Forcible separation and assimilation as trauma: The historical and socio-political experiences of Australian Aboriginal people

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Introduction

This paper contributes to the literature on collective, historical and intergenerational trauma, giving focus to the experiences of Australia's Indigenous people, and examining how past child welfare laws and practices and ongoing oppressive government policies have led to the significant inequities present in Aboriginal communities today. It is argued that the most important step towards addressing these inequities is that practitioners working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people develop a sophisticated understanding of how forcible separation and assimilation laws, policies and practices has resulted in trauma. The notion of trauma was originally considered to be a 'suspect condition' but societal understanding has 'moved from a realm in which the symptoms of the wounded soldier or the injured worker were deemed of doubtful legitimacy to one in which their suffering, no longer contested, testifies to an experience that excites sympathy and merits compensation' (Fassin & Rechtman, p.5). However, Indigenous Australian's suffering continues to be contested with many yet to experience universal acknowledgement of their trauma and restorative justice. This paper aims to demonstrate the importance of recognising the origins of Indigenous trauma in Australia. The word Indigenous is used respectfully and interchangeably with the terms Aboriginal or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in this paper. All terms are used to acknowledge, describe and honour the original inhabitants and traditional owners of Australia and their descendants.

In 2016, the Australian census data estimated that nearly 650,000 people identified as Indigenous Australians which represents nearly 3% of the overall Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). New South Wales (NSW) recorded the highest Indigenous population with 216,000 identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Sydney is home to 70,135 Indigenous people (2017, ABS). Disproportionality and disparity are present in the health, social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous Australians compared to non-Indigenous Australians. For example, there high rates of juvenile and adult incarceration, alarming youth suicide statistics and an overrepresented of Indigenous children in the child protection and out-of-home (OOHC) care sector (Fogliani, 2019). This article seeks to illustrate how these experiences need to be understood within a trauma framework and how an examination of the past child welfare laws, policies and practices has implications for human service providers and especially welfare practitioners working in the child protection sector.

1 Historical Trauma

The concept of historical trauma has been developed within the research literature as the result of growing recognition of the intergenerational impact that flows from systematically inflicted and sustained trauma on a subjugated population. It is a concept that challenges conventional approaches to public health and social welfare, calling on researchers and

practitioners to expand their thinking about inequity beyond individual risk factors to, for some populations, consideration of a legacy of health, psychological, social and economic inequalities as the result of mass trauma that can persist across generations (Sotero, 2006). Historical trauma is often inextricably linked to racism and the oppression of one group by a dominant group (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski, 2004; Williams, Neighbours & Jackson, 2003). It was first conceptualized in relation to Holocaust survivors and their families, and has since been recognised in a range of other racial or ethnic groups who have experienced extreme violence, segregation, economic deprivation and cultural dispossession, such as Cambodians, Palestinians, and colonized Indigenous peoples.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiences of 'multiple deaths and diseases, expulsion from home lands, loss of self-sufficiency and autonomy, the arbitrary removal of children and assimilation strategies, unlawful incarcerations and cultural suppression' (Ratnavale, 2007) is a representative case for historical trauma. Hartmann and Gone (cited in Kirmayer, Gone & Moses 2014, p.301) propose the 'Four Cs' to describe common features of Indigenous historical trauma:

> 1) Colonial injury to Indigenous peoples by European settlers who "perpetrated" conquest, subjugation, and dispossession; 2) Collective experience of these injuries by entire Indigenous communities whose identities, ideals, and interactions were radically altered as a consequence; 3) Cumulative effects from these injuries as the consequences of subjugation, oppression, and marginalization which have "snowballed" throughout ever-shifting historical sequences of adverse policies and practices by dominant settler societies; and 4) Cross-generational impacts of these injuries as legacies of risk and vulnerability which were passed from ancestors to descendants in unremitting fashion until "healing" interrupts these deleterious processes (p.301).

The work of Hartmann and Gone is relevant in understanding the historical trauma of Indigenous Australians as the dismantling of cultural and social structures, pursued by the colonial government in Australia, sought to dispossess and colonise Australia's first people. Indigenous Australian's identities were altered and changed with the placement of Aboriginal children with non-Aboriginal families where 'children were de-socialised as Aboriginal and re-socialised as whites' (Read cited in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p.40). The introduction and implementation of dehumanising practices and policies which cascaded through the generations of Australian Indigenous communities eventuated in a loss of cultural and social links with their past. It is argued that the impact of these alterations to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's social order and way of life have both contemporary and generational application and effect.

