



# Inclusive Research: A *Niu* Approach to Participant Recruitment in the Pacific

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Pacific research that explores sensitive health topics like domestic violence would benefit from a new approach to participant recruitment. Few Pacific-centred recruitment methods exist, and standard recruitment practices may not reflect the cultural contexts of researched communities. This In Brief presents a *niu* ('coconut' in many Pacific languages) metaphor for inclusive Pacific recruitment that explicitly centres the needs of the most vulnerable within a research project.<sup>1</sup>

## Pacific research is inclusive research

Pacific research is inclusive by nature (Ponton 2018). Founded upon the philosophies of human nature and interpersonal relationality (Sanga 2004), it positions relationships and cultural values within the contexts of researched environments. It considers relationships between the research, the researcher and the researched (Tupuola 2000) and is an active movement towards decolonising research (Smith 2021).

Inclusive research is defined by similar parameters (Nind 2014). It also seeks to empower historically disenfranchised groups and provide them with tools to actively participate in and benefit from research. Few Pacific research frameworks outline a method of participant recruitment, let alone explicitly justify their links to inclusive practices. It is timely to theorise new Pacific-centred metaphors for approaching participant recruitment. We acknowledge this perspective may not represent all our diverse Pacific cultures.

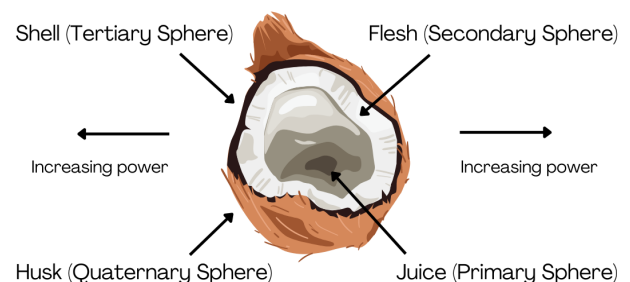
## A Pacific approach to participant recruitment

Pacific research often reframes the stages of research within a cultural context or by reconceptualising cultural artefacts that demonstrate the deep intrinsic relationships between Pacific peoples and the natural world. Researchers use well-known metaphors such as the *kakala* (Tongan garland of flowers), *tivaevae* (Cook Islands stitched quilts) and *vanua* (Fijian concept of land) to ground their studies in Pacific philosophy. We present a reframing of participant recruitment using another Pacific artefact: the *niu*.

A *niu* is a fibrous, one-seeded member of the palm tree family endemic to the Indo-Pacific region. Each aspect of the *niu* has a functional role in the lives of Pacific peoples: the juice and flesh as sustenance and hydration, the shell as a cup, commonly for kava, and the husk as a planting medium or rope for canoes (*va'a*). In a research context, the *niu* can be used as a metaphor for participant recruitment. The multiple layers of the *niu* describe subgroups of participants within a sample population and their degree of vulnerability to the research issue in question.

Figure 1. A *niu* approach to participant recruitment in the Pacific

### A *Niu* Approach



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Source: Authors.

**Juice (Primary Sphere)** The juice represents participants directly associated with the research topic. In domestic violence research, these participants would be victims/survivors or perpetrators/respondents. For other research issues, these could be youth, students, women, people with disabilities, elders or employees. Unfortunately, knowledge of the social issue does not always equate to power. As such, these voices tend to be the most vulnerable within a population, with little power to effect change. Under the *niu* approach, the goal of research should be to amplify these voices. These most vulnerable participants should be prioritised during recruitment,

because they best understand the issues at play and would benefit most from the research.

**Flesh (Secondary Sphere)** The flesh represents participants closely associated with the research topic. In domestic violence, these would be household members witnessing but not directly subject to the violence. This group has an understanding of the issue and corroborates the narratives of the primary group. They should be given the next priority during recruitment.

**Shell (Tertiary Sphere)** The hard shell represents participants indirectly associated with the topic. In domestic violence, these would be friends, neighbours, health professionals, teachers or other relatives aware of the household situation. This group has greater social power given their status in the society but may or may not use it to effect change. Their voices are important but not a priority to understand the research issue.

**Husk (Quaternary Sphere)** The surrounding husk represents structures or people that protect and privilege the voices of the community. In domestic violence, these would be village leaders or chiefs, of whom it is customary to ask permission to access the community. These leaders can often provide insight into the community's dynamics but do not have direct association with the issue. This group has the most power to effect change. They may be included in participant recruitment but not prioritised when collecting, analysing or reporting data.

### Symbolism of the *niu*

Although *niu* is a natural artefact shared across many Pacific Islands, its symbolism and mythology differ depending on locality. These nuanced perspectives are important to consider, just as the heterogeneity of Pacific populations must be considered when engaging in Pacific research. Similarly, just as *niu* juice tastes different depending on the age of the coconut, each community has a different composition of people, further influenced by the novelty of the research topic. Researchers must navigate this to ensure they prioritise the most vulnerable voices rather than the loudest.

Cracking the *niu* requires skill; otherwise, it results in a jagged edge. Similarly, researchers must engage participants with skill or may be met with backlash. Participants should be approached with respect, especially if the topic is considered *tapu* (forbidden) or sensitive like domestic violence. This ensures the most vulnerable participants are protected and feel comfortable sharing their narratives. Researchers should consider the protocols governing their data collection and analysis and incorporate Pacific cultural values (e.g. *vā* (relational space), *faka'apa'apa* (respect)) where possible. This approach would work best in conjunction with other Pacific research methodologies, and we support a multipronged approach to research design.

The *niu* shell can be fragile and break if handled without care. Similarly, researchers must be aware of cultural nuances and unseen power dynamics that could influence participant recruitment. For example, potential participants may be concerned about confidentiality or shy (*mā*) if the research is considered *tapu*. Furthermore, increased knowledge does not equate with increased power. Like in the example of domestic violence, participants at the centre of the social issue often have the least power to make decisions. Research should be considered an opportunity to elevate the power of the most vulnerable participants.

### A *niu* approach

Pacific philosophy is centred in a values-bound axiom — relationships are foremost in the lives of Pacific peoples (Sanga 2004). A *niu* approach enables researchers to prioritise their relationship with the most vulnerable members of Pacific communities. The *niu* metaphor recognises that the hierarchical nature of Pacific societies results in individuals experiencing social issues to varying degrees. This is true inclusive research practice and the foundation of Pacific research.

### Endnote

1. Note the distinction between our *niu* approach and the QUT *Niu* Framework designed for tertiary student retention and engagement (Fa'avale et al. 2016).

### Author notes

The authors are emerging researchers from across the Pacific region and recipients of an attendance scholarship to the ANU Pacific Research Colloquium 2022.

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