

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Sitting in Many Camps—Innovative Approaches and Methods for First Nations-Led Research Into Indigenous Peacebuilding

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## ABSTRACT

In 2021, a desktop review was conducted of published references to First Nations peoples' approaches to conflict and its management in Australia (Project Stage One), culminating in a report published in 2024. This article focuses on Project Stage Two, a complex, innovative research undertaking building on the findings of Stage One, and being developed and implemented as a First Nations-led project. It describes a fully collaborative research approach to co-designing, with First Nations peoples, multi-method techniques for collecting, analysing, interpreting and disseminating research information and outcomes on their approaches to conflict and its management. The approach relies on First Nations' protocols, methodologies and knowledges, as well as research principles such as intellectual humility, cultural responsiveness and respect. The project is guided by the principles and protocols relevant to First Nations research as provided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and protocols from the University of Newcastle. The Lead Researcher in this project is a First Nations woman, and the Project Team includes non-First Nations researchers.

## 1 | Introduction

There is enormous work to be done to truly demonstrate how First Nations can become the architects of their solutions again, in rebuilding their governances, problem solving systems to recreate cohesive communities and security, wellbeing, futures and those of the nation. We must demonstrate

on a contemporary level that the tools for self-determination, human rights and natural justice are held in dispute resolution and conflict management systems, it is our only way out of the struggle.

(Bishop 2024, unpublished personal email)

In 2021, with limited grant funding, a Project Team at the University of Newcastle, Australia, conducted a desktop review

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(‘the review’) of First Nations peoples’ approaches to conflict and its management, including published descriptions of systems, processes, techniques and skills. Stage One, a large review project on First Nations approaches to peacekeeping and peacemaking (‘the project’), culminated in the report, *Gathering Food for Thought—First Nations Approaches to Peacebuilding and Peacemaking in Australia* (‘the GFFT report’, ‘the Report’) (Bishop, Boyle, et al. 2024).

This article explains the project’s importance in modern Australia, exploring key issues in research involving First Nations peoples. It briefly describes Stage One’s findings and recommendations for what happens next, and introduces the collaborative First Nations-led approach that is being taken in Stage Two of the project. Key to that approach is working with First Nations collaborators to co-design multi-method techniques for collecting, analysing, interpreting and disseminating quantitative data and qualitative information about First Nations peoples’ approaches to conflict and its management. Stage Two will also explore the influences of community Elders, other leaders and women on those approaches and the flow-on effects for community cohesion and governance. In developing its innovative co-design, the Project Team draws on the history of research in this field as well as the stated preferences of First Nations peoples.

Across all societies, language is central to knowledge and culture, its meaning deriving from ‘culturally agreed-upon conventions for how ... words are used and interpreted’ and from their historical development and use within that culture (Tannen 2014, 354). The interweaving of language, culture and knowledge creates an inherent ethos for First Nations peoples (Graham 2023) with language providing the vehicle for people to engage with, relate to and perceive the world. As in other societies, First Nations’ languages have evolved over time to encompass new technologies and experiences, reflecting both continuity and adaptation. However, First Nations knowledge systems and epistemologies are often misunderstood or poorly articulated, leaving their standpoints and worldviews unrecognised (Foley 2003). Historically, ethnologists and anthropologists have shaped their narratives without recognising the foundational role of language in preserving ancient knowledge (Bishop 2022), and, in many contexts, the languages have been actively denied (Tuhiwai Smith 2021). This project acknowledges the inseparable relationship between First Nations languages and knowledge systems, where language is a vital vessel for carrying cultural knowledge, worldviews and deep connections to land. The project seeks to honour how these relationships sustain and shape First Nations ways of knowing.

In research involving First Nations peoples, transparency is crucial—not just about what is being done, but *how* it is being done. This project is informed by and follows guiding principles and protocols that are relevant to First Nations research and are provided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS 2022) and the University of Newcastle (2023a, 2023b).

In this article, the words Indigenous and First Nations are used. ‘Indigenous’ is used in the context of more intimate work or points, whereas ‘First Nations’ is used to set out the broader

focus and the Project Team’s recognition that land, peoples, languages and cultures will always be tied to unique sovereignty.

## 2 | Why This Project Matters

Research, both in Australia and abroad, shows clear links between social breakdown among First Nations peoples and the rise in antisocial behaviours, such as substance abuse and various legal offences, including violence, by both adults and youth. Inevitably, increased apprehension by enforcement bodies increases the likelihood of incarceration (ATSI Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000; Atkinson 2002; Langton et al. 1991; Reil et al. 2022; Roscoe and Godfrey 2022; Simpson 1993). Increased incarceration continues to deprive communities of their members, further eroding social cohesion and leading to a loss of collective and individual identity (ATSI Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000; Atkinson 2002; Australian Law Reform Commission [ALRC] 2017; Edwige and Gray 2021). This effectively prevents self-determination (Keating 1992), resulting in further antisocial behaviour and offending (ATSI Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000; ALRC 2017; Edwige and Gray 2021; Matoba 2022; Reil et al. 2022; Simpson 1993). It becomes an untenable cycle of social and cultural breakdown. By focusing on positive, First Nations-led conflict resolution and management, social and cultural cohesion can be supported and self-determination can be enabled.