2   Collective Trauma

The early work of sociologist Kai Erikson (1995) in the area of natural disasters explained that 'collective trauma' has devastating social consequences resulting in 'a loss of communality' for the affected people in a community. The experiences of natural disaster survivors are characterised by a sense of helplessness, interruptions to coping mechanisms, perceptions of threat and major changes in behaviour along with physical symptoms such as breathing difficulties, palpitations and epigastric discomfort (Raphael, 1986). Following a traumatic event there is an overwhelming sense of distress and loss that can be shared by groups of people who also experience the disintegration of social support systems (Erikson, 1995).

While the term collective trauma may have had its origins in the context of environmental and human disasters it is important to recognise that the 'shared catastrophes of any kind - natural or not - represent collective trauma' (Ratnavale, 2007). Human- initiated trauma as a result of 'deliberate and often cruel actions are accompanied by significant amounts of shared shame, shared helplessness, shared rage and shared suffering' as survivors of human initiated trauma are often dealing with 'the perpetrator - enemy as a human agency' (Ratnavale, 2007). Environmental disasters may be seen as 'acts of God' and are typically unavoidable leaving little room for blame or retaliation because 'our fate is often outside of our control' (Raphael, 1986, p.3). In short, traumatic experiences as a result of human inflicted harm, the more directly the trauma may affect people and have longer lasting repercussions. Typical signs and symptoms of cultural trauma include deep mistrust of self, others, even family, fear and anticipation of betrayal, cultural genocide, desecrating land and institutions, losing traditional values, and a conspiracy of silence (Halloran, 2004: Krieg, 2009).

Collective trauma can be seen in the experiences of Indigenous peoples and persecuted minorities who have suffered oppression and been denied the expression of culture and identity at the hands of the powerful. Lowitja O'Donoghue (1993), who was the inaugural Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), declared Indigenous Australian's experiences as:

> A history of brutality and bloodshed. The assault on Aboriginal people includes massacres, diseases, dispossession and dispersal from land. Aboriginal people were not only dispossessed of the land but also much of the traditional culture and language was taken from them… I cannot overstate the traumatic consequences of policy and the destruction of Aboriginal and community life that resulted (1993, p.14-15).

3   Intergenerational Trauma

The literature documents the origins of the term, intergenerational trauma to explain the experiences of the Holocaust survivors post WWII (Herman, 1992; Kellermann, 2001). Intergenerational trauma is distinct from collective and historical trauma as it refers to 'the specific experience of trauma across familial generations, but does not necessarily imply a shared group trauma' (Mohatt, Thompson, Thai & Tebes, 2014, p.128). The burden of intergenerational trauma is transmitted from generation to the next generation because as Herman (1992, p.1) states 'atrocities refuse to be buried' in the minds of the survivors. Intergenerational trauma definitions and experiences are not limited to war atrocities and holocaust trauma. More recently the concept of intergenerational trauma was used to describe the experience colonised Indigenous societies such as Canadian's First Nations people which involved 'a continuous passing on of unresolved and deep-seated emotions, such as grief and chronic sadness, to successive descendants' (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski, 2004, p.2).

The effects of intergenerational trauma among many Australian Indigenous communities are slowly beginning to be recognised by the broader Australian community. According to Professor of child and adolescent psychiatry, Helen Milroy (2018) 'the causes of trauma didn't occur in a single generation. They reach back for 230 years, in the shape of frontier violence, massacres, disruption to homelands and the extensive forced removal of children from their families, the Stolen Generations'. The seminal work by Professor Atkinson (2002), which explores the conceptions of trauma and theories of transgenerational transfer among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, labels common behaviours and typical symptoms of intergenerational trauma as despair, alcohol and drug misuse, suicidal ideation, anti-social behaviour, dysfunctional families, fractured relationships, anger, depression,

impaired parenting, and intrusive memories and thoughts which permeate the conscious and unconscious minds of the survivors and their children.

Researchers, such as Maria Brave Heart (1998), have been influential in applying a trauma lens to studies of health and wellbeing outcomes for Native American peoples. She describes the experiences of Native American people since colonization as being defined by 'pervasive and cataclysmic collective, intergenerational and massive group trauma . . . cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations' (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins & Altschul, 2011, p.282). This 'wounding' has led to profound current health disparities, including physical and mental health and substance abuse disorders. There is a growing body of research that identifies the colonial history of American Indian/Native Alaska Communities and the First Nations people of Canada as historical and collective trauma, characterised by massacres, genocidal policies, pandemics from the introduction of new diseases, forced relocation, forced removal of children though Indian boarding school policies, and prohibition of spiritual and cultural practices (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010).

