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## **Abstract**

*Since colonisation, the overt and covert forms of violence imposed on Australia's First Peoples has created an environment which is socially toxic for their children. The challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and family service agencies is to demonstrate that culturally based services, programs, policies and processes which enable self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families and children will improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family service agencies are seeking to frame a methodology to create an evidence base which pays due respect to both Indigenous and Western forms of knowledge and practice. Such an approach requires creating culturally respectful hybrid systems of research and evidence gathering.*

**Key Words:** Indigenous, culture, resilience, Australia

## **Introduction to the Issues**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia know intrinsically that the promotion of culture and the facilitation of the voice of their communities and children are essential in building the resilience of their children in the context of their hybrid, colonised world. Since 1788, when colonisation in Australia began, the overt and covert forms of violence imposed on the estimated 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of the lands and waters now known as Australia has created an environment which is socially toxic for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples consist of around 400 distinct communities with approximately 250 distinct languages (Horton, 1994, p. 1318). All communities have been impacted on by colonisation in varying degrees ranging from severe cultural and land disconnection, particularly in the south-east of Australia, to some communities retaining language and land but with ongoing disempowerment. Australia is the only country colonised by Great Britain which has no treaties with the First Peoples. As a consequence, Indigenous peoples in Australia have poorer health outcomes and are disproportionately subject to child protection and incarceration (The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009).

As the first community controlled child and family welfare service in Australia, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) was established in 1978 in response to the widespread removal of Aboriginal children at risk without cultural support and

connection back to their communities. VACCA's is a statewide organisation whose purpose is to promote and provide services which seek reconnection to family and community, Indigenous best practice, build resilience of Indigenous families through the provision of early intervention that addresses risks and promote the safety, stability and developmental needs of Aboriginal children and youth.

The challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and family service agencies is to demonstrate to governments and their departments that culturally based services, programs, policies and processes which enable self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families and children will improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. To meet this challenge, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family service agencies need to create an evidence base which pays due respect to both Indigenous and Western forms of knowledge and practice with integrity. Such an approach requires creating culturally respectful hybrid systems of research and evidence gathering.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies like the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) do not begin with a blank slate but with 600 centuries of experience and practice. VACCA therefore begins with a set of principles which inform what we know works best for children. Fundamental to that framework is our understanding of how culture and self-determination, or voice, are protective and resilient factors for our children.

In this paper our aim is to address the key issues involved in creating an evidence base for child and family services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia which respects and utilises Aboriginal cultural knowledge and practices. In the paper we discuss the key concepts of culture, voice and resilience, the ongoing impact of colonisation, introduce a conceptual framework based on the themes of culture and voice and finally explore a research methodology based on a hybrid of Indigenous and western epistemologies.

### *What is culture?*

Culture has been variously defined as

- the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon our capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations,
- the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group,
- the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a system, company or corporation and
- one group or people's preferred way of meeting their basic human needs (Cross, 2007).

Culture is essentially about how we collectively make sense of things in the universe and how we express our sense of meaning and engage with that world as communities of peoples. Understanding the dynamics of culture is not just about seeing the 'tip' of the cultural identity 'iceberg' of food, dress, music, language, art, and so forth, but is

concerned with the more subtle ways in which culture impacts on how individuals and communities see and engage with the world (St. Onge, Cole and Petty 2003, p. 1).

Culture is passed down the generations in the complex of relationships, knowledge, languages, social organisation and life experiences that bind diverse individuals and groups together. Culture is a living process. It changes over time to reflect the changed environments and social interactions of people living together (Atkinson, 2004, p. ix).

The dynamics of culture are different for children of minority cultures in relation to societal dominant cultures. It is different again for the people of minority Indigenous cultures. For Aboriginal peoples in Australia, culture frames a sense of identity which relates to being the First Peoples of the land. For Aboriginal children, families and communities, culture enhances a deep sense of belonging and involves a spiritual and emotional relationship to the land that is unique. Culture is a protective factor against colonisation and the imposition of an alien dominant culture on all aspects of Aboriginal peoples' lives.