## 3 | History of Research in This Field

This project is situated in two fields of research, one being the field of dispute management, specifically First Nations peoples’ approaches to conflict and to its management. The GFFT report (discussed further below) suggests that, in this field, most studies are conducted by researchers with a western focus, relying on techniques and measures known to be designed to meet Western needs and preferences (Datta 2018; Foley 2003; Nakata 2008; Simonds and Christopher 2013). For example, the GFFT report finds that, on the whole, dispute resolution programmes and services are imposed on First Nations communities with limited government funding, and with an expectation that evaluations focus on the effective use of that funding, including whether it should be continued. There has been limited (if any) consideration of how communities might choose to measure such a programme’s effectiveness—or any effect the programme/service might have on the community.

The second field of research in this project concerns First Nations peoples’ roles and participation in research that affects them, a complex and relatively controversial area that often ignores the cultures, methodologies and knowledges of First Nations peoples themselves. The literature shows that there has been limited full collaboration with First Nations people in research that affects them (Ali et al. 2022; Cunningham 2000; Foley 2009; Hall and Tandon 2017a; Martin and Mirraboopu 2009; Nakata 2008; Nakata and Maddison 2019; Ryder et al. 2020; Simonds and Christopher 2013), and they have been afforded few opportunities to enable their own preferences, interests and expertise to influence the design of such studies or to incorporate any culturally specific protocols

and methodologies. This includes the research design and approach; the nature of the information being collected; how it will be collected; how the information will be analysed; where final findings and reports will be distributed; and who has sovereignty over the research information.

The literature from First Nations researchers and commentators suggests that it is impossible for conventionally designed research to provide insight into First Nations peoples' traditional and contemporary approaches to most societal issues, including conflict and its management (Atkinson et al. 2021; Cunningham 2000; Datta 2018; Foley 2009; Nakata 2008; Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022). The key factor said to underlie this situation is the colonisation of research which prevents the incorporation of First Nations peoples' knowledges, methodologies, protocols, preferences, cultures, languages and ideas.

Drawing on the work of First Nations researchers and commentators, the rest of this section explores these issues. It foreshadows an approach that places First Nations peoples at the heart of studies that involve and affect them.

### 3.1 | Decolonising Research

Although there are many explanations and definitions of colonised, or colonist research, this article relies on the deep-seated assumptions (i) that conventional Western, or mainstream, knowledge and methods are the 'only objective, true science' (Simonds and Christopher 2013, 2185), and (ii) that First Nations peoples' knowledges are therefore 'denigrated ... as folklore or myth' (Simonds and Christopher 2013, 2185; Bishop 2022). In colonised research, Western values are dominant, as are Western orientations and interpretations of key concepts, such as time, place and community (Tuhiwai Smith 2021). These impose specialist language and create denigrating comparisons that entrench colonial power systems (Martin and Mirraoopa 2009). Those power systems often exclude First Nations peoples and their input, and the data collection and research methods perpetuate the colonialist image of expert researchers and their subjects (Kukutai and Walter 2015; Martin and Mirraoopa 2009; Simonds and Christopher 2013).

This approach reinforces mainstream dominance through the use of study designs that exclude First Nations perspectives, rather than exploring First Nations peoples in their own right (Ali et al. 2022; Kukutai and Walter 2015; Ryder et al. 2020; Simonds and Christopher 2013). Through 'paternalistic and racialised' perspectives (Lightfoot and Maddison 2024, 3), colonised people continue to be seen as 'childlike and uncivilised' (Lightfoot and Maddison 2024, 2), and they are treated as objects of study rather than as equals (Foley 2006; Nakata and Maddison 2019; Ryder et al. 2020). This attitude has affected perceptions of knowledge itself, including what it is and who can access it (Nakata 2008; Nakata and Maddison 2019; Tuhiwai Smith 2021). Western knowledge is seen as 'a universal truth and a necessary criterion of a civilised society' (Tuhiwai Smith 2021, 56), and it includes the only acceptable and rational ideas about the world and about the people in it, incorporating an inherent sense of 'innate superiority' (Tuhiwai Smith 2021, 63).

It is research that is imbued with an 'attitude' and a 'spirit' which assumes a certain ownership of the entire world, and which has established systems and forms of governance which embed that attitude in institutional practices. These practices determine what counts as legitimate research and who count as legitimate researchers.

(Tuhiwai Smith 2021, 64)

Through the reductive colonist lens, First Nations peoples are seen as a homogeneous population, despite each 'group' having its own localised 'knowledge, stories, histories and traditions' (Ali et al. 2022, 207; Cunningham 2000; Kukutai and Walter 2015). Such perspectives fail to recognise 'Indigenous population diversity and ... to recognise Indigenous culture[s], values and practices' (Kukutai and Walter 2015, 318). This denies and discounts the extensive complex knowledge systems of First Nations peoples, and, according to Hall and Tandon 2017a, actively destroys both those knowledge systems, or 'epistemicide'<sup>1</sup> (Hall and Tandon 2017a, 8) and the languages that support them, or 'linguicide'<sup>2</sup> (Hall and Tandon 2017a, 10). In addition, colonised research discounts key cultural values such as the complex life-force relationships among 'peoples, land, environment, history, collective agency, Indigenous languages and traditions ...' (Ali et al. 2022, 198). The overall effect is a systematic denial of First Nations peoples' identity, autonomy and expertise (Nakata and Maddison 2019).

