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Towards a Framework for Culturally Safer Simulation in the Australian Context

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Towards a Framework for Culturally Safer Simulation in the Australian Context

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Consent
Participant Consent and Information Sheet and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The research was conducted in accordance to NHMRC, Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007) and Declaration of Helsinki.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Keywords: Simulation, cultural humility, cultural safety, First Nations, simulation best-practice, co-design.

Abstract

Background: Culturally safe healthcare practice is a core expectation for nursing and midwifery graduates in Australia, yet limited evidence exists to guide how cultural safety can be authentically embedded within simulation-based education. Despite increasing curricular attention to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, simulation activities often lack meaningful First Nations involvement, risking tokenistic representation and missed opportunities for transformative learning. This study sought to strengthen the cultural integrity of the Quality Simulation Assurance Framework (QSAFe) by privileging First Nations perspectives on culturally safer simulation design, facilitation, and learner experience.

Methods: Guided by an Aboriginal Participatory Action Research methodology, this qualitative study engaged a First Nations Reference Group to provide cultural governance throughout. Twenty participants from four Australian states—nine identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander—contributed through focus groups co-facilitated by First Nations researchers. Reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken collaboratively, followed

by deductive interpretation using Yunkaporta's 8 Ways of Knowing and Learning pedagogical framework.

Results: Four interconnected themes described the conditions required for culturally safer simulation: (1) Relational authenticity through representation, partnership and voice, emphasising genuine involvement of Elders, cultural mentors and lived experience; (2) Cultural humility as a shared journey, characterised by reflexivity, vulnerability and co-learning; (3) Courage to engage with uncertainty, including confronting fear of mistakes and navigating diverse cultural perspectives; and (4) Creating conditions for culturally safer learning, through intentional design, yarning, inclusive facilitation, and environments that reduce shame and support belonging.

Conclusions: Culturally safer simulation is not achieved through the addition of First Nations content alone but through relational, reflective and community-led approaches. Embedding First Nations pedagogies within simulation design and facilitation offers a pathway toward more authentic, equitable and culturally safe learning experiences. These findings inform the ongoing development of QSAFe and highlight the importance of co-design in strengthening cultural safety within health professional education.

Positionality

The authors begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands and waters on which all Australians live, work and play. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

The team acknowledge the deeply spiritual connection to Country that has been experienced by the First Nations peoples of Australia for tens of thousands of years. We acknowledge the negative impacts that colonisation has had on maintaining this connection for First Nations Peoples. As a collective, the authors are hopeful that this project and similar ones will work toward a more equitable future for Australia's First Nations Peoples.

The research team consists of a Mununjali woman researcher in a non-health science field, a Wiradjuri and Ngunnawal woman who is a midwifery academic, a Quandamooka man who is an allied health assistant, and Wiradjuri man who is a physiotherapist, alongside eight non-Indigenous Health-Science academics of varying cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

Cultural safety is increasingly expected within healthcare education and practice in Australia. For nursing, midwifery and allied health graduates it is an expected professional standard to enhance respectful, responsive and culturally safe care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) peoples (1, 2). Universities and healthcare organisations therefore have an ongoing responsibility to prepare learners to engage respectfully and effectively with First Nations peoples, communities and knowledges. This includes designing and delivering culturally safe simulation-based learning that needs to support the preparation of graduates to provide respectful, inclusive equitable, and culturally safe care. Despite ongoing efforts to embed cultural safety within curricula, significant inequities in health outcomes persist, highlighting the need for educational approaches that move beyond awareness and cultural competence towards more meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. Embedding cultural safety within health curricula can potentially be a challenge. There is limited evidence regarding the educational approaches most likely to support culturally safe practice (3). Simulation-based curricula is an effective healthcare teaching strategy for transforming people's perspectives and could be useful for teaching cultural capabilities. Transforming perspectives requires learning to extend beyond cultural awareness, examining beliefs and worldviews to critically reflect on power, privilege and respect in healthcare (4). Such

practices are required for patients' self-determined and culturally safe care (5, 6). However, a recent review identified gaps in simulation design for developing cultural capabilities (3).

In this article, the term *First Nations people*s is used to respectfully identify the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples, recognising their status as the traditional custodians of their lands and waters (7). References to peoples outside Australia use the term *Indigenous peoples* to distinguish international contexts from the Australian setting.

Background

Simulation-based education (SBE) is increasingly embedded within Australian nursing and midwifery curricula as a key strategy for promoting experiential learning. However, translating international simulation standards into consistent educational practice remains challenging, particularly in the context of workforce turnover and reliance on casual educators (8). Consequently, there is a need for practical frameworks that support educators and institutions to operationalise best-practice standards and deliver high-quality simulation experiences regardless of their level of simulation expertise. The Quality Simulation Assurance Framework (QSAFe) was designed to address critical gaps in quality SBE by providing a structured approach to translating simulation standards into practice while also embedding principles of cultural safety (9). QSAFe development is reported elsewhere (9). QSAFe is particularly important in the Australian context, where accreditation requirements mandate that nursing and midwifery programs prepare graduates to provide culturally safe care for First Nations peoples and demonstrate the integration of cultural safety principles within curriculum design and learning outcomes (Australian Nursing and

Midwifery Accreditation Council [ANMAC], 2019). This is further supported by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) for embedding good practice in health practitioner education: simulation-based learning (10). Ahpra suggests that simulations should intentionally incorporate diverse cultural perspectives, promote cultural humility, challenge bias, and support the development of culturally safe practice. This should be done through partnering with communities and embedding authentic, culturally responsive scenarios throughout the curriculum.

As simulation constitutes a major teaching and learning strategy within nursing and midwifery education, ensuring that simulation activities are both culturally safe and educationally rigorous is essential. Experiential learning approaches have the potential to challenge assumptions, foster critical self-reflection, and promote cultural humility, thereby supporting the development of culturally safe healthcare professionals (11). Importantly, cultural safety is determined by those receiving care, including individuals, families, and communities, rather than by the intentions of the healthcare provider (10, 12). One way to strengthen the capacity of simulation-based education (SBE) to support culturally safer care is through the meaningful involvement of First Nations peoples from diverse Nations and communities in the design, implementation, delivery, and evaluation of simulation activities (13).