#### *What is voice?*

In the context of this paper, 'voice' is shorthand for self-determination and therefore is concerned with how the aspirations and concerns of Indigenous communities are expressed and given effect within the dominant culture. The right to speak is critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as, in many respects, that right was denied for decades until later in the modern era. Speaking language was in fact a subversive activity on many missions and reserves. Our contention is that facilitating the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families and their children is essential in building a sense of self-esteem in the context of the dominant colonised culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a story to tell and the enabling of that narrative and voice creates a positive context for the raising of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

#### *What is resilience?*

The International Resiliency Project has outlined some of the key aspects of attributes, traits and circumstances which lead to resilience. They range from individual traits such as self-awareness, a positive outlook, empathy, showing a balance between independence and dependence on others and a sense of humour; to contextual factors such as positive relationships; meaningful sense of community and a strong sense of culture (International Resilience Project 2004).

Given the diminished forms of self-determination and the legacy of culture abuse and racism that exist in Australia, enabling of voice for Aboriginal children and their communities and the promotion of culture as resilience are contested areas in the body politic of modern Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and services are therefore recognising the need for research methodologies which integrate

Indigenous ways of knowing and acting with the Western imperative of evidence-based approaches in order to prove that culture and voice 'works' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

### **Colonised Australia as a toxic environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children**

The imprint of invasion remains on the national psyche of Australia's body politic. Garbarino (1995) talks of socially toxic environments and their impacts on the raising of children. For Indigenous people, colonised Australia is a toxic environment which is premised on 'doing for' rather than empowering Indigenous people.

Colonisation is not a process which is limited to a particular defined historical period, it is an ongoing reality. Colonial power impacts on Indigenous children and families. Everyday Indigenous people are subject to a legal, political and economic system which ignores their cultural reality and enables subtle and disguised moments of racism to occur. For Aboriginal children, the playground and the classroom often become battlegrounds where they are forced to defend who they are in the face of ignorance and subconscious racial stereotyping.

The underlying issue which both Indigenous and non-indigenous people in Australia face today is that of the imposed colonial hidden narrative of terra nullius – the belief that Australia was 'empty land' which could therefore be settled without consent or treaty (Birch 2003). The terra nullius worldview denies the richness and complexity of Indigenous cultures and questions of Indigenous ownership and sovereignty. Terra nullius underlies the mainstream narrative of Australian history and historically labelled Indigenous spirituality and connection with the land as pagan and uncivilised.

This terra nullius worldview can be seen as the particular Australian articulation of what Dyer (1997) and African American feminist, hooks (1995), refer to as 'whiteness'. In general terms Dyer defines whiteness in the following way:

For those in power in the West ... whiteness is felt to be the human condition ... it alone defines normality and fully inhabits it ... white people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't see that they construct the world in their own image; white people set the standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail. ... White power ... reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal. (pp. 9-10)

This theme of 'whiteness' has been adapted by Indigenous scholars such as Holt (2002) and Moreton-Robinson to the Australian context. Moreton-Robinson (2003) suggests that:

Whiteness is both the measure and the marker of normalcy in Australian society, yet it remains invisible for most white women and men, and they do not associate it with conferring dominance and privilege. (p. 66)

McIntosh (1989) contends that in mainstream society white people are privileged by the dominant culture.

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. (p. 10)

In the Australian context, entitlement for the non-indigenous is an unacknowledged space. Non-indigenous peoples contact with Indigenous peoples may help to deconstruct the 'white privilege' perception of the world to enable them to see the reality of this land. It is a way of acknowledging and limiting non-indigenous 'colonial blindness' which is created by the colonisation process and maintained through dominant culture 'habits of addiction'.

The phenomena of the Stolen Generations was a specific racist and colonial practice with the aim of 'whitening' and removing Indigenous people from the landscape of Australia. The term Stolen Generations refers to the tens of thousands of Aboriginal children who were removed from their families and raised in institutions, adopted or fostered-out to non-Aboriginal people. The practice began in the mid nineteenth century on missions and reserves and continued until the 1970s.