Decolonisation of research also requires researcher self-examination and awareness of their own assumptions, biases and values, and how they might affect how a study is approached and conducted (Kukutai and Walter 2015). Although these are likely to have developed both during life experience and during the development of researcher skills and experience, the latter in particular might have included a colonising approach.

Decolonising research involves decolonising knowledge itself, a significant challenge for any researcher, whether they are First Nations or non-First Nations. For those trained in conventional Western research frameworks, it can be challenging to completely unlearn the knowledge, experiences and expectations they bring into their work. The colonisation of knowledge shapes not only what is considered 'knowable' and 'true', but also who is entitled to know it and what parts of it they can access (Nakata 2008; Tuhiwai Smith 2021). There are also complex questions surrounding the ownership of knowledge and research data (Simonds and Christopher 2013). Researchers steeped in Western knowledge systems may be surprised to learn that their own approaches could hinder truly collaborative work with First Nations peoples.

Once the approach to research (and research itself) is decolonised, First Nations methodologies and knowledges can be recognised and prioritised, making First Nations peoples' voices, knowledge, values and ideas central (Tuhiwai Smith 2021), enabling them to assert their self-determination and power (Ali et al. 2022). Such research accepts and respects the expertise and knowledge of non-homogeneous First Nations communities and groups through extensive consultation, transparency and shared decision-making (Clifford and Griffiths 2023; Tuhiwai

Smith 2021). Ideally, researchers work *with* First Nations people and the day to day events of their 'lived experience', rather than working on a 'case under investigation' (Nakata 2007, 12). This preferred research approach keeps 'a respectful commitment to knowledge development and sharing that benefits the lives of Indigenous peoples' (Ali et al. 2022, 199) and 'promote[s] Indigenous peoples' worldviews, knowledges, practices, rights and data sovereignty' (Ali et al. 2022, 201).

### 3.1.1 | Participatory Action Research (PAR)

As an empirical research approach, PAR was first proposed as a means of changing research focus from the interests and needs of researchers to those of the people and communities participating in the research, acknowledging that the work is truly participatory when it is 'a process developed with and led by the people' (Díaz-Arévalo 2022, 358; Brown and Tandon 1983).

PAR could be said to provide a truly collaborative research framework within which other study parameters nest. It is characterised by study participants who are treated as full co-researchers (Carpenter 2018; Firchow 2018; Seligman and Estes 2020). Also called 'collaborative ethnography' (Seligman and Estes 2020, 185) and 'Community Based Participatory Research' (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022, 97), this approach has been shown to improve co-researchers' commitment to both the research itself and to implementation of its findings (Firchow 2018). It has also been said to build a 'participatory community of inquiry', a self-sustaining source of future inquiry and knowledge-building (Killen and McIntyre 2022, 6). In Australia, the Citizen Science movement provides a practical example of this approach in which non-expert community members register to collect and submit their own data/information for a specific research study. In their study, Killen and McIntyre (2022) used this approach to enlist the collaboration of First Nations communities and other residents in the data collection, care and management of locally threatened fauna.

In PAR, the community co-controls the whole process, including co-designing the study, helping collect and analyse the data and information, and controlling the nature of the outcomes and their dissemination (Hall and Tandon 2017b). As noted by Firchow (2018), in her conflict studies based in Uganda and Colombia, the community affected by conflict knows best what the lack of conflict (or peace) means for them, and so should be the source of information about measuring and evaluating 'peacebuilding effectiveness' (Firchow 2018, 81).

## 3.2 | First Nations Researchers

A necessary component of decolonised research is the inclusion of First Nations researchers as leaders, guides and mentors in studies that affect First Nations peoples and communities, with the research itself being governed by what Tuhiwai Smith (2021) calls 'Indigenous research, Indigenous research protocols and Indigenous methodologies' (Tuhiwai Smith 2021, 4; Clifford and Griffiths 2023). This inclusion would be a major safeguard against non-Indigenous tendencies to dismiss Indigenous approaches as inherently less rigorous than studies designed

and conducted according to Western research rules (Tuhiwai Smith 2021).

First Nations researchers need to have the knowledge and skills to ensure that while both Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches contribute to the project's design and implementation, non-Indigenous approaches are not dominant (Ryder et al. 2020). A First Nations researcher with sufficient 'social location' and 'Indigenous situated knowledge' (Ryder et al. 2020, 258) can work within their own community confident that the community itself has the knowledge (including of their own history of colonisation), skills and capacity to be full collaborators in their own research projects (Tuhiwai Smith 2021). Under such First Nations control, the research itself would undergo a fundamental change through having a different focus, asking different questions and defining different outcomes (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022).

