

Navigating cultural load: balancing identity, expectations and wellbeing



Tegan Schefe

A boriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the longest continuing cultures in the world, with over 65,000 years of history. We have endured many challenges, including colonisation, which has led to ongoing intergenerational trauma and systemic racism. Nonetheless, our people have remained resilient in the face of these challenges, and we are still here today. As a proud Aboriginal woman from the Bidjara people, I take pride in my culture and being a voice for not just my people but for the communities I've worked in.

However, being Aboriginal comes with several responsibilities. I carry the weight of my ancestors and all that they have fought for to allow me to be the woman I am today. I carry the weight of my children and the responsibility to continue my ancestors' fight for a better world for them to live in. I also carry the responsibility of having to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to a people who still deny our history and us as this nation's first peoples. This is also known as cultural or colonial load.

Cultural/Colonial load

Cultural load is the invisible workload that is knowingly or unknowingly placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to share Indigenous knowledge, education and support with non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – to explain the reason for our being. This may look like being given the responsibility to share about culture in workplaces without being paid for the extra workload or being asked insensitive questions bordering on the verge of racist such as "what is it like to be Indigenous?" in social gatherings. It is as if we can never just represent ourselves, but we must represent all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, ignoring our unique differences. The responsibility of teaching about our cultures has been thrust upon us, with no responsibility whatsoever taken on by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We should not be bearing the weight of this cultural load, not alone at least. According to Weenthunga Health Network: "Culture has always been a strength. Our culture and cultural practices keep us well. Culture is not a load." Instead, cultural load should be reframed as "colonial load" which simply means "the load placed knowingly and unknowingly on First Nations people by settlers and institutions. It includes biases, assumptions, expectations and entitlement held by Settlers. The load is highly visible to us as First Nations people. When the burden to carry the load is placed on us, it causes harm. It



Participants who attended a safeYARN workshop with Galambila Aboriginal Health Service through the Culture Care Connect Suicide Prevention and SEWB program in Coffs Harbour.

can lead to burnout and impact our ability to maintain our cultural responsibility."

During my time as a facilitator delivering suicide prevention and intervention skills training through Indigenous-ASIST (I-ASIST) and safeYARN (<https://wwwold.livingworks.com.au/programs/i-asist/>) I delivered workshops to create a culturally safe space where many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants could share their experiences of carrying cultural load. However, not everyone is given the chance to share and offload to support their own wellbeing.

Who is taking care of the SEWB workers in our communities?

For many Indigenous peoples, taking time off for their own wellbeing isn't an option if they are the ones their families rely on for support. If they step away, the support disappears. This raises a critical question: who is taking care of the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) workers in our communities? Those who come through the programs at Indigenous-ASIST and safe YARN come from both our Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) and non-Aboriginal-led organisations. They are driven by wanting to learn the skills to keep our Mob safe from suicide. But they are also tired and overworked. We often talk about growing the workforce, but retaining staff is just as important. Retention isn't just about keeping people in jobs – it's about ensuring they feel supported, valued, and well enough to continue their work. Without this, burnout and high turnover will continue to affect our ability to build sustainable services.

Supporting SEWB workers' wellbeing

Some organisations are taking steps to recognise the reality of colonial load and to show support to their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Murdoch University, for example, has recently established a 'cultural load allowance' to recognise the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in providing cultural knowledge. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff may apply for this allowance when they undertake culture-related work that is not required of

their usual role. Other organisations are providing resources to help nurture the wellbeing of Aboriginal SEWB workers: Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services (KAMS) and the Transferring Indigenous Mental Health Wellbeing research program have recently worked together to develop two deadly resources to support our people working in social and emotional wellbeing.

The first is the *Social and Emotional Wellbeing Welcome Guide for the Aboriginal Workforce* and the second is *Workforce Wellbeing Guide: A self-reflection and self-care for Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services in the Kimberley*.

Both resources highlight the importance of self-care and wellbeing for SEWB workers and provide practical tools for managing self-care.

In my current role at the Indigenous Futures Centre I work alongside Professor Pat Dudgeon and Dr Chontel Gibson on projects which seek to support SEWB workers, and to understand how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can flourish in the face of racism.

I am also working with the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention, in collaboration with National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Danila Dilba Health Services, KAMS, Darling Downs Health, and Langford Aboriginal Association, to support the SEWB workforce.

We're promoting self-care and

providing vital skills for their workers to better understand social and emotional wellbeing.

Supporting the SEWB workforce is an essential part of our journey towards self-determination. Every part is important, and everyone has a role to play.

If we are serious about strengthening suicide prevention efforts, we need to invest more in training but also in the wellbeing of those delivering the training.

Building local capacity requires a shift in how we support, retain, and uplift the workforce which is on the frontline of community care.

Tegan Schefe is a proud Bidjara and Kamilaroi woman with a strong background in Primary health care and suicide prevention. Tegan is committed to community-driven, co-designed solutions that enhance the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. Tegan currently works at the Australian Research Council, Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Futures as an administrator and has close connections with the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention, University of Western Australia.

● This article is part of a series by authors from the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention at the University of Western Australia.



A safeYARN workshop hosted by Uni-SC Thompson Institute's the Alliance for Suicide Prevention in the Sunshine Coast.