The colonized people of Australia have endured abuse at the hands of the state in a way that parallels the Indigenous American experience (Cunneen & Libesman, 2000). To date, for the most part, this history has not been recognised as having an ongoing impact on contemporary Australian Aboriginal children, families and communities. Intergenerational trauma has not been well understood in this context (Atkinson, 2013; Petchkovsky, San Roque, Napaljarri & Butler, 2004). A brief summary of the history follows, with particular attention paid to the laws, policies and practices targeting Aboriginal children and families.

4   The Historical Context

4.1 Australian Aboriginal Contact with British Colonisers

The process of colonising Australia by Europeans, from 1788, was conducted without consent and by force (Attwood, 2005; Foley, 1999; Marcus, 2001; Reynolds, 1999). Early colonial contact was violent and Aboriginal people were overpowered by British arrivals in frontier conflict as they fought to retain possession of their lands. The invasion marked the beginning of dispossession of land and the erosion of culture and identity for Aboriginal people whose well-established social laws, rituals, customs and spiritual beliefs were intrinsically linked to the land (Attwood, 2005; Miller, 1985; Pettman, 1992,).

Widespread slaughter, disease, imprisonment, slavery, forced removal from traditional lands, dislocation and forced resettlement onto missions and stations with people from different Aboriginal communities and languages contributed to the destruction of identity (Miller, 1985). The disruption of tribal lands by Europeans resulted in ecological destruction with the loss of native food plants, destroyed hunting and fishing areas, and damaged habitats of native animals and birds (Miller, 1985). The view that Aboriginal Australians were a 'dying race' was widely held by Europeans during colonisation (Buti, 2007). This belief was supported and reinforced by the strong conviction that the 'ancient and, indeed, regressive' people had no place in the 'modern and progressive nation' of Australia (Attwood, 2005, p.15). There is little doubt that British empire-building was not just about land acquisition and conquering new places. The intentions of the new settlers were calculated, premeditated and unambiguous - kill off Indigenous Australians and 'eradicate the Aboriginal population' (Haskins, 2005, p.53). Attitudes of the English settlers and the contempt and disdain towards Australia's first people is captured in the work of Elder (1988, p.54) 'we must starve them off to get rid of

them - they are a squalid dirt lot' and 'the best thing that can be done is to shoot all the blacks and manure the ground with carcasses'.

Despite the massacres, deliberate and non-deliberate introduction of fatal diseases, dramatic changes in their relationship with the land and compromised lifestyles, Aboriginal communities showed enormous resilience and survived. Aboriginal survival was met with the introduction of a new strategy to disrupt their lives and dispossess them of their land. The new approach targeted their children by forcibly separating Aboriginal children from their parents, families and communities, masking the reality of land acquisition and economic gain by the colonisers. This new tactic ensured that Aboriginal children were deprived of their family, identity, language and culture (Maynard, 2007; Miller, 1985; Sherwood, 2013). In short, in their attempts to 'rid Australia of the Aboriginal problem' (Ellinghaus, 2003, p.183) authorities now focussed on eliminating the future Aboriginal population, the children, because without their children the Aboriginal population had no future.

4.2   The Impact of British Imperialism on Aboriginal People

The imposition of European ways and Christian beliefs that began in the 1800s underpinned the laws, practices and policies involving the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). As early as 1814, an institution was established with the purpose of educating Aboriginal children away from the influence of their families (Lock, 1997). However, it was considered a failure since the Aboriginal children continued to follow the traditional ways of their Elders, following their spiritual beliefs, singing traditional songs, and speaking their language as the children maintained strong links to their family (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

From that time on policies and legislation on separation and assimilation were imposed. Laws governed where people could live, who they could marry and what transport they could use to name a few. In 1883, The New South Wales (NSW) Aborigines Protection Board was established as a non-statutory body consisting of colonial politicians and public servants. The Board was responsible for establishing local boards to manage Aboriginal stations along with the distribution of 'rations, clothing and huts for accommodation' (NSW State Archives and Records, n.d.). The Aborigines Protection Board, later known as the Aboriginal Welfare Board, remained in operation until 1969 (Link-Up NSW Aboriginal Corporation & Wilson, 1997; Miller, 1985) and for several decades controlled, oppressed and subjugated Aboriginal children in institutions.