One key risk for First Nations researchers can be a lack of support from the participating community. This can be for a range of complex reasons, including colonisation's deeply ingrained acceptance that First Nations researchers cannot be 'good enough' (Tuhiwai Smith 2021, 10). To overcome these perceptions, and to effectively accommodate First Nations and non-First Nations preferences, all researchers need to have exceptional skills, sensitivity and patience (Tuhiwai Smith 2021).

'[First Nations]-driven research' (Cunningham 2000, 64) requires First Nations researchers in leadership roles, enhancing self-determination and empowerment, while potentially increasing engagement with the participating community through the sense of cultural safety that First Nations researchers may provide (Ryder et al. 2020; Tuhiwai Smith 2021; Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022).

Non-First Nations researchers are not excluded from this approach: 'bicultural' or 'partnership research' are terms that have been used to describe a fully collaborative process (Tuhiwai Smith 2021, 18).

## 3.3 | First Nations Protocols, Methodologies and Knowledge

### 3.3.1 | Protocols

As noted earlier, throughout this undertaking, the Project Team's approach to research involving First Nations peoples has been guided by two key publications from the AIATSIS and the University of Newcastle. Both outline protocols and ethical guidance for research involving First Nations peoples. Their key guiding principles include respect; self-determination; leadership roles; collaboration, consultation and consent; protection and maintenance of cultural integrity; shared benefit; and accountability (AIATSIS 2022, 2; University of Newcastle 2023a, 7).

Additional protocols from First Nations researchers and commentators refer variously to respect (including for country, plants, animals and landforms; Martin and Mirraoopa 2009), recognition and acknowledgement (Ryder et al. 2020); informed consent to participate or contribute (Ungunmerr-Bauman

et al. 2022); cultural safety (Atkinson et al. 2021); collaboration, sharing and mutual reciprocity (Atkinson et al. 2021; Ryder et al. 2020; Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022); respect for relationships, relationality and First Nations perspectives (Atkinson et al. 2021; Martin and Mirraboopa 2009; Woodroffe 2021); and shared responsibility. In addition, First Nations peoples prefer to be treated with dignity (Ryder et al. 2020) and to have a leading research role (Woodroffe 2021).

### 3.3.2 | Methodologies

As noted by Datta (2018), First Nations methodology refers to the importance of including 'Indigenous principles' in any research project so First Nations voices are central (preferably through leadership and supervisory roles; Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022), and their rights are respected (Datta 2018, 36; Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022). It is preferable for research to be designed for First Nations preferences, including an emphasis on their worldviews and relationality (including between the researchers and the participating communities) rather than objectivity and separation (Atkinson et al. 2021; Woodroffe 2021). Important methodological factors include transparency (Ryder et al. 2020), sharing and reciprocity (Tuhivai Smith 2021), listening (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022) and patience (Martin and Mirraboopa 2009).

Ryder et al. (2020, 260) outline three defining principles for First Nations methodology: '1. Resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist research; 2. Political integrity in Indigenous research; 3. Privileging Indigenous voices in Indigenous research'.

### 3.3.3 | Knowledge

First Nations and non-First Nations peoples can have quite different concepts of truth and knowing, as well as different ways of understanding the world around them (Nakata 2007). As noted above, there is no single homogeneous body of First Nations knowledge: many types of knowledge systems exist across communities and societies in what has been called a 'knowledge democracy' (Hall and Tandon 2017a, 11). In a First Nations context, knowledge has been described as 'local, culturally specific knowledge unique to a certain population. Indigenous knowledge is often depicted as being alive ...' (Simonds and Christopher 2013, 2185).

First Nations peoples rely on their 'social organisation of knowledge' (Nakata 2007, 12), with access to it being dependent upon their complex social relationship systems (Foley 2006). Knowledge is not static or confirmed at any particular point in time, being a concept that is 'continuous, evolving and adapting to change' (Foley 2006, 27).

Key to First Nations knowledge is language which carries within it the values and beliefs that create and maintain the 'Indigenous knowledge systems' in a particular community (Ali et al. 2022, 208). Every member of that community (including children) can be a repository of the knowledge system and contributes to its maintenance and evolution, helping to sustain a

form of 'collective rights and interests' in that knowledge system (Nakata 2007, 185). Knowledge affects how people go about their daily lives, as well as their place and responsibilities in the social relationships system (Martin and Mirraboopa 2009), including the rules for what knowledge and information can and cannot be made publicly available (Nakata 2007).

As noted above, the imposition of non-First Nations/Western approaches has dictated the primacy of non-First Nations knowledge and worldview (Hall and Tandon 2017a), necessarily separating First Nations peoples from the histories and traditional practices that are fundamental to their knowledge systems (Ali et al. 2022; Simonds and Christopher 2013). It has affected the integrity, meaning and contextual links of First Nations knowledge by breaking it up for Western categorisation and coding (Nakata 2008; Simonds and Christopher 2013). Because First Nations knowledge is so entwined within social relationships, the imposition of research confidentiality and its erasure of social context can also deny that knowledge's cultural links (Simonds and Christopher 2013).

There is additional tension between the requirements of Western research approaches and methodologies and their capacity to respect and incorporate First Nations knowledges. Where data about First Nations peoples is collected and analysed according to Western preferences, it can effectively exclude both First Nations knowledge itself and, by extension, the people from whom it was collected (Ali et al. 2022; Cunningham 2000; Martin and Mirraboopa 2009; Simonds and Christopher 2013).