Within Australian healthcare education, efforts to integrate First Nations' perspectives have historically has focused on curriculum content, case-based learning and cultural capability training developed and delivered mostly by non-Indigenous healthcare academics (14). Non-Indigenous academics have acknowledged their limitations in their cultural knowledge, confidence and lived experience to represent First Nations peoples' experiences and

worldviews without guidance from First Nations colleagues and communities (14, 15). Identifying appropriate First Nations healthcare academics, Elders, community representatives, or cultural advisors can be challenging within some healthcare programs, particularly where First Nations workforce representation is limited. Nevertheless, their meaningful involvement throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation of simulation activities is important for ensuring authenticity, cultural relevance, and cultural safety.

Consequently, simulations may be developed with good intentions but without meaningful First Nations involvement. Where opportunities for genuine partnership and co-design are limited, cultural elements may be incorporated primarily to meet curriculum or accreditation expectations rather than to support meaningful learning about culturally safe and responsive care. Genuine partnership, co-design and ongoing consultation with First Nations peoples are therefore necessary to support simulations that are culturally grounded, contextually relevant and responsive to community priorities (16).

Other studies argue too little is known about what constitutes culturally safer simulation from the perspectives of First Nations peoples, educators, learners and simulation stakeholders (5, 6). This knowledge gap is significant given the increasing use of simulation to prepare graduates for practice with First Nations peoples and communities. Existing literature provides limited guidance regarding how First Nations perspectives can meaningfully inform simulation design, facilitation and participant experience (3). This study, therefore, aimed to explore perspectives of culturally safer simulation among First Nations peoples and simulation stakeholders to inform the development of resources for

the QSAFe. Specifically, the study sought to identify the principles, practices and conditions that contribute to culturally safer simulation-based learning environments.

The present study builds on previous development of QSAFe (17, 18), a quality framework designed to support best practice in simulation-based education (8). This was identified as a key gap in simulation-based curriculum anecdotally amongst experts and through a national survey (19). Although the development of QSAFe involved consultation and co-design with First Nations academics, the project team identified a need for further work to strengthen the integration of First Nations perspectives within simulation resources and guidance materials. Specifically, there was a need to better understand how cultural safety might inform simulation design, facilitation and learner engagement, and to ensure that future resources were grounded in the voices, experiences and priorities of First Nations peoples (17). This work helps to meet Australian higher education strategies for widening participation and outcomes for First Nations peoples, and delivering high quality, student centric learning.

Aboriginal Participatory Action Research

This study was guided by Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) (20, 21), an Indigenous methodology that privileges First Nations voices, knowledge systems, and self-determination throughout the research process. Dudgeon, Bray (20) acknowledged APAR as a culturally appropriate approach for working with First Nations communities as it is grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing and supports collaborative inquiry, critical reflection, and action on issues of shared importance. Rather than individual ownership knowledge generation through respectful partnerships to uncover relational and collectively held knowledge is emphasised (21, 22). Key principles

include the meaningful involvement of First Nations peoples as equal partners throughout the research process, shared decision-making, collective knowledge generation, and ongoing reflexivity among both First Nations and non-Indigenous researchers. In this study, continuous cycles of engagement, reflection, collaboration, and action, meant the research was conducted with First Nations stakeholders at every stage.

A First Nations reference group provided cultural governance across all study phases. Comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, academics, an education project officer, and health professionals, the group co-designed the study, refined research aims and focus group questions, co-facilitated focus groups, and contributed to data analysis and interpretation. Members ensured cultural integrity, refined themes, and guided dissemination, authorship, and knowledge translation in accordance with First Nations peoples' ways of knowing, being, and doing, Indigenous Data Sovereignty, and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property principles (23).

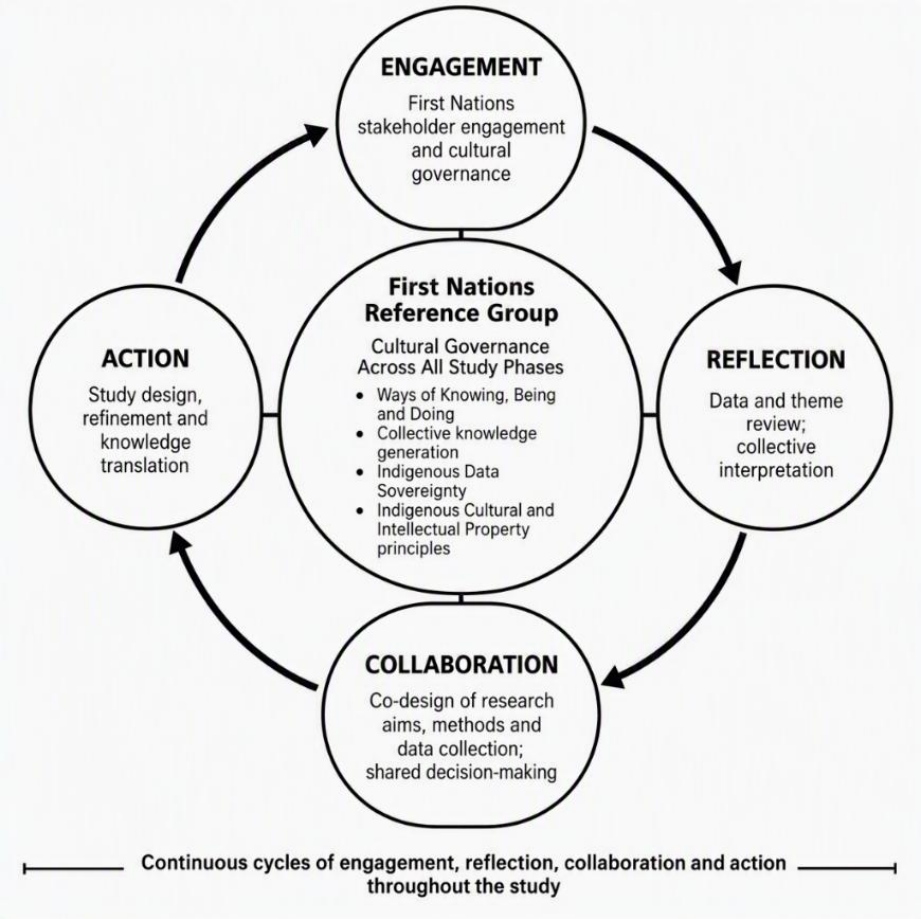


Figure 1. Aboriginal Participatory Action Research process underpinning the study. Continuous cycles of engagement, collaboration, reflection, and action guided all phases of the research.