It made little difference what the family situation really was or how the children were cared for, because being Aboriginal was in itself reason to regard children as 'neglected'. Even on the rare occasions when officials did not regard Aboriginal culture with contempt and fear, the emphasis on marriage and having fixed housing and employment in definitions of 'neglect' was inherently biased towards seeing all Aboriginal life as neglectful (Van Krieken, 1992, p. 8).

The story of the Stolen Generations is full of examples of how the principle of 'best interest' lead to children being badly treated, economically exploited, unable to form meaningful relationships and alienated from their own culture but unable to fit into a white culture which they did not understand, had different values and was not accepting of them.

When the culture of a people is ignored, denigrated, or worse, intentionally attacked, it is cultural abuse. It is abuse because it strikes at the very identity and soul of the people it is aimed at; it attacks their sense of self-esteem, it attacks their connectedness to their family and community. And it attacks the

spirituality and sense of meaning for their children (Bamblett and Lewis, 2006, p. 42).

Cultural abuse remains to this day. Child protection intervention in the lives of Indigenous community remains disproportionate in Australia. Until issues around the still present impact of colonisation and its toxicity for Indigenous communities are adequately addressed, they will continue to suffer systemic disadvantage and cultural abuse.

### **Culture as a relational-holistic foundation for resilience**

#### *Relational-holistic understandings of identity and culture*

Emerging international child and family welfare approaches emphasise the role of culture within a holistic and ecological framework. The holistic approach is concerned with the totality of the child's being and in the context of his or her relationships to other people and the world. In social work theory this is consistent with the ecological perspective (Garbarino, 1977, pp. 721-736) which suggests that all people are living beings who interact with their environments. From this relational perspective, culture is a key mediator between people and their social environments.

The ecological perspective is based on systems theory and states that all people are living beings who interact with their environments (Maluccio, Fein and Olmstead, 1986). In terms of child welfare the ecological model suggests that there are levels of systemic interactions and environments which determine conditions which may lead to child abuse or neglect (Belsky, 1980).

All these systems and their interactions impact on how a child develops and can explain the various factors which impact on family functioning. This perspective is consistent with the perspective of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community that sees the individual within the context of their family and the family within the context of the community and the community within the context of the land.

For Indigenous families, dispossession, impoverishment and forced family separations are all factors which may lead directly and indirectly to child abuse or neglect. In this way, attention needs to be given to the impact of the environment on the development of the child.

It is sound child welfare policy to seek active interventions in the social environment which take into account the effect of cultural and societal pressures on the child and their environment. Rather than being distracted solely by the need to treat symptoms, child welfare interventions need to be involved in prevention and providing societal supports and resources to address negative social environments. Such supports need to look at the functionality of the family and the family's community and how social networks can be strengthened.

The tendency has been to fragment helping efforts by concentrating variously on the children, the parents, or the foster parents, rather than working with the

children and parents as interacting components of one family system (Maluccio, Fein and Olmstead, 1986, p. 81).

Holistic systems take on another aspect when the dimension of culture is applied to relational-holistic systems of human interaction. Clearly, issues of culture and context require further investigation when it comes to creating measures that seek to measure the multidimensional nature of resilience and its promotion through “relational protective processes” (Ungar, 2008, p. 218.). Ungar notes that current methodologies that attempt to measure resilience are still predominantly culturally biased and conform to western epistemological understandings (2008). Despite the difficulties in measuring resilience, modern child development theory does acknowledge the role culture plays in the child’s sense of identity and sense of belonging (deVries, 1996, pp. 400-5). For example the *Looking After Children (LAC) Framework* also acknowledges the importance of a child’s identity although it remains underdeveloped when it comes to considerations of the role of culture in identity (Champion and Burke, 2004).

Any work with Aboriginal children which does not pay due regard to their heritage and culture will fail to recognise valid and culturally important impacts on their lives and the lives of their families. Culture plays a protective role, particularly for marginalised communities. In the case of Aboriginal communities the possibility of loss of culture needs to be seen as a risk factor.

