned and the well-used strategies of survivors, which had taken some of the women most of their lives to learn or develop. The women’s willingness to share these with others demonstrates their commitment to our people.

This research has reinforced that research on Aboriginal women, should be conducted by Aboriginal women with Aboriginal women rather than on or about them. Interviews or

yarning sessions are absolutely imperative to get a sense of what it is our women are feeling and thinking, and to find out their aspirations and hopes for the future. Research studies not undertaken with or by Aboriginal people and the examination of data sets can only tell a partial story; the real story about our Aboriginal women can only be told by ourselves, in the way we wish to tell it.

Including our voice doesn't mean just the opinions of one or two participants in research, it means a good number of people (10+) who also fit the criteria of the research subject to be able to extract a number of common themes. These quality yarns or conversations with our people will capture far more than even the most experienced researchers are able to reveal through literature reviews alone. Consulting with our communities before speaking or writing about them is considered the right, culturally appropriate way of doing business, and is also considered best practice with regard to Aboriginal research and ethics standards.<sup>(24)</sup> Listen to us, because we know our people, we know our issues and we know how to solve them.

The benefits of using an Indigenous methodology for Aboriginal research are well known.<sup>(24, 67, 73, 87)</sup> An Aboriginal researcher who applies an Indigenous methodology and who is guided by an Aboriginal reference group and supported by the community in which they are conducting the research, is in a better position to interpret and translate the research results in a way that is culturally appropriate and in a way that can be understood by both the Aboriginal and the wider community.

I found that being an Aboriginal woman researcher, also with local knowledge of the area, families and services, very beneficial during the study. The result was in-depth quality interviews that enabled the objectives of the study to be met.

### ***Research recommendation 3: Increase resilience research***

More rigorous research is needed on the concept of resilience as it relates to Aboriginal people in Australia. This also could include programs that have investigated or yielded positive results with regard to keeping Aboriginal people strong.

This area of research would benefit from larger numbers of Aboriginal people interviewed across the nation, to gain a sense of synergies and differences in the different Aboriginal groups in Australia. Resources are required, including specifically targeted funding

rounds from organisations such as the ARC and NHMRC to further investigate the risk and protective factors affecting Aboriginal people with regard to resilience across Australia.

### **Concluding comments**

The protective and risk factors that impact resilience in Aboriginal Australian women have been investigated through the in-depth interviews conducted with 12 Aboriginal women and a review of the relevant literature available related to resilience and strength in Australian Aboriginal women. The outcomes highlight the synergies and differences Australian Aboriginal women have with other Indigenous nations around the world. The common themes that enhance resilience include: culture, family, access to land, spirituality, language. The common themes that impact negatively on resilience are historical trauma, racism, drugs and alcohol, violence and discrimination. The next section will speak about my research journey and the new insights discovered.



## Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this final chapter, I reflect on my research journey and the meanings that have arisen through undertaking this research, both for my community and myself. I gained powerful new insights into the factors that make Aboriginal women strong. I will discuss the importance of focusing on our strengths rather than our weaknesses and I make some concluding comments about future research in this area.

The research journey that I have been on for the past two years has taught me much more than I could ever have imagined. On a personal note, I am in absolute awe at the way our strong women have met and overcome challenges and trauma that would seem insurmountable to many. The way that they continue to tirelessly care for their families and their communities is inspirational.

Prior to applying for a research scholarship, I spoke to Aboriginal women I knew in the community about whether or not a study about ‘Aboriginal women and resilience’ would be something worth doing. The general response was ‘yes we need more research on Aboriginal women, written and conducted by Aboriginal women’. This initial consultation phase, I believe, was very important as it acted as a scoping exercise to assess if others thought the research idea could be of benefit to their community. I would strongly encourage anyone wanting to conduct research to do so in an area they have a genuine interest in and that can also benefit their community.

I was fortunate enough to secure a scholarship from the University of Adelaide to conduct research into investigating strategies that Aboriginal women use to stay resilient. Without the opportunity provided to me in the form of an Indigenous research scholarship, I would not have been able to take the time out to conduct the research.

So, then started my research journey. At the beginning, I was fortunate enough to spend quality time with a number of researchers, including an Aboriginal researcher, developing the research title, aim and objectives. This was a very beneficial exercise, as it was then that I was encouraged to develop an Aboriginal reference group and I was also shown how to develop an ethics proposal that ensured all ethical obligations and requirements were met, both cultural and general. Although I had worked in Aboriginal affairs much

of my life, I was relatively new to the area of research; as a result, I was unaware of the jargon and protocols that are widely used in the academic arena.