This study sought to explore perspectives of culturally safer simulation among First Nations peoples and simulation stakeholders to better understand the principles, practices and conditions that support culturally safer learning environments. By privileging First Nations peoples' voices and experiences, the study aimed to inform the development of culturally safer simulation resources within QSAFe and contribute to a broader understanding of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing can inform simulation-based education.

Methods

Aims

To explore how culturally safer simulation is understood and enacted from the perspectives of First Nations peoples and simulation stakeholders to inform future simulation design and facilitation.

Research questions

The project aimed to answer four questions:

RQ1: What are the considerations when co-designing simulation experiences with First Nations peoples to maintain cultural safety?

RQ2: What are we currently doing or not doing at an undergraduate level to prepare First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous nurses and midwives for real-world culturally safe practice.

RQ3: What strategies prove successful in integrating First Nations peoples' cultural perspectives into culturally safe healthcare simulation to promote inclusive and respectful learning environments?

RQ4: How do participating First Nations and non-Indigenous stakeholders describe considerations for designing culturally safer simulation-based education?

Ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Ethical Conduct in Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities guidelines (24) and was further informed by Indigenous research principles including respect, reciprocity, deep listening, reflection, collaboration, and the development of sustainable relationships that extend beyond the life of the project (23).

Approval number: HREC 2025-4375HI and IREAP review and approval (IREP: Indigenous Research Ethics Advisory Panel).

Data Collection

Focus groups were selected as the primary data collection method due to their capacity to facilitate discussion, generate rich data, and capture diverse perspectives and experiences within a social context (25). In accordance with recommendations for medium-sized qualitative studies, a minimum of three focus groups was conducted (25). To ensure representation of diverse geographical and cultural perspectives, focus groups were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and comprised of individuals from different Australian states, cities and Nations.

Recruitment

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were recruited through existing professional networks, community introductions, and established relationships with First Nations and non-Indigenous stakeholders. Individuals identified as potentially interested in the study were invited to participate and were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form outlining the purpose of the research, participation requirements, and ethical considerations.

Prior to data collection, members of the research team facilitated information sessions for prospective participants to provide opportunities for clarification, answer questions, and establish and strengthen relationships. Consistent with Indigenous research methodologies that emphasizes relationship-building and trust, these sessions also provided an opportunity to foster connection between researchers and participants before study commencement

(23). All focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate rigorous analysis.

Following data analysis, participants were invited to review and provide feedback on the preliminary findings to ensure that interpretations accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. Consistent with Aboriginal Participatory Action Research, this process extended participant involvement beyond data collection and into the co-construction and validation of knowledge through collective reflection and interpretation (20).

Data analysis

Data analysis was iterative and collaborative. The research team worked in three analytic groups, each including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander researchers. Each group independently reviewed the data and developed preliminary interpretations before reconvening as a whole team to collectively reflect on and refine codes and themes. This process was repeated across multiple cycles, resulting in increasingly refined analytic tables comprising themes, codes and representative quotations.

A final analytic phase was undertaken by using an inductive–deductive approach. The inductive analysis prioritised participants' language, meanings and recommendations relating to culturally inclusive simulation design. Through this process, four interconnected themes were generated: (1) Relational Authenticity Through Representation, Partnership and Voice; (2) Cultural Humility as a Shared Journey; (3) Courage to Engage with Uncertainty; and (4) Creating Conditions for Culturally Safer Learning.

Following theme generation, Yunkaporta's 8 Ways of Knowing and Learning (26, 27) was used as a deductive, sensitising framework to further understand and interpret the themes

through a First Nations peoples' pedagogical lens. The framework comprises eight interconnected elements: Story Sharing, Learning Maps, Non-verbal Learning, Symbols and Images, Land Links, Non-linear Learning, Deconstruct/Reconstruct, and Community Links. The research team considered how these elements aligned with the themes and used these connections to deepen interpretation of participants' experiences and perspectives. Importantly, the 8 Ways of Knowing and Learning were not used to generate or impose the themes; rather, they provided an additional interpretive lens through which the emergent themes could be understood.

For example, the theme Relational Authenticity Through Representation, Partnership and Voice aligned strongly with the elements of Story Sharing and Community Links, reflecting participants' emphasis on authentic representation, local knowledge holders, and collaborative relationships. Similarly, participants' emphasis on creating silence and space for reflection aligned with the element of Non-verbal Learning. These connections highlighted how First Nations peoples' ways of knowing can inform understandings of culturally safer simulation and supported a deeper interpretation of the findings.

Reflexivity and Relational Accountability

Reflexivity was undertaken throughout all stages of the study, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed and shaped by the perspectives, experiences and relationships of those involved. Rather than being confined to individual researcher reflection, reflexivity was enacted collectively through ongoing engagement with the First Nations peoples reference group. The Reference Group contributed to study design, interpretation of findings and validation of emerging understandings, ensuring that analysis was informed by multiple First Nations peoples' perspectives and grounded in principles of relational accountability.

Through this process, interpretations were continually examined, challenged and refined to support cultural integrity, relevance and respectfulness.

Results

Twenty participants participated in the study (13 female; 7 male), nine (n=9) of whom identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Participants were purposively selected to provide a breadth of perspectives relating to simulation-based education, health professional education and cultural capability. The sample included health educators/academics from nursing, midwifery and physiotherapy disciplines (n = 16), an education officer (n = 1), a health assistant (n = 1), a simulation educator and vendor representative (n=1), and a cultural capability officer (n = 1). This multidisciplinary representation supported exploration of culturally inclusive simulation design from a range of professional and cultural perspectives.