4.3   Cultural and Racial Genocide

Aboriginal children were removed from their families to 'educate and train' them, although testimonial evidence given to a National Inquiry into the forcible separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families portrayed these practices as 'cultural and racial genocide rather than the provision of opportunity' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). The underlying philosophy and principles that gave rise to the forced separation of Aboriginal children were not about 'care' but were informed by racist ideology, racial superiority and were racist in nature (Manne, 2001; Sherwood, 2013).

There were two schools of thought driving the forced separation of Aboriginal children from their families. Firstly, there was a strongly held belief that Aboriginal children had to be saved from their 'savage' Aboriginal culture, community and family. Secondly, was the belief that

the only hope Aboriginal children had, in the wake of colonisation, was to be 'civilised' (Petchkovsky et al., 2004) and reap the benefits offered by the new settler society. These so-called advantages and opportunities were brought into question when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people began to reveal their real-life experiences. A resident of a Christian Mission recalls:

> They were pretty rough Christians in those days. They flogged you to put the fear of God into you. You had to be on guard all the time. The Super[intendant] was always trying to find some fault, something wrong. He'd hit you with a leather strap until your skin was cut. He was a big man, 17 stone. One day, I saw him flog an 8 stone teenager so badly that he lost feeling in his legs, lost bladder control, his legs just fell from under him, and he was left to crawl along the ground to the shed.
>
> Another time, he asked some boys to walk 10 miles to the pony paddock, so they could help him load ponies onto a truck. There were wild ponies in the days, which, if you could catch and ride them, you were allowed to keep in the pony paddock and look after. When we got there, he'd arrived [in his truck]. He pointed out some cabbage palms. We noticed they had been cut. 'Who cut the palms?' he asked. None of us had an axe, so none of us answered. …... then [he] told us to unload the ponies. There were six of them. The Super then put the ponies in a crush, and killed them with an axe, one by one, forcing us to watch (Petchkovsky et al, 2004, p. 5).

Children were often placed into abusive, cruel and regimented institutions where they were indoctrinated to despise their race, their culture, their families and, by implication, themselves (Swan & Raphael, 1995). Child sexual assault, neglect and physical and psychological abuse were common experiences for Aboriginal children. The extent of the personal pain and psychological impact felt by Aboriginal children is described in one testimony from an Aboriginal woman who was placed at the Cootamundra Girls Home:

> When the girls left the home, they were sent out to service to work in the homes and outlying farms of middle-class white people as domestics ... On top of that you were lucky not to be sexually, physically and mentally abused, and all for a lousy sixpence that you didn't get to see anyway. Also, when the girls fell pregnant, their babies were taken from them and adopted out to white families, they never saw them again. (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p.44).

Indigenous people were 'devalued and rejected as primitive and barbaric and irrelevant to the modern settler nation' (Haebich, 2001, p.75) and the perception within the Australian society was a state of 'knowing and not knowing' or 'innocent denial' when knowledge of the forcible removal practices surfaced (Haebich, 2001, p.76). Although there were some sympathises toward the mother's grief the prevailing attitude was separation from the Aboriginal family was in the best interests of the child and also aimed to extinguish the 'perceived future menace to local law and order, racial purity and economic progress' (Haebich, 2001, p.77). To contextualize the political and personal milieu of this time and also illustrate how elected governments of the day were increasingly concerned with racial purity and promoting a 'whites-only' country in Australia, that is, to replicate the British Empire, the White Australian policy was introduced in 1901 (Pettman, 1992). The central premise of the White Australia policy aimed to strengthen British Crown Sovereignty and safeguard the British identity in Australia. Laws were established to prevent non-European immigration. Racist ideology informed comprehensive legislation to deal with almost all aspects of daily life for Aboriginal people (Manne, 2000).

4.4 Forcible Separation by Government Sanctioned Laws Between 1909 to 1943

In 1909, the NSW Aborigines Protection Act provided statutory powers to the NSW Aborigines Protection Board to legally separate Aboriginal children from their families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Under this legislation and with the authority of the Board's jurisdiction, Aboriginal children were taken from their families and placed in institutions not just because of safety and protection concerns but more often because their culture and heritage were considered inferior and unwanted (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). The conditions in institutions were deplorable and without basic amenities as large institutions were overcrowded and expensive to run (Link-Up NSW Aboriginal Corporation & Wilson, 1997).