The development of my ethics proposals was an extensive process, as many Aboriginal researchers would recognise. Approval was first required from the Aboriginal community in which I conducted the study. The study was conducted in the Midwest region of WA, and approval was sought from the MAOA, which is comprised of the Chairpersons and CEOs of the local Aboriginal organisations in the area. After this approval was gained, I then sought approval from two ethics committees, the first being the WAAHEC. The WAAHEC approved the research with a recommendation to ensure I provided reports and update them on any changes. I was very lucky to experience no delays in gaining approval.

A Master's program can be a difficult journey without the support of good people. I was extremely fortunate to have the support of the staff at the University of Adelaide (UoA) and the Wardliparingga Aboriginal Research Unit within SAHMRI during the two years I studied. This commitment given by the UoA and Wardliparingga and the understanding and very supportive environment they provided during my studies helped me through some challenging times and for this, I will be eternally grateful. I believe this positive experience has enabled me to encourage other Aboriginal people that wish to embark on postgraduate studies.

The interviews and research that I have undertaken revealed many insights. Aboriginal women are dealing with many challenges and much trauma and I believe, if this continues for too much longer, the burdens we are enduring could become too much. This statement is not a throw-away statement; it is an observation and a red flag, which were often present during the interviews. Some of the stories that I heard from the women, not only in my interviews but in the community, are unbelievably horrific, and I wonder how some of them are even able to function normally. Although the women are strong and have great strategies in dealing with challenges, I, like the women interviewed, understand the need for counsellors or other specialists to help to deal with extreme trauma. We can't keep relying on the strong to always support those who are suffering, as continuously doing so causes vicarious trauma for those providing the support. New ways of strengthening the next generation to deal with the complexities of life need to be investigated, to lessen the load on the strong and avoid possible burn-out.

As a mature Aboriginal woman with children and an extensive work history in Aboriginal affairs, both in government and the Aboriginal community, I believe there are many others who have had similar experiences to me, who may also have very useful insights when it comes to Aboriginal research. There is a large group of Aboriginal people who have the experience of years working in the community with their people and are also sufficiently skilled to contribute to research, through either postgraduate studies or research projects. We should not discount the lived experiences of Aboriginal people and their contributions to their community and the value this could ultimately have for research undertaken with Aboriginal people in Australia. Delivering programs in our own communities and being involved on boards and committees are great ways to increase our knowledge into what works and what doesn't. The benefits of then using this knowledge and converting it into research can help us capture this information for our people, and influence and inform Aboriginal program development and government funding priorities and guidelines. When resources are provided to those areas demonstrating the greatest need, those who have an intimate knowledge of what the actual needs are would benefit from being involved in developing the research priorities in their areas. Increasing the research skills and knowledge of Aboriginal communities, in particular, the leaders, could be invaluable for the long term, especially if we use research to highlight and address our own identified needs.

On a personal note, this journey has also highlighted the absolute need for Aboriginal women to support one another. As the most marginalised group in Australia, it would seem fitting that we would support one another to achieve our goals and pursue our dreams; however, this is not always the case. The anxieties and issues many Aboriginal women face with regard to self-worth and self-doubt (as reflected in the interviews) contribute to our poor statistics; for example, early pregnancy, lateral and physical violence, suicide and poor mental health. If we don't already do it now, we should be actively supporting our sisters in any way we are able to and together smash the glass ceilings. This is a very personal reflection on what I sometimes see in our communities. Aboriginal women who want to achieve, I say, don't let anyone stop you, and for those who may feel uneasy or threatened by this, embrace change and progress for our next generation. If we have benefited from women before us, who have paved a way forward, so too should Aboriginal women pay that forward for our next generation.

Our young Aboriginal women's voices must be heard, as statistically, it appears they are suffering the most. We must help them as best we can to positively influence the socio-economic status of our Aboriginal women in Australia.