Analysis of the focus group data revealed four themes relating to the development of culturally safer simulation-based education experiences that authentically incorporate First Nations peoples' perspectives. The themes presented below reflect participants' collective experiences and recommendations and provide insight into the key considerations for developing culturally responsive simulations.

Theme 1: Relational Authenticity Through Representation, Partnership and Voice

Participants described culturally safer simulation as fundamentally relational, emphasising that authentic representation and meaningful partnerships with First Nations peoples were essential to both the design and delivery of simulation experiences; *"You know, the biggest thing, you know, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is the yarning. We talk*

about it; we don't like to be pushed into things and it's all about building those relationships which then is going to turn in and build the trust" [P2200FI]. Cultural safety was perceived to emerge when First Nations peoples; voices, lived experiences and cultural knowledge were listened to. As one non-Indigenous participant shared *"if you had the voice of an Elder, you had the voice of someone who had been experienced, a hospitalisation episode as a First Nations person and what was it that impacted on them? What made a difference? You know, some of those key things that send shivers up your spine to say, wow, I need to consider that"* [P300FNI].

Another participant shared that First Nations peoples' perspectives need to be embedded throughout the educational process rather than added superficially; *"it needs to be an explicit learning objective - can't bury the content in the sim – it has to be explicit and discussed"* [P600MI]. A non-Indigenous participant stated *"I don't think we pay anyone any more than lip service and I'm definitely guilty of that because I don't know where to start and I don't know how to actually go about doing it"* [P1100MNI].

Representation was viewed as important not only within simulation scenarios but also *"representation in the planning process"* [P900MI], facilitation, and evaluation. Participants consistently highlighted the value of involving Elders, for example *"Bringing in Elders helps students ask questions and identified students feel acknowledged"* [P2400FNI]. Cultural mentors and Community members were described as trusted knowledge holders whose lived experiences provided authenticity and credibility "*sometimes they [students] like to hear my stories or, you know, the things that have happened in my life and all that sort of thing, to give it that credibility"* [P2000FI]. The presence of Elders and cultural mentors was frequently associated with increased learner confidence, engagement, and feelings of

cultural safety. As one First Nations participant said, *"And I think just having that Elder there running the session made it feel culturally safe just within itself, just that"* [P900MI].

Participants also emphasised the importance of co-design and consultation, describing culturally safer simulation as a shared endeavor rather than an educator-led process. Reciprocal partnerships with communities were viewed as necessary to ensure scenarios reflected authentic experiences and avoided tokenistic representations of First Nations peoples and cultures. Underlying these discussions was a strong focus on relationality *"Relation building I think is so important and is really understated for sure"* [P1400FI]. As another First Nations participant stated, *"Good foundation and going slow to then go fast and making like how we touched on at the start, just with the relationship building and relationship first and then things will come after"* [P1700MI]. Participants frequently described yarning as*"[you] called it networking, we've always called it yarning"* [P2200FI], listening, and relationship-building as prerequisites for effective learning, suggesting that trust and connection must be established before deeper cultural learning can occur. Authentic stories, place-based identities, and opportunities for learners to contribute their own experiences further strengthened feelings of belonging and inclusion. One non-Indigenous participant described having a cultural mentor co-facilitate with them; *"It made me feel safe because I had someone of authenticity, and I'm not going to say authority, knowledge around how the Indigenous culture person would respond to certain questions and certain techniques that we do in a simulation scenario"* [P500MNI].

Alignment of Theme 1 to the 8 Ways of Knowing and Learning.

This theme demonstrated the strongest alignment with three elements of the 8 Ways elements of *Community Links, Story Sharing and Land Links*. Participants emphasised the

importance of involving Elders, cultural mentors, Community members, and people with lived experience in simulation design and facilitation. Authentic representation was viewed as emerging through reciprocal relationships and shared authority rather than through the inclusion of First Nations peoples' contributed content alone. The prominence of yarning, storytelling, and lived experience narratives reflected in the element of Story Sharing, whereby knowledge is constructed and transmitted through relationships and narratives. Similarly, repeated references to co-design and consultation resonated with the element of Community Links, which positions learning as accountable to and grounded within community priorities. Participants' descriptions of identity, belonging, and authenticity were also consistent with the element Land Links, which emphasises the inseparability of knowledge, place, and cultural context.

These findings suggest that culturally safer simulation is fundamentally relational, with learning emerging through authentic connections between learners, educators, Communities, and Country rather than through traditional content-driven approaches.

Theme 2: Cultural Humility as a Shared Journey

Participants conceptualised cultural humility as an ongoing process of self-reflection, learning, and personal growth rather than an endpoint or competency to be achieved; *"…once you know yourself, then you can start to understand someone else's experience and adopt this sense of what we call cultural humility"* [P600MI]. Discussions highlighted the importance of recognising one's own cultural assumptions, biases, and limitations while remaining open to alternative perspectives and ways of knowing; *"The only way to really understand each person's perspective is to actually ask those questions"* [P1900MI]. The shared journey was highlighted by a First Nations participant, "*It's easy enough to tick a box*

in those, but to really have an impact in the end, you need to make sure you've got the right governance around design and evaluation with that, which includes the people that you're expecting to have an impact on" [P600MI].

Participants described cultural humility as requiring both learners and educators to position themselves as co-learners. Rather than expecting certainty or expertise, culturally safer practice involved curiosity, respect; *"You know, so it's understanding some basic human principles around respect and regard*" [P300FNI]), and a willingness to acknowledge what one does not know; "*The best I can do is be vulnerable and say, here I am, I want to support this, and this is not my experience, but I would like to encourage that"* [P1200FNI]. This orientation was seen as particularly important when engaging with First Nations peoples' knowledges and experiences, where participants recognised the diversity and complexity of perspectives across communities; *"I think what we need to go back to in terms of designing our simulations is about that human regard, respect, communication that applies to every cultural perspective"* [P300FNI].