Hence, it is imperative to adopt a research approach that respects and prioritises First Nations peoples' knowledges and worldviews (Martin and Mirraboopa 2009), on the understanding that the availability of knowledge can inform broader non-First Nations parts of society, as well as other First Nations peoples (Kukutai and Walter 2015).

In some communities, specific knowledge, sociocultural arrangements and language literacy have been impacted so profoundly by colonisation that their language is threatened, or extinct, leading to the associated erosion of social governances and compromising the integrity of inherited knowledge systems. In such circumstances, the principles of decolonising may not be sufficient to revive original worldviews or practices, or to enable reflection upon them; however, information about the communities' contemporary functions and cohesion can inform and contribute to research design as much as can information from more traditional communities. In such communities, there is an opportunity to clarify how their contemporary systems, approaches and worldviews have developed and how those have influenced their contemporary social governances and communication preferences.

## 3.4 | Benchmarking Collaborative Research Approaches

Recent notable examples of inclusive research projects with First Nations collaborators include an examination of the cultural consequences of out-of-home care for First Nations children (Study 1, Krakouer et al. 2018); of the links between

well-being and the maintenance of cultural connections (Study 2, Edwige and Gray 2021); and an exploration of a First Nations approach to empirical research methodologies (Study 3, Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022). These exemplars are described below.

Study 1 reports on a review of legislative provisions in Australia that underpin approaches to the placement of First Nations children in out-of-home care, including the removal of children who have become known as ‘the Stolen Generations’ (Krakouer et al. 2018, 266). The authors draw on many First Nations-led studies and, in particular, review the design of ‘exiting performance targets’ (Krakouer et al. 2018, 273), which are shown to be Western-focused and inadequate for assessing a First Nations child’s connections to family, community and culture. Citing extensive references, the authors note that, in a Western context, the family and Western notions of placement and carer stability are of paramount importance for child placements, with culture having a ‘peripheral’ influence. They note that, in a First Nations context, connection with culture has been shown to be fundamental to a child’s ‘development, health, and wellbeing’ (Krakouer et al. 2018, 271), providing a sense of identity and a worldview that influences all aspects of life.

In Study 2, an extensive literature review reports ‘the significant benefits of connecting to culture, family and community as part of culturally appropriate treatment and care to promote wellbeing, rehabilitation and healing’ (Edwige and Gray 2021, 3). Both authors identify as First Nations researchers. In their findings, they emphasise the importance of First Nations peoples being ‘at the forefront of the design and delivery’ of their own systems and programmes, preventing the damaging effects of externally imposed approaches (Edwige and Gray 2021).

Study 3 describes the work of a group of First Nations and non-First Nations researchers whose cooperative research approach was designed to explore the existence of transgenerational effects of trauma (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022). The approach gave a central focus to First Nations knowledge systems and ‘privilege[d] their worldviews’ (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022, 101). This was achieved by incorporating community-based participatory research whose ‘tenets include respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility’, with core protocols of ‘cultural strength’ and ‘bi-directional learning’ (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022, 97). During the study, information was collected using interviews and ‘sharing circles’ (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022, 97). The interviews were unstructured, allowing interviewees to control and direct the discussion. In sharing circles, all participants co-created a ‘collective communal story’ about their experiences of trauma (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022, 97). The researchers describe research principles that guided their specific work as the following: ‘the success of the project depends entirely on the approval and acceptance of the Aboriginal people; the research cannot proceed without forming relationships based on reciprocity and respect; participants must feel safe and be safe; the listening function of Dadirri must be adhered to; the explication of data must be presented with fidelity; and finally, ethical responsibilities are held in the highest regard’ (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022, 100).<sup>3</sup>

## 4 | The GFFT Report (‘The Report’)

### 4.1 | Objectives

The GFFT Report explored publications describing First Nations peoples’ approaches to peacemaking and peacebuilding, including the systems, processes, techniques and skills of peacemakers and peacebuilders. The initial analysis was directed at the words: ‘peacebuilders’ and ‘peacemakers’ and ‘peace practitioners’ which are used to describe First Nations people whose role is to assist communities and groups with managing conflict. These words have been suggested in some publications and in conversations with the Project Team, and members of the Project Advisory Group.

In terms of the research itself, during 2022 and 2023, the Project Team collected, catalogued, reviewed, evaluated and analysed primary materials that report or describe ‘the approaches, techniques and skills of First Nations peacebuilders and peacemakers’ (Bishop, Boyle, et al. 2024, 20). The approach to the review emphasised the priority of First Nations peoples’ perceptions and perspectives as key sources of information.

The next section is based on Bishop, Boyle, et al. (2024, 57–73, 77, 89–98).

### 4.2 | Key Findings

In relation to First Nations peoples, the review’s findings confirmed the importance of language, community, family, social and cultural relationships and the links between those and people’s well-being. In addition, there is notable complexity and range in how conflict is viewed and approached.