The NSW Aborigines Protection Act also required Aboriginal children to be apprenticed, girls in domestic service and boys as agricultural labourers, from the age of 14 until they were 21 years old (Miller, 1985). The ruling applied regardless of whether or not the children were in the care of the Protection Board or living with their families. It also included a set of regulations stating that all Indigenous girls and boys reaching the age of 14 years were to be dispatched to training homes (Miller, 1985). This government directive offered Aboriginal parents no alternative. The emphasis at these homes was on training, not education, as a former child resident from Cootamundra Aboriginal Training Girls Home, Rita Wenberg recalls in her video testimony:

> As I was growing up being abused was a natural thing in the home. Most of the abuse in the home was mostly being hit by the whip with the wire and the leather strap wrapped around it. They usually hit you with that and then you would be thrown into the box room and the deputy matron, she was cruel. She used to hit me over the head a lot… They used to let our Aunty Amy come up to the home [be]cause she was white. Any dark or black [people] they weren't allowed because we were being brought up as a European. Dress yourself as a European. Talk as a European (Stolen Generations' (Testimonies Foundation, 2009).

Racism was a central feature in the forcible separation laws. Children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were at risk of being taken away at birth from their families due to the inherent discrimination that underpinned the removal laws. No other cultural group or children of other racial backgrounds were subjected to the same level of racial scrutiny and ultimately, forcibly removed from their families in the way that Indigenous Australians were treated within the child welfare system. Put simply, the forcible separation policies were 'designed to put an end to Aboriginality', (Read, 2012, p.5). Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Dodson, discussed the weight of the legislation in the 'Bringing Them Home' DVD (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997):

> Aboriginal people were the only people in this country ever to be automatically wards of state at birth because their Aboriginality was perceived as a problem.

An amendment to the NSW Aborigines Protection Act (1909) was proposed in 1914 however, the 1915 Amendment Act was met with some resistance during the parliamentary debate as the Honourable Mr. P. McGarry strongly opposed the introduction of legislation when he said the purpose of the law was, 'to steal the child away from the parents' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p.42). The Colonial Secretary responded by saying, 'no, the hon. member's suggestion is wrong. It is not a question of stealing the children but of

saving them' (Parliamentary Debate 1914-1915, cited in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p.42). A second member of parliament assessed the 1915 Amendment Act, 'as tantamount to the reintroduction of slavery in NSW' and said 'this act of cruelty is a scheme to take children prisoners and to gain absolute control of the child and use them as a slave without paying wages' (Parliamentary Debate 1914-1915, cited in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p.42). With very little opposition, in 1915, the amendment to the Aborigines Protection Act (1909) gave the NSW Aborigines Protection Board complete authority to separate Aboriginal children from their families without the involvement of courts (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). To quote Read (1981):

> No court hearings were necessary: the manager of an Aboriginal station, policeman on a reserve or in a town might simply order them removed. The racial intention was obvious enough for all prepared to see, and some managers cut a long story short when they came to that part of the committal notice, 'Reason for the Board taking control of the child'? They simply wrote, 'for being Aboriginal' (p.6).

The consequences of the 1915 Amendment Act rendered Aboriginal people even more powerless as they were denied natural justice to lodge appeals through the legal system because there was no court order to challenge. Declaring Aboriginality was not the sole reason for separation. A number of spurious other reasons that were commonly cited included,

> To send to service', `Being 14 years', `At risk of immorality', `Neglected', `To get her away from surroundings of Aboriginal station/Removal from idle reserve life' and `Orphan' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p.42).

Education policies heightened the vulnerability of Aboriginal children to being forcibly separated from their families. In 1884, the New South Wales Department of Education introduced the 'clean, clad and courteous' policy, requiring Aboriginal students to behave in a courteous manner, be hygienic, unsoiled and clothed in a way deemed to be appropriate to be eligible to attend school (Parbury, 1986). By 1902, the policy reflected the values of racial superiority by increasing the power of education authorities to 'exclude on demand' (Parbury, 1986). The Department of Education was entitled to prevent the entry and enrolment of an Aboriginal child in the public education system as a result of a discriminatory policy. The grounds for the policy included 'opposition' and protests from the non-Aboriginal community and the 'home conditions' of the Aboriginal child. Aboriginal children who did not attend school were labelled 'uncontrollable' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p.47).