Reflexivity emerged as a critical mechanism for developing cultural humility. Participants frequently discussed the need to examine stereotypes, question assumptions, and remain attentive to how personal values and experiences shape interactions with others. Respectful communication, including *"allowing people to self-identify, don't force them to,"* [P1500MNI] and define their own identities, was viewed as an important expression of humility in practice.

Alignment of Theme 2 to the 8 Ways of Knowing and Learning.

The theme of cultural humility aligned most closely with the elements *Non-verbal Learning, Non-linear Processes*, and *Community Links.* Participants described cultural humility as an ongoing process of listening, observing, reflecting, and remaining open to multiple perspectives. Such descriptions mirror Yunkaporta's proposition (2009), that some of the deepest forms of learning occur beyond explicit instruction through observation, silence, reflection, and relationship.

Participants consistently positioned cultural learning as unfinished and evolving, reflecting the *Non-linear nature o*f First Nations peoples' pedagogies. Rather than representing a competency that could be mastered, cultural humility was conceptualised as an iterative process of self-examination and growth. Knowledge was understood to be distributed across learners, facilitators, Elders, and communities, reinforcing the collective and relational orientation of the element *Community Links*.

Viewed through the lens of 8 Ways, cultural humility may therefore be understood as a relational and reflective learning practice that privileges curiosity, reciprocity, and continuous learning over certainty and expertise.

Theme 3: Courage to Engage with Uncertainty

The findings raise a question about whose safety is prioritised when educators are encouraged to engage despite uncertainty. Support for educator learning should be considered alongside protection of First Nations participants from cultural harm and expectations to act as cultural experts.

Participants identified fear and uncertainty as significant barriers to culturally safer learning and practice. Many described apprehensions about making mistakes, causing offence, or

being perceived as culturally insensitive. Non-Indigenous participants shared this apprehension; *“Should I approach that? Should I say this? Should we dive into this discussion? Because you're afraid of saying and doing the wrong thing”* [P500MNI]. Another shared:

> *I think part of the tokenism also comes, yes, with the ticking of the box, but the reality is from previous experiences, there is also a fear factor from us…it's easier for me to almost kind of bury my head in the sand and go, if I ignore it, it will be picked up in another unit”* [P300FNI].

In response, a participant shared "*We don't want people not to be inquisitive and curious because they're worried about offending"* [P400FNI].

While these concerns were often well intentioned, participants suggested that fear could limit engagement, inhibit questioning, and ultimately reduce opportunities for meaningful learning, *“It's just a bit like this self-fulfilling prophecy. We can't do it because there's so many barriers, but then the students aren't prepared for the realities”* [P800FNI].

The theme captured tensions associated with navigating complex cultural issues where there may be no singular "correct" response. Participants acknowledged that First Nations peoples’ cultures, communities, and experiences are diverse, requiring learners and educators to become comfortable with ambiguity and incomplete knowledge. As one participant stated, *“It's okay to not know everything because even I [as an Indigenous person] do not know everything”* [P1700MI]. And another explained how identifying themselves, people assume they are the cultural expert in the room “*Where suddenly the black fellow in the room is the expert and they're just learning like with everyone else”*

[P600MI]. Cultural safety was therefore viewed as requiring a willingness to engage despite uncertainty. *"It's around empowering people to feel safe and secure to go down the path of talking about things, even though I'm not an Indigenous person or a cultural expert"* [P500MNI].

Discussions also highlighted the need to confront personal biases and examine the influence of dominant cultural perspectives; *"I've got to check, is this me? Is this a stereotype I am applying?*" [P400FNI]. Participants described the importance of recognising defensiveness, privilege, and assumptions that may hinder learning, while simultaneously creating space for individuals to learn from mistakes without fear of judgement; *"If I'm actually more up front about my bias of why I've said this, why I've said that, then I may learn from that a little bit better"* [P500MNI]. Several participants argued that educators play a key role in modelling vulnerability and demonstrating that uncertainty is a normal and expected part of cultural learning. For example: "*Everyone's got their own, and maybe do we explore our biases as well,"* and *"ensuring there's clear boundaries in that safe space, creating upfront so we can create opportunities to unpack people's biases in that space"* [P200MI].

Alignment of Theme 3 to the 8 ways of Knowing and Learning.

The theme of courage to engage with uncertainty demonstrated the strongest alignment with the elements *Non-linear Processes and Deconstruct/Reconstruct.* Participants frequently discussed fear of offending, uncertainty about cultural issues, and concerns regarding making mistakes. However, meaningful learning was described as requiring engagement with complexity rather than avoidance of it.

Yunkaporta's (2009) concept of *Non-linear Processes* challenges assumptions that learning follows a predictable or sequential pathway, instead recognising ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and the emergence of understanding over time. Participants' discussions regarding the diversity of First Nations peoples' experiences and the absence of a single "correct" answer closely reflected this.

Similarly, participant accounts for recognising stereotypes, questioning assumptions, and examining personal biases aligned with *Deconstruct/Reconstruct* processes. Learners were required to critically analyse pre-existing beliefs before developing more nuanced understandings of culturally safer practice. This iterative process of disruption and reconstruction appeared central to transformative learning within simulation contexts.

Theme 4: Creating Conditions for Culturally Safer Learning

Participants emphasised that culturally safer simulation did not occur by chance but depended upon intentional educational design and facilitation. Creating environments in which learners felt both psychologically and culturally safe was regarded as essential for meaningful engagement with sensitive and challenging topics.

Several factors were identified as contributing to culturally safe learning environments, including supportive facilitation; *"I guess, breaking it down into what can I do for you right now? My role as a facilitator is to ensure a safe environment"* [P1400FI], inclusive participation strategies, responsive pedagogies; *"If there's no yarning, there's no getting to know people"* [P1000FI]*),* and the involvement of Elders and cultural mentors; *"Bringing in Elders helps students ask questions and identified students feel acknowledged"* [P2400FNI]*.* Participants described how these factors created opportunities for learners to ask questions,

share perspectives, and engage in difficult conversations while feeling respected and supported.