Cultural identity is not just an add-on to the best interests of the child. We would all agree that the safety of the child is paramount. No child should live in fear. No child should starve. No child should live in situations of neglect. No child should be abused. But if a child’s identity is denied or denigrated, they are not being looked after. Denying cultural identity is detrimental to their attachment needs, their emotional development, their education and their health. Every area of human development which defines the child’s best interests has a cultural component. Your culture helps define HOW you attach, HOW you express emotion, HOW you learn and HOW you stay healthy (Bamblett and Lewis, 2006, p.44).

#### *Culture as basis for understanding relational-holistic resilience in children*

Indigenous communities view the person as living and being in relationship with the family, the community, the tribe, the land and the spiritual beings of the law or dreaming. It is inherently inter-relational and interdependent. To a greater extent than in Western culture, the person is perceived as a self-in relationship. The Indigenous perspective is holistic and community-based. Therefore Indigenous communities believe in,

- the whole child, and not just the child’s educational, physical or spiritual needs in isolation,
- the child’s relationship to the whole family, and not just mum or dad,
- the child’s relationship to the whole community, and not just the family, and

- the child's relationship to the land and the spirit beings which determine law, politics and meaning.

Family structures are critical in developing the sense of identity of all children. Aboriginal family structures are primarily embracing and inclusive in nature. Relationships within Aboriginal families are understood as ways of including people in the 'parenting' of a child rather than specifying particular distinct and distanced roles. For example, aunts and uncles are not seen as more distant to the child than the natural mother or father. Children are seen as belonging to the broader extended family and community rather than just to their parents. Aboriginal family structures centre on the extended family group or family clan, which is held together by strong kinship ties and relationships. These kinship systems set out how all members are related and their position or status within the clan group, all of which have a foundation based on a relationship to country. Community Elders also play a critical role, particularly in education and the maintenance of culture. In a very real sense it is the whole community who raises the child.

The Indigenous approach to looking after children perceives culture and the maintenance of culture as central to healthy development. An Indigenous child knows who they are according to how they relate to their family, community and land. Maintaining this connectedness in social relationships provides the child with a positive environment for growth.

### **Voice as a narrative-rights based foundation for resilience**

Ricoeur suggests that history is best understood as a form of narrative frameworks of communities and peoples (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 148). As a basis for meaning, a people's narrative ethically evaluates situations and suggests courses of action (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 115). These narratives form matrices of concepts and beliefs which assist peoples in making sense of their world. Being able to speak of this meaning from a cultural perspective ensure a people can be resilient despite negative events. To this notion of cultural-ethical narrative, we would suggest that ensuring distinct peoples maintain the right to speak their story – to have voice – is fundamental to resilience. For Indigenous peoples in Australia it is both the narratives of the Dreaming or Law or Lore and the post-invasion narratives of resistance which create a sense of belonging to a meaningful universe.

Gabarino (1999) notes that some cultural differences in child rearing practices produce no intrinsic difference in child development and should be embraced as pure diversity. Culture is also part of what Gabarino outlines as the universal needs of children. He notes three categories of need as:

- o Physical (calories, vitamins, nutrients, etc.)
- o Psychological (acceptance vs. rejection; children rejected develop badly)
- o Spiritual (knowing they live in a meaningful universe with a larger meaning to their lives).



Gabarino suggests that to transcend trauma implies "transformational grace," which children can achieve through receiving love, recognition of self-worth and talent, and reliance on deep cultural resources (Gabarino, 1999, pp. 149-177). While Garbarino is focusing on minority ethnic communities in urban America, the key point is about how culture frames an effective measure of resilience by meeting, what he terms as, the spiritual needs of children is critical for Indigenous child and family welfare practice. To be resilient, a traumatised people tell their history their way – facing the truth but with hope. To do that is the challenge Indigenous people face everyday. For example, in Australia, Indigenous people remember the 26th of January as Survival Day and hold Indigenous musical and cultural events throughout the nation on that day as a sign of resilience. They don't let the dominant culture talk down to them; they sing words of defiance to that culture and perform ceremonies to demonstrate survival. As Ashford and Kreiner (1999) suggest, resilience is

The ability to reframe negative events by searching for a perspective that is simultaneously truthful and favourable helps people maintain a realistically optimistic perspective (p. 414).