### **New insights**

One of the most rewarding aspects of undertaking the research in my community was the understandings I developed of the factors supporting the strength of the women who are the backbone of that community. Whilst the literature provided me with general information, it was the specific and more distinct insights that I gained, and found most useful. Although this study has many synergies with other Aboriginal research around the world, there were some areas specific to Aboriginal women and resilience in Australia:

1. Support provided by matriarchs and other strong Aboriginal women is absolutely pivotal in maintaining strength. The imparting of knowledge on how to remain resilient or strong, developed by generations of strong women, is imperative in teaching younger generations how to develop and maintain wellbeing, strength or resilience.
2. Similar to other Indigenous groups, Australian Aboriginal women draw strength from their culture, families and communities to maintain resilience.
3. Aboriginal women are employing the strategies of isolating and withdrawing to heal and recharge to deal with complex challenges.
4. Aboriginal women are using a number of both Aboriginal specific and non-Aboriginal self-care strategies and activities to maintain wellbeing. Our women are operating in two worlds and, as a result, are having to use self-care methods from both worlds to maintain general wellbeing
5. There seems to be an increase in the need for and use of counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists to help women deal with complex issues such as extreme trauma, drugs and alcohol.
6. Accessing information and dealing with gatekeepers who restrict this access in the wider community is a source of difficulty for Aboriginal women in their day-to-day lives.
7. There is lack of literature on and a desperate need for research that aims to investigate and celebrate the strengths of Aboriginal women.

8. Our strong women provide an enormous amount of support to their families and communities. They address much of the need arising in communities amongst themselves, however, they are not invincible and there is also a real danger of our women burning out if they have to deal with compounding challenges and complex trauma for too long, without the necessary supports.
9. The use of a reference group of Aboriginal women to troubleshoot issues relating to resilience was also very helpful in guiding and supporting the research.

I believe much of the current literature, especially in terms of how it is presented and how easily accessible it is, further marginalises and seeks to categorise and emphasise disparities between us and non-Aboriginal Australians; this is especially evident in the dominance and use of statistics.

### **Concluding comments**

A reality that is commonly overlooked is that Australian Aboriginal people belong to one of the richest, oldest and longest continuing cultures in the world. We belong to a proud race of healthy and strong people, who highly valued and carefully cared for their environment, families and communities. We still have many Aboriginal people that live by the principles that our ancestors imparted to us, such as value for family, respect for elders, care and love for our culture and country and care for others.

That being said, I feel that it is important for us as Aboriginal people and researchers to lead the way in celebrating and sharing with the world and ourselves our inherent strengths. Aboriginal women are statistically the most marginalised group in Australia; yet many of us see ourselves as strong, resilient and the backbone of the community—this has emerged from both the literature and the interviews. Focusing on our strengths does not mean we ignore the issues, the cause of the poor statistics, or even the challenges we face or will continue to face daily. It just means that we move towards forging a positive way forward for those coming behind us, by creating a new discourse on Aboriginal women, one filled with messages of strength and hope for younger women and for our people.

This is a strengths-based study, as mentioned in the ‘aim’ of the research proposal. The outcomes of this research can be used to guide future policy and program development

and assist in the design of programs and interventions to support Aboriginal women to overcome difficult and traumatic events that affect their lives.

## Appendices

## Appendix 1: Ethics approvals



RESEARCH SERVICES  
OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS, COMPLIANCE AND  
INTEGRITY

SABINE SCHREIBER  
SECRETARY  
HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE  
THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE  
LEVEL 4, RUNDLE MALL PLAZA  
50 RUNDLE MALL  
ADELAIDE SA 5000 AUSTRALIA  
TELEPHONE +61 8 8313 6028  
FACSIMILE +61 8 8313 3700  
email: hrec@adelaide.edu.au  
CRICOS Provider Number 00123M

8 February 2017

Professor A Braunack-Mayer  
Public Health

Dear Professor Braunack-Mayer

**ETHICS APPROVAL No: H-2016-250**  
***How did we survive? Aboriginal women sharing their lived experiences and knowledge of lessons learned in life through story-telling***

The ethics application for the above project has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee and is deemed to meet the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*.

**The ethics expiry date for this project is: 28 February 2020**

Ethics approval is granted for three years and is subject to satisfactory annual reporting. The form titled *Annual Report on Project Status* is to be used when reporting annual progress and project completion and can be downloaded at <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/research-services/oreci/human/reporting/>. Prior to expiry, ethics approval may be extended for a further period.

Participants in the study are to be given a copy of the Information Sheet and the signed Consent Form to retain. It is also a condition of approval that you **immediately report** anything which might warrant review of ethical approval including:

- serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants,
- previously unforeseen events which might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project,
- proposed changes to the protocol; and
- the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.