Participants also recognised the importance of adapting facilitation approaches to account for diverse communication styles and cultural preferences. Concerns were raised about educational practices that unintentionally create shame or pressure, highlighting the need for flexibility and responsiveness in simulation design; *"Sometimes enforcing turn-taking is pressure and it's a shame factor for a lot of Indigenous people that you're going to ask me a question, oh my God. You know, so I think it's about collaborating a little bit more"* [P2000FI]. The learning environment was also key, *"artworks, throwovers, they had land in mind ….. harsh clinical lighting and the light walls make it very invasive…maybe pictures would make them feel safe and grounded if those images were around"* [P1900MI].

Active listening emerged as a recurring feature of culturally safe facilitation, with participants emphasising the importance of creating space for reflection, dialogue, and multiple perspectives; "*A lot of simulation people are role-playing, people are trying to put a context on it, but then at the end of it, we don't think we unpack it and let people process it"* [P500MNI]. These practices were perceived as strengthening learner engagement while simultaneously fostering cultural safety.

Alignment of Theme 4 to the 8 Ways of Knowing and Learning

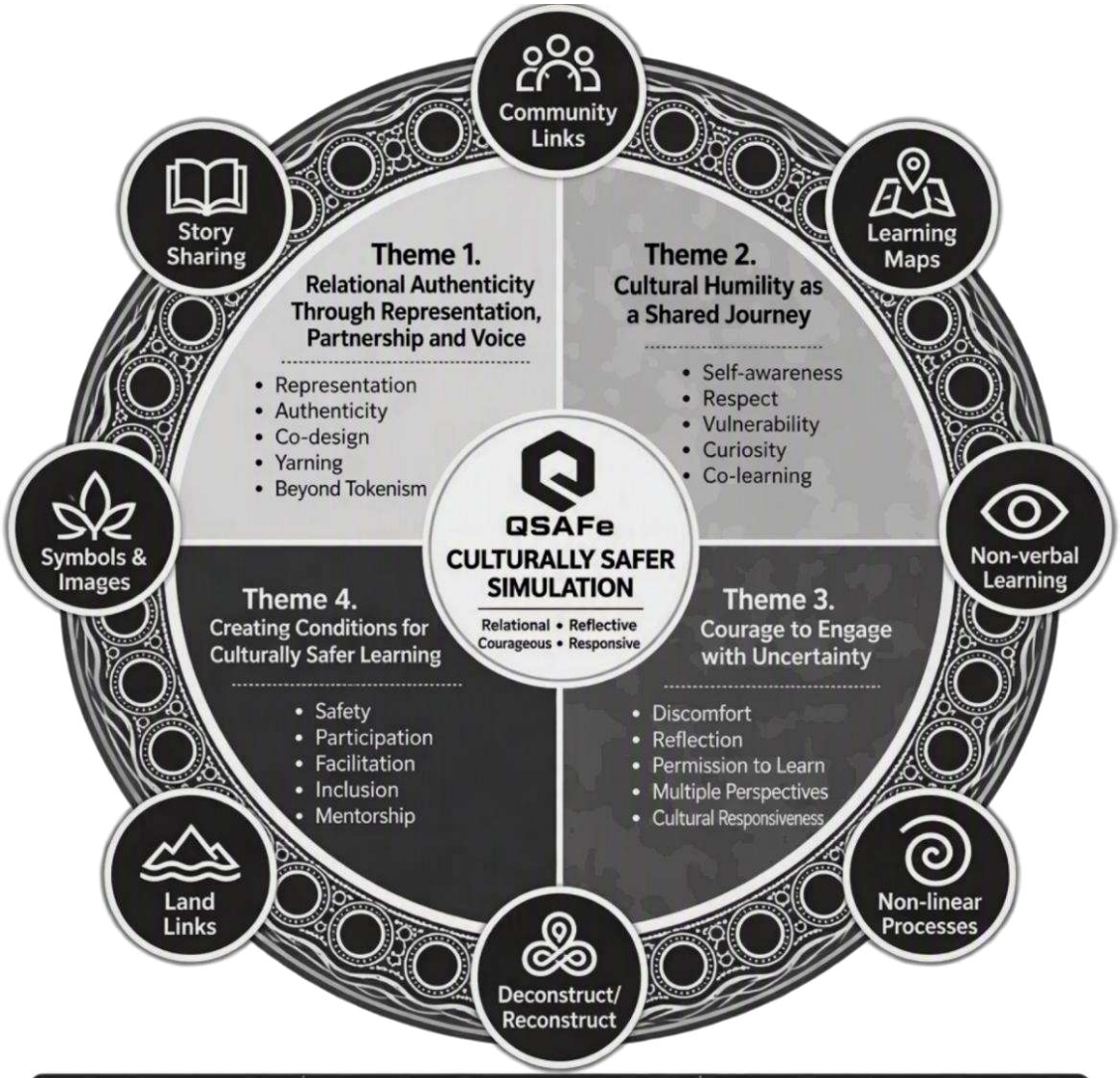
The theme of creating conditions for culturally safer learning aligned most closely with the elements of *Learning Maps, Deconstruct/Reconstruct, Story Sharing,* and *Community Links.* Participants identified pre-briefing, supportive facilitation, active listening, and culturally

responsive teaching approaches as essential for enabling engagement with sensitive cultural issues.

Learning Maps describe making the learning journey visible and supporting learners to understand where they are, where they are heading, and how they will navigate the process. This concept closely reflected participants' emphasis on preparing learners for difficult conversations and establishing culturally responsive learning environments.

Similarly, culturally safe facilitation appeared to involve processes of scaffolded learning consistent with *Deconstruct/Reconstruct* elements. Facilitators supported learners to unpack difficult concepts, explore diverse perspectives, and gradually develop more sophisticated understandings. Yarning, storytelling, and sharing lived experiences further reflected *Story Sharing* processes, while the involvement of Elders and cultural mentors reinforced *Community Links*.

Overall, the findings demonstrated strong conceptual alignment with the 8 Ways, particularly in participants' emphasis on relationality, yarning, co-design, community partnership, reflexivity, and learning through lived experience. Viewed through this lens, culturally safer simulation appears not merely to incorporate First Nations content, but to embody First Nations pedagogical processes.



