

Fact Sheet:



Aboriginal Participatory Action Research

A Collaborative, Indigenous-Led Approach to Research and Change

What is APAR?

Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) is a transformative, strengths-based research method grounded in **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, cultural practices, and worldviews**. It is designed to:



Empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by prioritising their voices and lived experiences.



Build **self-determination** and strengthen the **social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB)** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families, and communities.



Heal the impacts of colonisation by reclaiming and affirming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing.

APAR extends beyond traditional research by **focusing on action and collaboration**. It helps Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities identify challenges, explore solutions, and take steps to improve their wellbeing and self-determination.

Why is APAR important?



Decolonising Research

- Research has often been imposed on Aboriginal communities, ignoring their values and knowledge. APAR shifts this dynamic by putting Aboriginal voices and priorities first and challenging Western dominance in research with critical thinking.
- It exposes and resists systems of **epistemic injustice** (the devaluing of Indigenous knowledge) and supports **cultural renewal and epistemic self-determination**.

Empowering Communities

- APAR enables communities to co-create solutions that reflect their needs and aspirations.
- It ensures research findings lead to practical, meaningful change.
- APAR values lived experience and local knowledge as equal to, or more important than, external expertise.

Strengthening Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB)

- SEWB is a holistic view of health that connects body, mind, spirit, family, community, culture, and Country and recognises social, cultural, political and historical determinants of health.
- APAR supports SEWB by addressing both historical trauma and the strengths of cultural identity and community connection.

"In this research we are presented only as objects of curiosity and subjects of research, to be seen but not asked, heard, or respected"
(Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003)

Key Principles of APAR?

APAR is guided by principles that respect and prioritise Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural values, and ways of working:

Indigenous Leadership and Governance

Aboriginal people lead the research process, ensuring it reflects their priorities and ways of knowing.

Respect and Reciprocity

Relationships between researchers and communities are built on trust, shared learning, and mutual benefit.

Collaboration at All Stages

Communities are involved in every step—designing the research, gathering data, and applying the results.

Culturally Safe Practices

Methods like yarning, storytelling, and cultural workshops are used to collect information in respectful and meaningful ways.

Action-Oriented Research

APAR ensures that findings are applied to create tangible improvements in wellbeing and quality of life.

The APAR Process

The main elements of the APAR process are:

1. Indigenous leadership/governance and establishment of local Indigenous community reference group.
2. Implementation of the nine guiding principles drawn from the landmark *Ways Forward* report (1995).
3. Enactment of the *NHMRC (2018)* and *AIATSIS (2020)* Indigenous ethical guidelines.
4. Involvement of Aboriginal community researchers for “the co-construction of narratives without silencing, co-opting, or distorting community voices.”
5. Localised knowledge generation. The enactment of a research process that respects Indigenous peoples as experts-by-experience.
6. Community level feedback and dissemination.

Figure 2: The four interconnected components of APAR



Core Concepts in APAR?

APAR draws on several important Indigenous frameworks and philosophies:

Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST):

A critical standpoint and way of understanding how power shapes knowledge, prioritising the perspectives of those with lived experience.

- IST is a political theory or strategy aimed at understanding how power works by learning from the standpoints of the less powerful (Martin et al., 2002).
- Nakata (1998) argues that IST as an approach to knowledge production that allows Indigenous people to navigate the ‘cultural interface’ – the contested domain of competing Indigenous and Western knowledge systems.
- Minniecon et al (2007) explore how power operates in the construction of knowledge and to “construct knowledge that exposes and undermines the social relations that now divide us” (Sprague, 2001).

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS):

Local knowledge that is rooted in place, community, and culture, passed through generations.

- A central tactic used by colonisers was the suppression, outlaw, and marginalisation of existing IKS. Colonisation replaced systems that had enabled communities to thrive for centuries with oppressive knowledge systems of White Supremacy. This process has been referred to as epistemic injustice, epistemic violence, and epistemic erasure.

Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRM):

Indigenous research is a form of resistance to centuries of colonial domination and differs from Western research in both purpose and process. IRM reveal knowledge, rebalance power, decolonise, and heal through:

- Prioritising Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.
- Contextual reflection – situating researchers and Indigenous peoples in the research process. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers are required to engage in self-reflexive work to map their relationality and formulate a critical standpoint.
- Inclusion of Indigenous peoples in ways that are culturally respectful, reciprocal, decolonising, and self-determining. IRMs acknowledge the value of lived experience in informing Indigenous Knowledge Systems, producing knowledges that: challenge mainstream concepts, provide strategies and solutions, implement tools and methods that support critical reflexivity, equalise power relations and disrupt White privilege.

Decolonisation:

A process of dismantling colonial structures, restoring Indigenous knowledge, and addressing power imbalances. Decolonisation is the critical standpoint within IRM.

- For non-Indigenous peoples, decolonisation requires the same understanding of historical truths as well as the unpacking and recognition of the unearned power and privilege associated with colonial legacy. To decolonise their work, they need to reflect deeply on how they exercise power and privilege in their work, relationships, and neighbourhoods, and ensure their work is grounded in genuine respectful relatedness with Indigenous peoples with a goal of epistemological equivalence and critical consciousness.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB):

A holistic framework that connects individual, family, and community health with cultural and spiritual wellbeing.

2010 - 2012

1 'Hear Our Voices' **Kimberley Empowerment Project:**

This project details the methodology and findings of a research project undertaken in response to the high number of Aboriginal suicides in the Kimberley.



- ← Responding to community identified need
- ← Indigenous Leadership and Governance
- ← Respect and Reciprocity
- ← Collaboration at All Stages
- ← Culturally Safe Practices

2012 - 2014

3 'Voices of the people' **National Empowerment Project (NEP):**

A community-led initiative that focused on mental health and suicide prevention by empowering local leaders and building stronger connections to culture.



- ← Aboriginal community researchers
- ← Localised knowledge generation
- ← Community level feedback and dissemination
- ← Building Indigenous knowledge systems e.g., the SEWB Model

Commencing 2025

5 **Youth Empowerment Project**

High number of Aboriginal suicides in the Kimberley

1999 - 2006

2 **Kimberley Empowerment, Leadership, and Healing Program (KELHP):**

This program strengthened leadership and cultural healing in Aboriginal communities, helping people reconnect with their identity and take action for change.

2012 - TODAY

- ← Decolonising and holistic SEWB Framework
- ← Enactment of core values and guiding principles
- ← Indigenous Research Methodology
- ← Action oriented research

= tangible improvement in individual and community wellbeing and self determination

2014 - TODAY

4 **Cultural, Social, and Emotional Wellbeing (CSEWB) Program:**

This program strengthens community self determination using decolonising APAR approaches to empower individuals and promote SEWB through culture.

APAR in practice

Some examples from our work