Please refer to the following ethics approval document for any additional conditions that may apply to this project.

Yours sincerely

 Professor Paul Delfabbro  
Convenor  
Human Research Ethics Committee





RESEARCH SERVICES  
OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS, COMPLIANCE AND  
INTEGRITY

SABINE SCHREIBER  
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email: hrec@adelaide.edu.au  
CRICOS Provider Number 00123M

Applicant: Professor A Braunack-Mayer

School: Public Health

Project Title: *How did we survive? Aboriginal women sharing their lived experiences and knowledge of lessons learned in life through story-telling*

---

THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

**Project No:**

**H-2016-250**

RM No: 0000022106

APPROVED for the period until:

**28 February 2020**

Thank you for the response dated 24.1.17 to the matters raised by the Committee. It is noted that this study will be conducted by Jasmine Gregory, Masters student.

Refer also to the accompanying letter setting out requirements applying to approval.

 Professor Paul Delfabbro  
Convenor  
Human Research Ethics Committee

Date: 8 February 2017



15<sup>th</sup> November, 2016

Dear Jasmine,

WAAHEC HREC Project Reference: 751

Project Title: How did we survive? Aboriginal women sharing their lived experiences and knowledge of lessons learned in life through story-telling

Thank you for submitting the above research project which was considered by the WAAHEC at the out of session meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2016. I am pleased to advise that the WAAHEC has reviewed and approved the following documents for use in this project:

---

Document(s):

- WAAHEC Application Form
- Values and Ethics Statement
- Letter of support from Midwest Aboriginal Organisation Alliance
- Appendix A, Information Sheet – Interviews
- Appendix B, Consent Form

The WAAHEC has granted approval of this research project from date of the meeting held, pending your agreement of the following conditions:

**1. Conditions**

- The WAAHEC will be notified, giving reasons, if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion
- The coordinating Investigator will provide a Progress Report every 30<sup>th</sup> June each year in the specified format. This form can be found on the AHCWA website ([www.ahcwa.org](http://www.ahcwa.org)).
- The approval for studies is for three years and the research should be commenced and completed within that period of time. Projects must be resubmitted if an extension of time is required.

450 Beaufort Street, Highgate WA 6003 / PO BOX 8493, Stirling Street, Perth WA 6849  
**Phone:** (08) 9227 1631 **Fax:** (08) 9228 1088 **Email:** [ethics@ahcwa.org](mailto:ethics@ahcwa.org) **Web:** [www.ahcwa.org](http://www.ahcwa.org)  
ABN: 48 114 220 478 ACN: 114 220 478



- Publications that arise from this research are to be provided to the WAAHEC for review prior to submission for dissemination.
- That the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community are formally acknowledged for their contribution to this research project.

#### **Amendments**

- If there is an event requiring amendments to be submitted you should immediately contact [ethics@ahcwa.org](mailto:ethics@ahcwa.org) for advice.

Should you have any queries about the WAAHEC's consideration of your project please contact [ethics@ahcwa.org](mailto:ethics@ahcwa.org).

The WAAHEC wishes you every success in your research.

Kind regards

Tara Pierson

For, Vicki O'Donnell  
Chair, WAAHEC

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*, *NHMRC and Universities Australia Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007)* and the *CPMP/ICH Note for Guidance on Good Clinical Practice*. The process this HREC uses to review multi-centre research proposals has been certified by the NHMRC.

450 Beaufort Street, Highgate WA 6003 / PO BOX 8493, Stirling Street, Perth WA 6849  
**Phone:** (08) 9227 1631 **Fax:** (08) 9228 1088 **Email:** [ethics@ahcwa.org](mailto:ethics@ahcwa.org) **Web:** [www.ahcwa.org](http://www.ahcwa.org)  
ABN: 48 114 220 478 ACN: 114 220 478

## Appendix 2: Letter of approval – Midwest community (MAOA)

MAOA



Midwest Aboriginal Organisation Alliance

56-86 Eastward Road, Utakarra  
PO BOX 2105  
GERALDTON WA 6531  
Phone: 99207900

Dear Ms Jasmine Gregory

**RE: Support for Masters Research Project**

Thank you for seeking permission and support for your Masters Research Project.