Theme	Primary 8 Ways Pedagogical Alignment	Rationale
Relational Authenticity Through Representation, Partnership and Voice	Community Links, Story Sharing, Symbols & Images, Land Links	Emphasises Elders, lived experience, co-design, yarning, authentic narratives and community partnership, ensuring cultural knowledge is represented with integrity and authenticity.
Cultural Humility as a Shared Journey	Non-verbal Learning, Non-linear Processes, Community Links	Requires self-reflection, listening, respect for multiple perspectives, and learning through relationships rather than certainty or expertise.
Courage to Engage with Uncertainty	Non-linear Processes, Non-verbal Learning, Deconstruct/Reconstruct	Involves sitting with ambiguity, challenging assumptions, and learning through reflection, critical examination, and discomfort as part of growth.
Creating Conditions for Culturally Safer Learning	Learning Maps, Deconstruct/Reconstruct, Story Sharing, Community Links	Focuses on pedagogical design, facilitation, scaffolding difficult conversations, and creating safe and supportive pathways for culturally safer learning.

Source: QSAFe Culturally Safer Simulation Project. Adapted from Yunkaporta, T. (2009). *Aboriginal Pedagogies at the Cultural Interface. Alignment with the 8 Ways of Learning framework.*

Figure 2: **Emerged themes aligned to the 8-ways of Knowing** (AI generated image - Co-Pilot)

Discussion

This study explored considerations for co-designing culturally safer simulation with Australian First Nations peoples, current approaches to preparing nursing and midwifery students for culturally safer practice, strategies for integrating First Nations peoples' perspectives into simulation, and stakeholder perspectives on culturally safer learning environments. Four interconnected themes were identified: relational authenticity through representation, partnership and voice; cultural humility as a shared journey; courage to engage with uncertainty; and creating conditions for culturally safe learning. Collectively, the findings suggest that culturally safer simulation is not achieved through the inclusion of First Nations peoples' content alone. Rather, it is shaped through relational, reflective and community-engaged approaches in which cultural safety is understood as a shared responsibility.

Participants also described cultural humility as an ongoing process of reflection, relationship and learning, rather than a competency that can be acquired and completed. This aligns with simulation literature that has increasingly positioned cultural humility as an alternative to approaches based primarily on cultural knowledge or competence (28). Mitchell (29), similarly highlights the value of simulation for developing self-awareness, adaptive communication and reflection on culturally complex interactions. Our findings extend this work by shifting attention from what simulation can develop within individual learners to the cultural and relational conditions established through its design and facilitation. Cultural humility was therefore evident not only in learners' responses, but in educators' willingness to recognise limitations, seek guidance, engage with uncertainty and share responsibility for creating culturally safer learning.

This distinction is particularly important when considering the transferability of existing cultural humility approaches developed in other contexts. For example, Prebriefing for Cultural Humility (30) provides a structured approach to preparing learners for sensitive conversations through establishing ground rules, acknowledging complexity, creating a safe psychological environment and defining expectations for engagement. Such approaches provide valuable principles for simulation educators; however, the present findings suggest that generic cultural humility strategies cannot, by themselves, account for the specific historical, relational and cultural context of First Nations peoples in Australia. Rather than rejecting existing approaches, the findings point to the need for contextual adaptation and, importantly, involvement of First Nations peoples in determining what culturally safe simulation should look like within Australian contexts. The significance of co-design therefore lies not simply in adapting existing simulation strategies, but in creating space for First Nations peoples' knowledge, relationships, perspectives and pedagogies to shape the educational design itself.

The findings further suggest that culturally safer simulation requires conditions that support learners and educators to engage with uncertainty and discomfort, hallmarks of psychologically safe environments (31). Participants identified yarning, storytelling, extended prebriefing and debriefing, active listening, reflection and culturally responsive facilitation as interconnected approaches that can support this process. This is consistent with literature describing cultural humility as an ongoing, reflective practice and highlighting the importance of psychologically safer environments for engaging with potentially uncomfortable cultural conversations (28, 29). However, the findings suggest that psychological safety should not be confused with avoiding discomfort (32). Rather, culturally

safer learning may require carefully facilitated opportunities to encounter uncertainty, examine assumptions and engage respectfully with perspectives that challenge existing understandings.

Although the 8 Ways of Knowing and Learning is well known in the educational literature (26, 27, 33) its application within simulation-based education has received little attention in the published literature. The findings of this study suggest that the framework offers a useful approach for understanding and interpreting simulation practices through an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lens. Specifically, it supported thematic analysis and discussion by highlighting relational, experiential, narrative, and community-centred dimensions of learning, demonstrating the value of first Nations' frameworks in shaping simulation research alongside First Nations researchers and participants.

The four themes were further strengthened through the 8 Ways of Knowing and Learning (26), which provided a First Nations peoples' pedagogical lens through which participants' experiences could be understood. The elements of Community Links, Story Sharing and Land Links highlighted the relational foundations of learning; Non-verbal Learning and Non-linear Processes illuminated alternative ways of engaging with knowledge and uncertainty; Deconstruct/Reconstruct supported critical reflection and transformation; and Learning Maps informed intentional educational design. The 8 Ways therefore appeared not simply as an additional framework applied to the findings, but as a means of understanding how culturally safer simulation may be enacted through relational and First Nations peoples' ways of knowing. This finding reinforces the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to cultural safety and instead creating educational processes in which relevant First Nations peoples' knowledge systems can inform the design of learning.

Taken together, these findings position co-design as more than a method for developing culturally appropriate simulation content. Co-design may function as a mechanism through which relationships, representation, cultural humility and shared responsibility are embedded across simulation design and delivery. This shifts the focus from asking whether a simulation contains appropriate cultural content to asking whose knowledge and perspectives have shaped the simulation, what relationships underpin its development, and what conditions have been created for culturally safer learning. Such a shift has implications for how simulation quality and cultural safety are conceptualised, assessed and supported within Australian nursing and midwifery education.

