

Empowering people by prioritising their voices and lived experiences



Prof Pat Dudgeon

Research is an important facet of our work at the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSIISP) and Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing (TIMHWP), at the University of Western Australia. We promote frameworks and practices to improve the wellbeing and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However, this can only be achieved through research methods which prioritise Indigenous voices and focus on collaboration and co-creation with Aboriginal community members. One of the methodologies we use is Aboriginal Participatory Action Research, or APAR. This is a collaborative, Indigenous-led approach to research which strengthens Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) and builds self-determination, while challenging Western methodologies in research.

What is APAR?

APAR is a transformative and strengths-based research method. It is grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge systems, cultural practices, and worldviews.

This research method is designed to achieve three key things; empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by prioritising their voices and lived experiences; build self-determination and strengthen the SEWB of First Nations individuals, families, and communities; and heal the impacts of colonisation by reclaiming and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing. Empowerment is necessary for First Nations communities. It contributes to building self-esteem and encourages participation in decision-making. This can positively influence self-determination, which according to the Australian Human Rights Commission, is 'concerned with the fundamental right of people



A collaborative CSEWB workshop at UWA, yarning about needs of community.

to shape their own lives.'

APAR extends beyond traditional research through its focus on action and collaboration. It can help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities identify challenges, find solutions, and take steps towards improving their wellbeing and self-determination. All of this is crucial to closing the gap in health and mental health which lies between First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

Why is APAR important?

APAR plays a fundamental role in decolonising research, empowering communities, and strengthening SEWB for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Historically, research methodologies have been imposed on Aboriginal communities, ignoring their values and knowledge. As Karen Martin Booran Mirrabooa puts it, "we are present only as objects of curiosity and subjects of research, to be seen but not asked, heard or respected." APAR aims to shift this dynamic

through putting Aboriginal voices and priorities first, while challenging the dominance of Western research. It exposes and resists systems of epistemic injustice, instead supporting cultural renewal and self-determination.

Through enabling communities to decide on solutions which reflect their needs and aspirations, APAR can empower communities and ensure the research results lead to practical and meaningful change. Lived experience and local knowledge are treated as equal to, or more important than, external expertise. This ensures the results strongly reflect the needs of the community.

APAR also addresses both historical trauma and the strengths of cultural identity and community connection, allowing this approach to prioritise strengthening SEWB, which is the holistic view of health connecting body, mind, spirit, family, community, culture, and Country.

Key principles

APAR is guided by five key principles to ensure researchers respect and prioritise Indigenous

knowledge systems, culture, values, and ways of working. These are; Indigenous Leadership and Governance; Respect and Reciprocity; Collaboration at All Stages; Culturally Safe Practices; and Action-Oriented Research.

The principles form the foundation from which APAR can build, ensuring researchers work in a culturally safe, respectful manner and engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in all stages of the research project.

APAR in practice

It is the ambition of CBPATSIISP and TIMHWP to use APAR and similar Indigenous-led approaches in all research projects. One of the projects we have worked on which uses an APAR method is the National Empowerment Project (NEP).

The NEP was a community-led initiative from 2012 to 2014, which focused on mental health and suicide prevention through empowering local leaders and building stronger connections to culture. This project had Indigenous governance through Aboriginal community researchers, and prioritised

localised knowledge generation. Community was involved in all stages of the research project, providing feedback and helping in the dissemination of tangible outcomes. The NEP also prioritised building Indigenous knowledge systems, such as the SEWB Model. The use of APAR in this project enabled the research outcomes to be seen immediately at a community level.

APAR is a foundational approach to research and change, prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and working to empower, build and heal in our communities. In all research projects involving our communities, it is essential to look beyond Western methods and to give precedence to the methods which prioritise our voices, our needs, our knowledge systems and our cultural practices. In this way, we will truly decolonise research, empower communities and strengthen SEWB for our Mob.

For more information on APAR, check out our factsheet here: <https://cbpatsisp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/APAR-Fact-Sheet.pdf>