I am very pleased to advise you that this was discussed on 20/10/16 at our most recent MAOA meeting and your proposal received unanimous support.

The members were very impressed with your sensitivity and approach.

On a personal note, I believe your chosen topic of "...How did we survive": Aboriginal women sharing their lived experiences and knowledge of lessons in life through story-telling." is an excellent choice and I would be interested in the outcome.

I was also very pleased in your respectful approach not only in the way you will conduct your project but also in your inclusive request to members of MAOA.

I wish you all the very best in your project.

✓  
Gordon Gray ~

Chairperson, Midwest Aboriginal Organisation Alliance (MAOA)

21 October 2016

## Appendix 3: Participant information sheet and consent form



### Appendix A Information Sheet

#### Information Sheet – Interviews

#### *THIS IS FOR YOU TO KEEP*

#### Developing a Best Practice Service Delivery Framework Study

**Aim:** The aim of this study is to understand what contributes to the resilience of Aboriginal women.

**Who is Involved in the Research Project:** This research project is being conducted by Jasmine Gregory who is a Masters Student at the University of Adelaide.

**Benefits to Participants:** There is no anticipated direct benefit to individuals participating in this research project, however, those participating may find it beneficial to be involved in research that may be used to develop programs and improve services for their community.

**What Will Participation Involve:** You will be contacted by a researcher who will invite you to participate in an interview at a time and place most suitable to you. It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately one hour and you will be able to stop and/or reschedule at any time.

**What Information are We Seeking:** We will ask you for your views on:

- what strategies do you use to overcome difficult and challenging times;
- what has supported you to overcome difficult and challenging times;
- what could (if available) support you to overcome difficult and challenging times, and
- what do you believe should be avoided when confronted with difficult and challenging times.]

**Information Will be Used To:** The information you provide will only be used for the purposes of this study and no other, without your express permission. Information from this study may be published in journals, conferences and/or books.

**Potential Risks and Participant Rights:** We do not envisage that there will be any risks associated with participating in this study. However, the proceedings of the interview will be tape recorded. If you wish to stop the recording you may ask for the tape recorder to be turned off at any time. You may also stop participating in the interview at any time and may withdraw your consent at any time, with no repercussions.

The interview questions are not intended to be intrusive, but if at anytime during the interview you feel upset or uncomfortable please let the Researcher know as they will be able to discuss with you available local counselling and support services that you could access. The Researcher will provide you with support during this process, if this is your wish.

**Confidentiality:** We have a number of stringent processes in place to protect your privacy. This includes but is not limited to ensuring the confidentiality of all information including the tape recordings of interviews. To ensure your privacy, you will be given a study ID and:

- Any information you provide to us will be de-identified with this study ID.
- Your information will only be accessed by research staff.
- Your hardcopy information will be stored in a secured locked cabinet.
- A tape recording of the interview will be stored electronically on a secure, password and firewall protected computer.
- Tape recordings of interviews will be kept for a minimum data retention period of 5 years and not destroyed beforehand,
- You will not be personally identified in any reports or articles; and
- The information you provide will only be used for the purposes of this study and no other, without your express permission.
- If you have any complaints that relate to this study please contact the University of Adelaide's Human Research Ethics Committee 83136028 and [hrec@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:hrec@adelaide.edu.au).
- Please do not hesitate to contact either myself on 0437418842 or email : [jasmine.gregory@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:jasmine.gregory@adelaide.edu.au) or researcher Dr Carol Davy if you would like a copy of the interview transcript P 08 8128 4220 M 0424 751 192

**This Research Project has Been Approved by:** The study has been approved by

WA Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee  
450 Beaufort Street Highgate  
Western Australia  
6003  
Australia  
Ph: (08) 9227 1631  
Fax :(08) 9228 1099

Human Research Ethics Committee  
Research Branch  
THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE  
SA 5005 AUSTRALIA  
Contact

**If You Wish to Discuss the Study in More Detail:** Please contact

Professor Annette Braunack-Mayer  
School of Public Health Level 7, Terrace Towers 178 North Terrace UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE  
Mail Drop DX 650 207 AUSTRALIA SA 5005 Ph 08 8313 1694 e-mail:  
[annette.braunackmayer@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:annette.braunackmayer@adelaide.edu.au)

Dr Teresa Burgess  
Senior Lecturer  
School of Public Health  
University of Adelaide  
Adelaide SA 5005  
P: 08 8313 3468

## Appendix – Consent Form

### Consent Form

**Study Title:** How did we survive?: Aboriginal women sharing their lived experiences and knowledge of lessons learned in life through story-telling.