Indigenous songs and stories of sadness always, even if un-stated, contain a message of hope. Turning tragedy and oppression into song-lines of identity and self-belief are critical to resilience. Kirby and Fraser (1997) suggest that there are three types of resiliency – overcoming the odds, sustained competence under stress and recovery from trauma. Indigenous people have demonstrated their resiliency in all these ways.

*The 'rights' stuff – self-determination as the persistence of voice and human rights as a meeting place between cultures*

The practice of Indigenous affairs by governments in Australia has been determined by non-Indigenous forms of governance. Whereas other colonised countries have been prepared to accept a limited Indigenous order of governance within their broader governmental framework, the debate in Australia has been confined to improving the prevailing government-directed, welfare-based community service model. This model emphasises the provision of services to Indigenous peoples by defining them as a category of disadvantaged Australians. Funding to Indigenous communities is at the discretion and direction of Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and agencies.

Decades of racially-based Indigenous child removal occurred within a framework where Indigenous sovereign and self-determining rights were denied and the assimilation policies of state or territory and Federal Governments were prominent. These Government policies sought to determine the future of Aboriginal and Islander communities rather than allow Aboriginal and Islander communities determine their own futures. In response to the trauma and injustice caused by the Stolen Generations policies it is important to today recognise Indigenous communities' self-determining

role in relation to their children. Indigenous leaders have continually sought the restoration of this right in their on-going struggle for recognition and rights. It is the persistence of Indigenous voice which has the potential to strengthen community and family resilience. While human rights is a Western construct, United Nations human rights instruments and declarations create a meeting place between the dominant culture and Australian Indigenous culture. It is with this potential cross-cultural meeting place in mind that we would suggest that promotion of a narrative-rights framework which recognises the self-determining rights of Indigenous peoples is essential for better outcomes for Aboriginal children today.

### **Creating the evidence base – researching culture and voice in a dominant culture context**

#### *Traditional Indigenous systems of knowledge verses Western systems*

Traditional Indigenous ways of research, learning and analysis in Australia were fixed and unchanging, and therefore from an Indigenous perspective, reliable. Indigenous ways of knowing are holistic and part of an Indigenous sense of identity and meaning. In most traditional Indigenous cultures, the 'old stories' or law or 'dreaming' not only defined spirituality and identity; they also established knowledge systems concerning economics, trade, land use, legal rights and responsibilities, political arrangements, education and family relationships. They were deep, holistic systems of knowledge and knowing, and embedded in Indigenous peoples very being. In traditional Indigenous society knowledge was conveyed in varying ways, particularly through story telling and importantly depended on when the listener was ready to hear, or more importantly, ready to listen.

In contrast to traditional Indigenous perspectives on the acquisition of knowledge, non-indigenous research methods and systems of knowledge were generally speaking driven by the need to 'finding out the facts', and therefore were about intellectually 'dividing-up' reality and enabling categorisation. In many respects non-indigenous ways of knowing, were about trying to control the world by dissecting and labelling. When Australia was colonised, non-indigenous researchers and scientists brought with them a method of knowing that was clearly under the spell of this Western desire to control the world through knowledge.

Western knowledge, with its flagship of research, has often advanced into Indigenous peoples communities with little regard for the notions of Indigenous worldviews and self determination in human development. As a result, the history of Westernization in virtually all locations of the globe reads like a script of relentless disruption and dispossession of Indigenous Peoples with the resulting common pattern of cultural and psychological discontinuity for many in the Indigenous community. (Ermine, Sinclair, and Jeffery, 2004)

Non-indigenous anthropologists and researchers mislabelled traditional Indigenous practices, physically measured people's heads to determine intelligence, 'measured' people's blood to define the degree of a person's 'Aboriginality', and treated Indigenous people virtually as fauna to be studied. Non-indigenous explorers and diarists also wrote down their encounters with Indigenous people and often left events out, such as massacres and attempts to poison Indigenous people, so that later they could claim the pre-eminence of the written word over the memory of Indigenous Elders and their oral stories of resistance and survival (Dodson, 2003, pp. 25-28).