The findings also show there is limited engagement of First Nations peoples in selecting externally sourced programmes and services to help manage their conflicts, and there is limited to no participation of Indigenous practitioners in the design and implementation of those programmes and services, and there is little or no accord with the peoples’ own values, languages and approaches, including key cultural and kinship underpinnings and the roles and influence of Elders and other community leaders. In addition, non-First Nations people dominate the management and resolution of conflict, perpetuating this reliance and proliferating their preferences more broadly, such as in mainstream entities relating to law enforcement, housing and various health and social services.

The above findings should not be surprising. In Australia, Western-skewed research approaches and data collection have been recognised for their misinterpretation and misrepresentation of First Nations peoples (Ali et al. 2022; Datta 2018; Kukutai and Walter 2015; Nakata 2007).

#### 4.2.1 | Data Sovereignty

During the review, it became clear that existing conventional views of intellectual property may not be adequate for safeguarding custodianship of First Nations materials, such as

those collected during this project. The project collection includes a range of culturally sensitive materials that are secured in cloud-based storage, overseen by the University of Newcastle, and accessible only by the Project Team. This is not satisfactory.

The Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective is an international movement that prioritises data governance by First Nations communities and organisations who need to access and control data that affects them and so inform their own decision-making (Walter et al. 2021). Data include tangible and intangible materials (Walter and Carroll 2021) and relates to ‘... people, lands, resources and knowledges ...’ (Walter and Carroll 2021, 11). The data can be in any form (Maiaam Nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective, n.d.), and First Nations peoples have the right to ‘... decide what, how and why Indigenous data are collected, accessed and used’ (Maiaam Nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective).

The project accepts this view. Stage Two of this project affirms First Nations peoples, communities and organisations as responsible decision-makers regarding research information, including its collection, its analysis, its inclusion and dissemination. This includes future arrangements for the storage, access and use of information collected as part of this research project.

#### 4.2.2 | Future Work

The Report did not make ‘recommendations’, instead outlining a range of activities to be seen as ‘Next Steps’ in the achievement of recognition of First Nations peoples’ own approaches to conflict and its management (Bishop, Boyle, et al. 2024, 102–111). Those Steps outline the aspects of First Nations conflict management that will be explored including how First Nations communities, peacemakers and peacebuilders approach conflict and its management; and the support needs of First Nations peacebuilders and peacemakers. The Next Steps also propose locations for place-based studies. Because there is no single, or homogeneous, First Nations culture, and each First Nations community safeguards its own culture in its own localised geographical setting—urban (cities and major town centres), peri-urban (the edges of established urban centres), regional (regional cities, towns and centres) and remote (communities and settlements that self-describe as ‘remote’), and all are to be included as study locations during Stage Two.

## 5 | First Nations-Led Research

### 5.1 | Sitting in Many Camps: Celebrating and Supporting First Nations Peacebuilding

The title of the next stage of this research project, *Sitting in Many Camps: Celebrating and Supporting First Nations Peacebuilding*, is an expression coined by Charlie Watson, a Kangu and Birri Gubba (Wiri) man from central Queensland. In Stage Two, the focus will be on the active collaborative participation of various First Nations communities and peace practitioners, and the study is being designed to that end.

Its top priority is the enlistment of First Nations researchers and participants as leaders, co-designers and full collaborators. The focus will be on truly collaborative research approaches and methods, relying on First Nations input from researchers, non-researchers, peace practitioners, other experts and communities. It will be undertaken in ways that are designed to further enhance research capacity among First Nations communities and peoples, and to incorporate First Nations peoples’ research paradigms and methodologies. In particular, emerging First Nations researchers will be mentored and supported by members within the Research Team.

### 5.2 | Research Aims

Stage Two is designed to achieve several clear aims that focus on celebrating and supporting First Nations peoples’ approaches to conflict:

- Showcase First Nations peoples’ traditional and contemporary approaches to conflict and its management;
- Clarify the roles and influence of Elders, other community leaders and women in managing conflict, safeguarding community cohesion and protecting community governance structures;
- Explore specific processes, practices and skills of First Nations peacebuilders and peacemakers;
- Explore (and, where feasible, trial) professional and peer support needs in the delivery of peacebuilding and peacemaking services; and
- Enhance First Nations peoples’ research capacity through First Nations-led collaborative work, as well as mentoring and supervising younger generation scholars.

Stage Two will be First Nations-led, and a key tangible measure will be a graduated reduction in the involvement of non-First Nations researchers.

Drawing on the research literature and First Nations publications and commentary, the Project Team has developed the principles, approaches and methods outlined below.

### 5.3 | Research Principles

#### 5.3.1 | Intellectual Humility and Reflexive Practice

Intellectual humility has been described as being able to hear and take into account other people’s views that differ from one’s own while accepting one’s own errors and shortcomings (AlSheddi 2020; Church and Samuelson 2017; Haggard et al. 2018; Hanel et al. 2023; Hoekstra and Vazire 2021; Van Tongeren et al. 2023). An alternative descriptor, ‘cultural humility’, incorporates the recognition of cultural power imbalances (AlSheddi 2020, 37).