The new provisions in the Child Welfare Act (NSW State Government, 1939) defined a 'neglected' or 'uncontrollable' child as legally viable for removal from their family. Labeling an Aboriginal child 'uncontrollable' placed them under surveillance and directly in the path of police and child welfare authorities. The discriminatory nature of the education policy preventing Aboriginal children from attending school simultaneously heightened their vulnerability and increased the risk of an Aboriginal child being removed from their family as they were labelled 'uncontrollable' for not attending school. The education policy remained in effect until 1972 before it was withdrawn from the NSW Teachers Handbook (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

In 1943, a further and final amendment to the NSW Aborigines Protection Act, ensured that Aboriginal children would remain separated from their families and that the Aboriginal Welfare Board would continue to control the lives of Aboriginal people until 1969 by introducing 'exemption certificates' to Aboriginal people who requested to be legally 'deemed not be Aboriginal' (Link-Up NSW Aboriginal Corporation & Wilson, 1997). Exemption was most often sought by individuals so that they could no longer be constrained by the NSW Aborigines Protection Act and could seek employment or access to access the same social security benefits available to other Australians (Link-Up NSW Aboriginal Corporation & Wilson, 1997, p.88). This 1943 amendment was another deliberate strategy to eliminate Aboriginal familial and cultural links. It forbid Aboriginal people no longer 'deemed' Aboriginal to have contact with Aboriginal family, relatives or other Aboriginal people living on stations without permission (Link-Up NSW Aboriginal Corporation & Wilson, 1997). The conditions of exemption certificates compelled an Aboriginal person to live as a non-Aboriginal person but without the citizenship status or human rights of a European non-Aboriginal person. In fact, Aboriginal people, with or without exemption certificates were not classified citizens of Australia for almost a quarter of a century after the 1943 amendment. During the 1950s and 1960s many Aboriginal people relinquished their 'opportunity' to be a non-Aboriginal Aboriginal in favour of access and contact with family, kinship and community relationships (Link-Up NSW Aboriginal Corporation & Wilson, 1997).

4.5 Australian Assimilation Policy

By 1937 Australia officially adopted the policy of 'assimilation' which underpinned the policies, practices and laws governing Aboriginal people. The 1937 Assimilation policy states:

> Generally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation, all native characteristics of the Australian Aborigine will be eradicated.... The problem of our half-castes will quickly be eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white (Commonwealth Government, 1937).

The impact of the Australian Assimilation Policy was felt by all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the nation. The state endorsed existing separation and the new Assimilation policy 'affected every region of Australia' but the more telling fact is that 'not one Indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p.37). Aboriginal children were segregated according to skin colour believing that Aboriginal children with lighter skin were superior to Aboriginal children with darker skin (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). These beliefs often caused further distress and isolation as light-skinned Aboriginal children were separated from the darker skinned Aboriginal children despite birth, familial, kin and sibling connections. In NSW light-skinned Aboriginal children were often adopted or fostered to non-Aboriginal parents or sent to institutions for non-Aboriginal children (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). A former resident of the Cootamundra Girls Home said, 'I remember all we children being herded up, like a mob of cattle, and feeling the humiliation of being graded by the colour of our skins for the government records' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p.186).

The Aboriginal Welfare Board continued the process of breeding out the black appearance, black culture and the black characteristics of Aboriginal people (Miller, 1985). Ironically, in 1939 Australia sent troops to the other side of the world to fight in the Second World War

(Miller, 1985) against a regime attempting to socially engineer and biologically construct a superior race of people through the eugenics movement (Foley, 1999; Marcus, 2001; Tatz, 2016). A similar pseudo-science was introduced in Australia where the goal was to 'eliminate the full-blood and permit white admixture [to 'half castes'] and eventually the race will become white', (Beresford & Omaji, 1998, p.43) i.e. fair features, blonde hair, blue eyes and white skin. What was happening in 'Nazi-occupied Europe and the tactics of dawn raids conducted by the Gestapo to take away family members at the time of day when they were most vulnerable and least able to resist or escape', (Miller, 1985, p.158) could be paralleled with what was happening at the same time in to Indigenous families in Australia.

The belief that if the Aboriginal colour was extinguished, the Aboriginal culture would be extinguished, was naïve. Changing the skin colour of Aboriginal people could never erase their ancestral origins, community structures, spirituality, traditions and connections to the land. The emphasis on whiteness failed to take into account that Aboriginal is not a colour, it is a culture. In fact, Aboriginal culture is the oldest living culture in the world (Gooda & Kiss, 2013). Cunneen and Libesman (2000) argued that the assimilation and separation of Aboriginal children was a deprivation of liberty, denial of parental rights, abuse of power, breach of guardianship duties, and a violation of human rights as children were imprisoned in orphanages, subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse, punishment, hunger, and fear, not protected from harm and exploitation, and were told that their parents were dead.