**Researcher's name:** Jasmine Gregory

#### THIS MEANS YOU CAN SAY NO

- I have received information about this study and the research project has been explained to me.
- I have had a chance to ask questions and I am comfortable with the answers I have been given.
- I understand the purpose and my involvement in the research study.
- I have volunteered to participate in the study.
- I understand that I do not have to answer any questions I don't like.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research study at any stage without any negative impact.
- If I withdraw from the study prior to analysis, none of the information I have been given will be used in the research.
- I will be supported to seek suitable support services if I am upset or uncomfortable during and after the interviews.
- If I withdraw from the study after analysis has commenced, I understand that it will not be possible to extract my information from the findings.
- I understand that I may not directly benefit or be paid for taking part in the study.
- I understand that this study may be published in journals, conferences and/or books.
- I will not be identified and my personal information will remain confidential.
- I understand that I may be audiotaped and the researcher will turn off the tape if I ask them to.
- The tapes will be destroyed once they are summarised and at completion of the study.
- I understand that I will retain ownership of all information (intellectual property) that I provide to the study.
- I understand that I can have a copy of my transcript sent to me by emailing  
jasmine.gregory@adelaide.edu.au
- I give Jasmine Gregory permission (an irrevocable royalty free licence) to use the information I have provided in order to further the aims of the study as specified in the information brochure.

**Name of participant:** .....

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**I have explained the research project to the participant and believe that he/she understands what is involved.**

Researcher's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature and date: \_\_\_\_\_

**If you would like to participate, please complete the above information and return the form:**

- Scanned copy via email to [jasmine.gregory@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:jasmine.gregory@adelaide.edu.au)
- Via mail in the reply paid envelope provided
- You can decline this invitation by emailing [jasmine.gregory@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:jasmine.gregory@adelaide.edu.au) or ph: 0437 418842

**If you would like more information, have any concerns or complaints about this research project, you can speak to:**

Professor Annette Braunackmayer  
School of Public Health Level 7, Terrace Towers 178 North Terrace UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE  
Mail Drop DX 650 207 AUSTRALIA SA 5005 Ph 08 8313 1694 e-mail:  
[annette.braunackmayer@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:annette.braunackmayer@adelaide.edu.au)

Dr Teresa Burgess  
Senior Lecturer  
School of Public Health  
University of Adelaide  
Adelaide SA 5005  
P: 08 8313 3468

Chairperson – Vicki O'Donnell  
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450 Beaufort Street Highgate  
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Human Research Ethics Committee  
Office of Research Ethics, Compliance and Integrity  
Level 4 Rundle Mall Plaza, 50 Rundle Mall  
The University of Adelaide, AUSTRALIA 5000  
THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE  
SA 5005 AUSTRALIA  
Contact 83136028 and [hrec@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:hrec@adelaide.edu.au)



## Appendix 4: Participant interview guide



### Appendix C – Semi Structured Interview Guide

#### Part One – Introduction

Prior to commencing the interview ensure that:

- you introduce yourself;
- participant has received, read and fully understood the information sheet; and
- participant has voluntarily consented to participate and has signed a copy of the consent form.

Then ensure that:

- you ask permission to turn on the tape recorder; and
- highlight that participants may ask for the tape recorder to be turned off at any time.

#### Part One – Obtaining Background Information to Interview

**(Provide a general introduction to participant for the discussions)**

The aim of this study is to understand what contributes to the resilience of Aboriginal women. The outcome will include sharing this knowledge and the insights to guide future policy and program development for Aboriginal women.

#### Part Two - Data Collection

Can you tell me a little bit about a recent difficult or challenging situation you have been involved in?

- What strategies did you use to overcome difficult and challenging times;
- What supported you to overcome difficult and challenging times
- What other things could have supported you to overcome this difficult and challenging time, if available.
- What do you believe should be avoided when confronted with difficult and challenging times.

#### Part Three – COMPLETION

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this interview today. Please do not hesitate to contact either myself on 0437418842 or [jasmine.gregory@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:jasmine.gregory@adelaide.edu.au) or researcher Dr Carol Davy if you would like a copy of the transcript P 08 8128 4220 M 0424 751 192 E

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