Intellectual humility is accepted as both a theoretical or philosophical approach (Church and Samuelson 2017; Mitu 2021), and as a key attribute of research practice (AlSheddi 2020; Bishop,

Sourdin, et al. 2024; Cabrera 2020; Haggard et al. 2018; Hanel et al. 2023; Hoekstra and Vazire 2021). It has been reported that, when researchers are intellectually humble, there are improvements in their own capacity to learn and in their interactions with research participants (Church and Samuelson 2017; Hanel et al. 2023). There are close links between intellectual humility and reflexive practice (AlSheddi 2020).

Reflexive practice, or ‘engaged scholarship’, describes an approach in which the researcher is constantly aware of their own role and influence throughout any research undertaking (Bansal et al. 2018, 1191; Tuhiwai Smith 2021). In particular, where studies involve other people, the levels of transparent reflexivity will affect perceptions of the research findings and outcomes, which themselves are influenced by the design of the research, its treatment of study participants and the consequential integrity of collected information and data (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017; Levitt et al. 2018). In particular, reflexivity can be a protection against the development of exploitative power relationships between co-researchers (Hore et al. 2021). Reflexive practice has also been recommended for ‘insider’ researchers (e.g., the First Nations researcher who is part of the participating community) to maintain awareness of their own role, relationships and status within the community (Tuhiwai Smith 2021, 158). In recent years, systematic appraisals have accepted researcher reflexivity as a measure of quality control (Bansal et al. 2018; Berger 2015; Weiner-Levy and Popper-Giveon 2013).

An approach that incorporates intellectual humility and reflexive practice would be key to the integrity of this project and will be demonstrated through:

- *Openness*: Acknowledging the limits of one’s own knowledge and being open to learning from others;
- *Respect for different ways of knowing*: Valuing First Nations peoples’ knowledge systems as equally valid to Western epistemologies; and
- *Collaborative approach*: Engaging with First Nations individuals and communities as research partners rather than as ‘subjects’.

### 5.3.2 | First Nations Peoples’ Research Principles

As outlined earlier in this article, First Nations researchers and commentators have recognised the importance of respecting and maintaining interpersonal and community connections, as well as the connections with all living and non-living things. Researchers must recognise that there are many First Nations communities and cultures and that approaches that are useful in one setting may not be useful in another (Edwige and Gray 2021). They must emphasise the value of ensuring that each community co-develops approaches and methods that are most suitable for their own social and cultural setting (Edwige and Gray 2021). Researchers will maintain a flexible approach ensuring that differing cultural contexts are recognised and respected while preserving the project’s core principles.

In Stage Two of this project, recognition will be given to three First Nations research principles:

- *Relationality*: Recognition that knowledge is relational, connected to community, to the ecological estate, to language and to the cosmos;
- *Respect*: Honour will be given to the wisdom and knowledge of First Nations peoples, to their social systems and to their governances; and
- *Responsibility*: the project commits to the well-being of all First Nations partners, including participants, communities, the land and their languages.

## 5.4 | Research Approach

The research team has adopted an adapted PAR approach. Care will be taken to ensure the integrity of the research and avoid the approach becoming a paternalistic research tool used to promote (even impose) external preferences that are not necessarily endorsed or accepted by the participating communities (Díaz-Arévalo 2022; Hore et al. 2021; Zurba et al. 2018).

In preparing for a PAR-based study, the Project Team will be guided by First Nations knowledges and cultures; by adopting culturally responsive approaches and practices; by ensuring the participating community gives free, prior and informed consent to the study and their collaborative role in it; and by ensuring the Project Team builds collaborative relationships with the participating community (Woodroffe 2021).

## 5.5 | Research Methods—Gathering Information

The research project will draw on and incorporate First Nations peoples’ techniques for collecting information. These may include storytelling and yarning, immersive observations and collaborative community-based workshops, as well as other information gathering methods preferred by each community and suiting its own needs and preferences. They may incorporate any of the following:

- Co-creation of research questions;
- Flexible research design; and
- Flexible Approach to Gathering information that may include storytelling and yarning; participant observation; collaborative community-based workshops; cultural mapping; and place-based studies.

### 5.5.1 | Storytelling and Yarning

Storytelling and yarning are recognised as cornerstones of First Nations identity, both in Australia and overseas (Ali et al. 2022; Datta 2018; Hore et al. 2021). They include ‘in-depth discussion [and] insights’ (Ali et al. 2022, 208), and incorporate First Nations peoples’ unique knowledges and cultures. Storytelling’s key components include the development of the narrative itself and the knowledge within it, as well as how it is told, by whom and to whom. Traditional storytelling encapsulates a community’s ethos and builds trust; however, it requires a capacity for ‘dadirri’, or deep listening, sharing and reflection (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022,

94). Deeply embedded in the process of storytelling and yarning is the complex web of relationships that are part of each person's identity, including family and social links, as well as community and cultural links. Any use of storytelling as a research tool must incorporate that relationality (Atkinson et al. 2021).

In the research context, yarning is a fully collaborative exchange of stories between researchers and participants, with a focus on 'voices, experience and knowledge, and relationships' (Atkinson et al. 2021, 192). Its key value for collecting information is its familiarity, cultural safety and flexibility (Ali et al. 2022; Atkinson et al. 2021; Datta 2018; Martin and Mirraoopa 2009; Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022).