The Assimilation Policy was eventually dismantled in 1969, but the effects of the racial bigotry and discriminatory practices continued well beyond that time. Aboriginal children were removed from their families and made State wards or placed in foster homes, with non-Aboriginal social workers citing 'moral danger' and neglect (Lock, 1997). Children were removed when they were found to be 'neglected' and 'uncontrollable' but also if they were subjected to 'improper' or 'incompetent' parenting (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; Child Welfare Act, 1939 S4). Too often these terms of reference were exaggerated or fabricated for the courts. Aboriginal children were categorised under a non-Aboriginal model of childrearing, and poverty was seen as neglect. Parenting was seen through a Eurocentric framework of what constituted adequate care and dictated the qualities of a suitable carer. Due to continued surveillance, any deviation from the non-Aboriginal norm in behaviour meant that children were taken away (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

Past child welfare laws, policies and practices were discriminatory and racist in nature, and their impact resulted in significant trauma for Aboriginal people which continues today.

4.6 Evidence of historical and repeated trauma in Australian Aboriginal communities today

On all measures of health, economic, employment, emotional and social well-being, Aboriginal Australians remain disadvantaged. The symptomology of trauma is prevalent in many Aboriginal communities (Atkinson, 2002; Atkinson, Nelson & Atkinson, 2010; Kreig, 2009; Menzies, 2019; Petchkovsky, San Roque, Napaljarri and Butler, 2002). Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Helen Milroy (2018), who recently completed her five-year term as a Commissioner on the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Assault reflects on how she was 'struck by the accounts of generations removal - where up to five generations of one family were sent to institutions'. The legacy of past child welfare practices contributes to the gross overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection system today (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017).

The consequences of these human rights violations have led to documented high rates of self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse, profound grief and loss, high rates of violence, unresolved grief, mental illness, depression, transience, homelessness, marginalization, discrimination, feelings of insecurity, and feelings of hopelessness, which are commonly experienced by Aboriginal people (Atkinson, 2002; AIHW, 2018; Menzies, 2019; Petchkovsky et al, 2002). Aboriginal people are twice as likely as non-Aboriginal Australians to be hospitalised for mental health and behavioural disorders as well as for intentional self-harm (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). High rates of domestic violence and negligence have been documented (Cheers, Binell, Coleman, Gentle, Miller, Taylor, & Weetra, 2006; Stanley, Tomison & Pocock, 2003), concerning particularly in light of research that identifies trauma in children who witness family violence (Carter & Myers, 2007; Cozolino, 2002; Perry, 2000; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). Evidence suggests that children exposed to intra-familial violence display trauma-related behaviours which parallel the trauma behaviours of children living in war-torn countries (Herman, 1992).

Within the research literature there is strong evidence for the impact of trauma and psychological distress on physical health (Banyard, Edwards & Kendall-Tackett, 2009; Sherwood, 2013). Not unlike the health profiles of other colonized peoples, there are significant health inequities for Indigenous Australians compared to non-Indigenous Australians. For example, Aboriginal people have significantly higher rates of stillbirth, low birth weight and premature babies. Infant mortality rates are 1.7 times higher than the Australian average, and child mortality rates are 2.1 times higher (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012; Carville, Lehmann, Hall, Moore, Richmond, de Klerk & Burgner, 2007). Pyoderma is as high as 70% in some communities, and impaired hearing affects 67% of Indigenous children (Lehmann, Tennant, Silva, McAullay, Lannigan, Coates, 2003). Aboriginal communities experience significantly higher rates of chronic diseases of the circulatory system, cancer and hypertensive disorder (Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet, 2017). There is a 10.6 year life expectancy gap for Aboriginal males compared to non-Aboriginal Australian males, and a 9.5 year gap for Aboriginal females (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018).