The old order of research, positivist, empirical, and driven by the agenda of the academy, has not served Indigenous populations. The shift to new paradigms of research is the result of the decolonization agenda that has as a principle goal, the amelioration of disease and the recovery of health and wellness for Indigenous populations. The emerging paradigms utilize Indigenous knowledge and worldview for the development of the ethical foundations of research. (Ermine et al, 2004)

Today, particularly in the human sciences, there is greater awareness of the limits of science and the need to be aware of how power dynamics and culture influence the construction of research methodologies particularly concerning Indigenous people. This research approach moves towards inclusivity of voice, worldview, and culture; issues of representation, the location of the other and other ways of knowing are central to this evolving qualitative discourse.

Practice-informed evidence: comes from being in relationship with people, in exploring and understanding their lives, their stories, their experiences, their knowledge, while growing up from the ground, through engagement with people, building from their wisdom and knowledge, while living in process with them, to understand what they know and what they can do from what they know can be done, in the reciprocity of Process Evaluation Research. (Atkinson 2006)

#### *An international example of how culture and voice works for Indigenous children*

International research and practice also demonstrates the importance of culture as a means through which Indigenous communities can overcome disadvantage. A recent study from Canada by Michael Chandler and Travis Proulx (2006) for the International Academy for Suicide Research has pointed out that as measures for self-determination and culturally-based services increase, youth suicide dramatically decreases. As demonstrated by the following chart, the more Nation or tribal groups – here referred to as 'bands' – have control over and cultural input into governance, health, education, policing, resources and seeking title to land, the lower the incidence of youth suicide. Being on your own land, having a form of self-government, having Aboriginal health services and policing; all combine to create a sense that there is not only a proud past – but a promising future for young Aboriginal people. It is clear from this that self-

determination and cultural connection has a positive impact on the social determinants that relate to Aboriginal wellbeing and health and can create a platform for better outcomes for Aboriginal children.

*The dearth of research in Australia on culture as resilience for children*

There is clearly a dearth of evidence regarding Aboriginal children's social and emotional wellbeing with the exceptions of a few major reports, including one specific to children *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey* (Zubrick, S.K., et.al., 2005) and one regarding the general Aboriginal population *the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2004-05* (ABS, 2006). A third major study is the national study known as the *Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children* (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006) which, at the time of this paper had not been completed.

Although some work has been done to define Aboriginal wellbeing, there is little data available on the state of their wellbeing and particularly on the impact of culture and self-determination on Aboriginal child wellbeing. The *Ways Forward* report (Swan & Raphael, 1995) called for more data gathering on Aboriginal health in general and particularly on mental health. They argued for a need to explore risk and protective factors. Since then the Social and Emotional Well Being Framework has been developed (SHRG, 2004). It calls for more culturally appropriate, quality data and research to underpin improved service delivery.

Although the population of Aboriginal people in Victoria is small, it is disproportionately higher in the population under 25 years of age, and by any indicators of health and wellbeing, is one of the most vulnerable groups (DHS, 2006; Dwyer, et al., 2004). Therefore it is concerning why more research is not undertaken that either focuses specifically on Aboriginal children, or at least intentionally includes them in larger studies.

According to the peak Australian Indigenous child and family services body, the Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC)

Whilst there is a plethora of information available nationally and internationally in regards to children and young people, in fact there is not a great deal of national research which has been undertaken in regards to Indigenous children and youth in Australia (Borg, 2004, p. 5).

The dearth of literature on Aboriginal children may be further explained by the suspicion about research by the community (Vichealth, 2000; Humphery, 2001; Atkinson, 2004). Some Aboriginal people distrust research especially if they do not see how it can positively impact on the community 'under the microscope.' They also may consider themselves to be 'over researched' where the research is viewed as being of "career benefit to non-Aboriginal people, but of little benefit to Aboriginal people" (Central Land Council, 2006).