Implications for practice

For educators, cultural safety should be considered throughout the simulation development process rather than addressed through the addition of First Nations peoples' content alone. Educators should consider whose knowledge, and perspectives inform the simulation, how people and cultures are represented, and where opportunities exist for relationship building, reflection and co-design. Where educators do not hold the cultural knowledge required, engaging with relevant First Nations peoples' communities and cultural advisors is an important component of responsible simulation design (9, 34). A person-centred approach is also important: a simulation representing one person's experience should not be expected to represent all First Nations peoples.

Faculty development should extend beyond cultural awareness to include cultural humility, reflexivity and the facilitation of difficult conversations. Participants identified educator preparedness as important, particularly in navigating issues of culture, power and inequity. Educators may therefore require support to recognise the limits of their own knowledge,

manage uncertainty and model vulnerability rather than feeling compelled to provide definitive answers (35). This capacity may be as important as acquiring additional cultural knowledge.

Relational approaches should be intentionally incorporated into simulation design and delivery. Yarning, storytelling, place-based introductions, extended prebriefing and debriefing, and active listening may provide opportunities to establish trust and belonging before learners engage with challenging scenarios. Relationship-building should therefore be considered a core component of simulation pedagogy rather than an optional preparatory activity.

Attention should be given to participation structures that may inadvertently create shame, exclusion or discomfort. Participants identified practices such as requiring self-identification or using rigid turn-taking approaches often included during debriefing, as potential barriers to culturally safe participation. Flexible opportunities for engagement, culturally responsive facilitation and multiple avenues for contribution may better support diverse learners.

The account of a First Nations participant being treated as the cultural expert also highlights a potential burden of cultural teaching. Proposed involvement of Elders, cultural mentors and First Nations learners should recognise local cultural authority, voluntary participation, appropriate remuneration and the right to decline requests to disclose personal experiences or provide cultural guidance.

Finally, cultural safety should be embedded across simulation programs rather than confined to isolated First Nations peoples' health scenarios. The emphasis on relationships, humility, reflexivity, communication and uncertainty suggests that culturally safer practice

represents a broader educational orientation that can inform simulation across clinical contexts. Viewed through Yunkaporta's 8 Ways, First Nations peoples' pedagogies may also strengthen established simulation practices by reinforcing relational learning, storytelling, multiple perspectives and reflective inquiry. Importantly, these principles need not constitute an additional layer of educational content; they may deepen how existing simulation practices and best practice recommendations are conceptualised and enacted (36, 37). Use of these frameworks should be encouraged in undergraduate and post graduate healthcare curricula. Together, these findings provide a foundation for further development of QSAFe and associated resources to support educators in designing, facilitating and evaluating culturally safer simulation.

Table 1: Examples of alignment of Yunkaporta's 8 Ways to Simulation best practice

8 Ways of Knowing and Learning	**Simulation Best Practice**
Story Sharing	Relational prebriefing Narrative debriefing
Community Links	Co-design and stakeholder engagement Co-facilitation with cultural mentor/knowledge keeper
Non-Verbal Learning	Observation and communication
Learning Maps	Prebriefing and learning journeys Educator self-reflections to understand positionality and biases
Deconstruct/Reconstruct	Reflective and inquiry-based debriefing
Non-Linear Processes	Learner-centred inquiry/debriefing
Symbols and images	Co-design and stakeholder engagement Learner-centred inquiry-based debriefing Imagery to enhance reflection Relational
Land Links	Simulations outside of the simulation lab Co-design and stakeholder engagement Simulated participant/patient details and back story reflect community and land connection: Example – Name: Uncle Jack Murray; Wiradjuri man Connection to Country: Dubbo region Support person: Eldest niece present

Implications for Research

The findings point to several priorities for future research. First, further work is needed to develop and test conceptual models of culturally safer simulation that account for the relational, contextual, and co-constructed nature of cultural safety. Second, studies exploring the perspectives of First Nations students, community members, and Elders would strengthen understanding of how culturally safer simulation is experienced by different stakeholders. Third, future research should examine the effectiveness of specific pedagogical strategies, such as yarning approaches, co-facilitation with Elders, and culturally responsive debriefing methods, in promoting culturally safe learning outcomes.

A key contribution of this study is the proposition that culturally safer simulation may be understood not as a set of educational techniques but as a relational process characterised by authenticity, humility, courage, and intentional design. Future scholarship should continue to explore how these elements interact to support transformative learning and culturally safer healthcare practice.

Limitations and strengths

Several limitations are acknowledged. The study was conducted within the Australian healthcare education context, and therefore findings may not be directly transferable to other countries, healthcare systems, or Indigenous populations. As participation was voluntary, it is possible that individuals with a particular interest in cultural safety or

simulation were overrepresented, introducing the potential for selection bias. As with most studies designed in this way, generalisability is a limitation.

A key strength of this study was the use of Indigenous research approaches, ensuring First Nations voices, knowledges, and ways of knowing, being and doing were prioritised and embedded throughout the research process. Establishing a First Nations peoples' reference group strengthened First Nations governance, cultural integrity, and the relevance of findings to educational practice. The APAR supported collaborative interpretation of stakeholder perspectives to inform future resource development. Inclusion of participants from diverse health and education backgrounds further enhanced the applicability of findings and supported the development of a framework grounded in both simulation best practice and cultural safety principles.

Conclusion

This study highlights that culturally safer simulation is not defined by the inclusion of First Nations peoples' content alone, but by the relationships, values, and processes that underpin its design and delivery. The findings demonstrate that authenticity, cultural humility, and culturally responsive learning environments are central to creating meaningful educational experiences that support culturally safer practice.

By positioning co-design as a relational process rather than simply a development strategy, the study emphasises the importance of First Nations peoples' voices, knowledges, and perspectives in shaping simulation education. QSAFe offers a foundation for embedding these principles within nursing and midwifery simulation at the design stage, supporting

educators to move beyond cultural awareness toward more reflective, relational, and culturally safer approaches to learning. Ultimately, fostering culturally safer simulation has the potential to contribute to a healthcare workforce better prepared to provide respectful, equitable, and culturally safer care for First Nations peoples.

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