### 5.5.2 | Cultural Mapping

Cultural mapping (Duxbury et al. 2015; Holcombe 2023), also known as participatory mapping (Corbett 2009; Denwood et al. 2022), is, as its alternative name suggests, a process in which affected communities and people work together to create a representation of their own individual and collective knowledge of certain spaces. For Langton et al. (1994), it '... involves the identification and recording of an area's indigenous and non-indigenous cultural resources for the purposes of social, economic and cultural development' (Langton et al. 1994, 11–12). The final 'maps' can take the form of conventional maps using GPS tools, sketch maps that overlay existing paper-based maps, or what have been called 'ground maps' (Corbett 2009, 14), or 'mental mapping' (Denwood et al. 2022, 2326), in which participants create freehand maps without the use of any pre-existing paper-based map, or conventional sense of geographic accuracy. The latter form is likely to be iterative and impermanent.

Cultural mapping is a valuable community-led technique for representing both tangible (key sites and assets) and intangible (values, relationships, knowledges) aspects of a community's identity and culture. It relies heavily on participation, trust, transparency and time, revealing key intimate aspects of local identities that cannot be represented on conventional maps (Corbett 2009; Denwood et al. 2022; Duxbury et al. 2015; Holcombe 2023).

### 5.5.3 | Place-Based Studies

The purpose of place-based research is to consider the research topic in its own context, or 'existing within its community' (Jung 2014, 3/14). First Nations peoples' sense of identity and community are inextricably tied to Country and to a sense of place, making place-based studies of key value.

Place-based research approaches have been applied in many research fields including First Nations studies (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022; Zurba et al. 2018). The key concept of 'place' has been described as a specific geographical area (Victoria State Government 2020), the 'environmental context', or community setting, of a study (Jung 2014, 3/14). Despite being 'site specific', place can be tied to a sense of identity (Vanni and Crosby 2023, 6). Rather than being restricted to a 'static location', the concept of place can be quite fluid and reflect the subjective interactions between people and their own environment (Neely and Nading 2017, 57).

During Stage Two, the place or context of each place-based study will be described and identified by the collaborating community, and the study will be conducted by a Place-Based Working Group comprising members of the community and of the Research Team.

## 5.6 | Research Methods—Analysis, Interpretation, Dissemination

Consistent with the above principles and approaches, the individual study results and findings will be co-analysed, and all reporting will be community-centric. In other words, collaborating communities and individuals will be key recipients of reports, and they will co-devise with the Project Team a distribution plan of where and to whom the reports are to be shared. Collaborating communities will also help identify any actions or outcomes arising from the research that are directly applicable or relevant to their community, or warrant broader consideration.

Reporting for the project will also involve collaborating with communities and other First Nations participants. Participating community preferences will influence the dissemination of reports, as well as the storage of research information and access to information and data.

Given the approach and design of the Project, it is likely that the reports will include non-traditional research outcomes that cannot yet be clearly predicted.

## 6 | Conclusion

This article has outlined a significant research project being designed to foster a qualitative PAR method that is respectful, inclusive, and action oriented. It is intended to promote the skills, empowerment and well-being of Indigenous researchers and communities, and enrich academic understanding of First Nations peoples' approaches to peacebuilding and peacemaking. The project will recognise First Nations peoples' knowledges and enable their active contribution to its design, approach and implementation.

The project's innovative approach is aimed at creating:

- Greater understanding of:
  - First Nations peoples' approaches to conflict and its management;
  - The roles and influence of Elders, other community leaders and women in terms of managing conflict, safeguarding community cohesion and protecting community governance frameworks;
  - The processes, techniques and skills of First Nations peacebuilders and peacemakers.
- Promotion of First Nations-led research projects and studies and further enhance the capacity of First Nations peoples as researchers; and
- Affirmation of First Nations communities and organisations as responsible decision-makers regarding research and research information.

This project draws on existing knowledge about research involving First Nations peoples to create an innovative approach in this sector. Its focus is on building and maintaining a First Nations-led undertaking based on co-design, co-collection, co-analysis and co-reporting. To protect First Nations peoples' data sovereignty, all decisions about research information and data (including its storage and reuse) will be made collaboratively.

The Research Team is aware that this innovative undertaking may face hurdles at institutional and community levels, and recognises that the building of trust at all levels will be a key ongoing activity from the outset.

The potential ramifications of this research are wide-ranging. As a non-conventional research approach, it sets benchmarks for future work in this area. Above all, it actively promotes First Nations-led research and nurtures First Nations researchers.

### Author Contributions

**Helen Bishop:** conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, resources, writing – review and editing. **Alysoun Boyle:** conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, resources. **Tania Sourdin:** conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, resources, writing – review and editing. **Bin Li:** conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, resources, writing – review and editing.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Epistemicide is a term that has been used to describe the active destruction of Indigenous knowledge systems.

<sup>2</sup> Linguicide is a term that has been used to describe the active destruction of Indigenous languages.

<sup>3</sup> Dadirri is a form of deep listening and reflection that connects with the speaker, the listener and the environment, building relationships of trust and respect (see Atkinson 2002; Ungunmerr-Bauman et al. 2022).

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