The role of cultural and spiritual factors on a child's social and emotional wellbeing has been under-researched across all cultures. A review of wellbeing indicators for Indigenous children concluded that the literature was meagre and that while these indicators for non-Aboriginal children "*may be similar they may not always be the same*" (McMahon, Reck, & Walker, 2003, p. 3). They commented on the focus on health, while there is little discussion of indicators that address cultural identity and spirituality. Bromfield and colleagues conclude that more research on culturally specific wellbeing indicators for Aboriginal children needs to be developed and implemented. They contend that existing Western assessment tools do not sufficiently take into account Aboriginal concepts of relatedness and childrearing. These tools are urgently needed for understanding and documenting the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, particularly those who have suffered trauma and deprivation. Existing assessment approaches do not adequately reflect difference in culture.

#### *Learning from each other*

In creating the right research tools it is important to increase the levels of participation of Indigenous agencies and workers and pay respect to their right to self-determination. Secondly it is important to recognise that there are 400 Indigenous peoples and therefore important not to generalise. Thirdly there needs to be a recognition that the imposed dominant culture's alien values of individualism and materialism do not, in most cases culturally match with Indigenous cultures. In broad terms there are dichotomies of values between non-Indigenous and Indigenous in the areas of adversarial versus consensus decision making, individual presenting issue versus holistic based approaches to child welfare, and an individual or immediate family versus cultural and communal understandings of the child as a person. Fourthly, need to understand the relationship of the researcher to the community and work out whether they are an observer or a participant. This means being aware of where the researcher sits in terms of power and culture. We therefore need to ask the question, 'who 'owns' the research', and in the case of researching Indigenous communities we would say that it must not only involve but be owned by the Indigenous community.

Following from this we must also be clear about the purpose of research. If research into Indigenous communities is to not be a subtle or obvious method of control, it must be community owned and community driven. Appropriate research methods need to blend Indigenous and non-Indigenous methodologies.

What is required is clear processes for

- cultural input and translation,
- community engagement and
- community empowerment.

Once these issues of research control and cultural awareness are dealt with, Indigenous researchers can then engage mainstream academic methods such as literature review and statistical analysis.

Indigenous people operate in 'two worlds' – Indigenous and non-indigenous. Indigenous communities have also adapted to colonisation in particular ways reflecting their resistance and resilience in the context of colonisation. The implications for research with Indigenous communities in Australia today means that the methodologies used are necessarily hybrid.

*Using mixed methods of research to navigate the dominant culture context*

Much of our work at VACCA is based on the need to develop programs that strengthens the resilience of Indigenous children. So the fundamental aim and purpose of our research work is to ensure Indigenous children are resilient. Measuring resilience is a problematic area. Ungar's study of resilience across cultures found that:

- there are global, as well as culturally and contextually specific aspects to young people's lives that contribute to their resilience;
- aspects of resilience exert differing amounts of influence on a child's life depending on the specific culture and context in which resilience is realized;
- aspects of children's lives that contribute to resilience are related to one another in patterns that reflect a child's culture and context; and
- tensions between individuals and their cultures and contexts are resolved in ways that reflect highly specific relationships between aspects of resilience (2008).

Through our partnerships with mainstream universities and community service organisations, we have focused on a community development and community engagement process based on the need for 'Yarning (talking) Up'. We have begun an Aboriginal Research Circle and various programs have developed a community development model of yarning with families about issues around bringing up their children. The data gathered from these sessions is use to evaluate the impact of our community engagement work.

Central to our 'yarnin' sessions for these programs are;

- Providing a safe environment. By that we mean creating an environment which is culturally safe as well as agreeing on ground rules so that every one is respected and heard.
- Ensuring cultural respect. We do this through a welcome to or encouragement of country, the presence of Elders and the use of ceremony at important points in the program.
- Ensuring trust. Again this is through promoting a quality of relationship through guided, but not dominating, forms of facilitation.
- Providing voice. Along with cultural respect, proving voice is central to our processes as it is the voice of community which needs to heard and respected.

Importantly, the learnings we glean are *with* and *for* the community, not *about* and *to* the community.

At VACCA we are working on creating an evidence base for our work in embedding culture into our programs and proving that culture is a protective factor and that children having access to their culture improves their outcomes. We have received three year funding from a philanthropic trust to enable us to do our own research according to our own priorities rather than fitting our ideas into what ever tenders and submission opportunities emerge from governments.

VACCA is currently conducting research and community consultations throughout Victoria on the notion of cultural safety. It is our contention that the key to understanding and promoting Aboriginal family resilience is through what we have termed a cultural safety framework. Preliminary findings from our research have identified that resilience is greater amongst families that have a strong sense of cultural identity, connection to traditional land and, however imperfect, participation in self-determining structures and processes that enable their 'voice' to be heard. These resilience factors relate not only to the 'elasticity' and 'buoyancy' factors which McCubbin and colleagues (1997) identify but also to the Canadian Suicide studies (Chandler and Proulx 2006). Our intention is to produce a research report which contains both our analysis of community consultations and an analysis of measures and indicators being used by the soon to be released *Victorian Aboriginal Children and Youth People Health and Wellbeing Survey*, using our cultural safety framework. We hope the methodology developed will assist us in developing specific cultural assessment tools for Indigenous children in out of home care .

There is much that we know from experience, but if Aboriginal community controlled organisations and services are to survive – we need to translate our community knowledge into the language of government treasury departments – and we need to do this in a way which maintains respect for our traditions and communities. Culture can't be dissected without being damaged – but the rich data of culture can be communicated if we can create culturally respectful hybrid systems of research and knowledge. Mainstream assessment tools often do not allow for cultural factors and ignore the critical need for Indigenous children to be strong in culture and have a sense of connectedness to their community. From our perspective, a lack of culture and connectedness is a risk factor for Indigenous children. We need to provide them with positive and caring environments, within their family, kinship and community networks, and develop healing methods to assist in their recovery, it is important to be able to accurately assess their current emotional and behavioural presentation and see the role that culture – which is fundamental to identity and self-esteem – has on promoting positive behaviours.

## **Conclusion – The beginnings of Australian Indigenous research into the efficacy of culture and voice**

In the context of Australia as a colonised land, Indigenous communities struggle against neo-colonial policies of mainstreaming and continuing denigration of their cultures. It is therefore critical that Indigenous child and family agencies are able to demonstrate the positive impact culture and self-determination has on meeting the needs of Indigenous children and re-creating networks of nurture and care. Our contention is that understanding the positive role of culture in promoting resilience creates a relational-holistic framework which equates with the emerging ecological perspective and that understanding the role of voice in resilience creates a narrative-rights framework which creates a meeting place to overcome the negative impact of cross-cultural dynamics between dominant and First Peoples cultures.

In conclusion, we need re-emphasise that we are at the beginning of a process of both future research methodologies and developing mutually respectful collaborations. Respect and trust are the keys to research. The Indigenous way of understanding the world and therefore of research and learning is based on relationships rather than the collection of 'information' or 'facts'. So too the future for Indigenous research in the future. Effective respectful partnerships need to marry relationships and styles of research, without privileging Western methods over Indigenous methods.

Secondly, Indigenous research must be a culturally embedded process – not just another colonial imposition. This goes to not only how information is sought but also how information is understood. In the area of child and family welfare we know that connectedness to culture, extended kin and community are fundamental to Indigenous children's well-being and override considerations of wealth or conspicuous consumption.

Lastly we would emphasise the need for research to be concerned with empowering communities rather than assessing and categorising them. The core responsibility of researchers is to the community. Both the ownership and purpose of research is to strengthen communities and help them develop the capacity to overcome two centuries of colonisation and marginalisation. For Indigenous people to be 'researched on' has proven to be an abusive process but if Indigenous people and communities are in control of research, they can navigate the dominant culture context, meet the hopes and aspirations of Indigenous people and help Indigenous communities in raising children who are strong in culture, resilient and hopeful about what the future holds.



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