The social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous Australians is significantly compromised as a result of being forcibly separated from their families. A recent study found Indigenous Australians removed from their families reported high rates of childhood trauma and were more likely to develop dementia than Indigenous people who were not removed (Radford et al. 2017). The new report on Stolen Generations found the negative consequences of removal include 'not being employed, having experienced homelessness, and encountering discrimination in the past 12 months' (AIHW, 2018, p.70). Evidence documenting the deleterious effects of removal is not limited to the Stolen Generations cohort. Experiences of marginalisation and discrimination is also a major concern for the descendants of the Stolen Generations (AIHW, 2018). A new study titled, 'Children living in households with members of the Stolen Generations, concluded several adverse outcomes for Indigenous children living in households with members of the Stolen Generations compared to Indigenous children in households with adults who were not separated from their families (AIHW, 2019). Indigenous children living with members of the Stolen Generations reported, 'having been treated unfairly at school for being Indigenous, experienced stress in the last 12 months and have poor self-assessed health' demonstrating the 'transfer of intergenerational trauma and poverty' (AIHW, 2019, p.vi).

In 2008 the Australian Government launched the 'Closing the Gap' campaign with the goal to eliminate health and education disparities between Indigenous Australians within a generation (by 2030). The latest report indicates that, while there have been some improvements, Australia is not on track to reach the required targets for improvement within the set time frames (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017). There is a call for more significant government investment. While increased investment would be a very positive step, it is important that this investment is meaningful. Milroy (2018) asserts the need:

> For practitioners to understand intergenerational trauma and acknowledges it is the key to Closing the Gap for Indigenous people and that trauma informed practice is essential to making sure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to appropriate and relevant health services.

It seems there is limited value in continuing to pursue a conventional approach, focusing on individual risk factors, unless there is equal investment in the underlying cause of the discrepancies. This would involve actively addressing the collective trauma present within Aboriginal communities, recognising the ongoing systemic and racist approaches that reinforce this trauma, and requiring change not only in the lifestyles and habits of Aboriginal people but also in the ways in which service professionals work with and form partnerships with Aboriginal people. Central to challenging the individual, institutional and societal discrimination is the need to acknowledge the racist intent of child removals and the impact of trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians.

5 Implications for practitioners

To examine the impact of the past assimilation laws, policies and practices it is important to recognise the dichotomy between the past child welfare laws and the current child protection laws of Australia. It is argued that an accurate understanding of the past and present laws is essential working knowledge for all human service practitioners and may dispel inaccurate beliefs about why Aboriginal children were removed from their families in the last century (e.g. the assumption that Aboriginal people are abusive parents). This paper has argued that the former child welfare laws, policies and practices were based on an ideology of racial inferiority with the explicit aim of deculturalising Aboriginal children in order to assimilate them into the dominant Anglo culture as the child welfare laws were the Government's deliberate attempt to eradicate Aboriginal people (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Providing practitioners with factual information about the structural and systematic barriers Aboriginal people have experienced can provide some insight into the reality of the experience for many Aboriginal people and may assist to challenge myths and negative beliefs. For instance, recognising violent, negligent and self-destructive behaviours that are seen within some Aboriginal communities as the symptoms of collective, historical and intergenerational trauma does not excuse these behaviours, but it does offer a new framework within which to address them, and challenges the often made assumption that somehow violence, substance abuse and negligent parenting is intrinsic to being Aboriginal. If practitioners are inadequately informed about the historical and socio-political context of child removal it is likely to inhibit their understanding about the origins of Indigenous trauma in Australia. It is critically important that all Australians have access to truth telling and that we are 'able to honestly and openly own our shared history' because without a factual narrative our national psyche will continue be 'based on a false and incomplete history' (McMullan, 2001).

6   Conclusion

Davoine and Gaudilliere (2004, p.47) describe the impact of cultural genocide, geographic displacement or forced removals as a 'dehistoricization of experience'. They use the term 'frozen trauma' to explain how an individual's past trauma remains present and how these manifest in severe psychiatric symptoms, such as psychosis and severance of social links. The opportunity for these individuals and groups to 'name the unnameable' experience of their trauma is key to healing (Davoine and Gaudilliere, 2004). This article seeks to contribute to the body of literature that explicitly names the experiences of colonised Indigenous Australians as trauma, commencing with invasion and continuing through generations of intrusive government legislation and disempowering interventions. It argues that an understanding of collective, historical and intergenerational trauma shifts the conversation away from judgement and criticism of a community that overwhelmingly fails to thrive, to a conversation about resilience and survival and how we can all contribute to healing.

There is a lack of evaluative data on interventions and programs to meet the needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people impacted by trauma as a result of forced separation (Atkinson, 2013, p.2). Targeted and systematic research needs to be conducted to determine how to effectively work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in ways that will lead to successful outcomes to address the cycle of intergenerational trauma and prevent the inequities faced by many Indigenous Australians. Moving forward with collective healing programs for members of the Stolen Generations and Indigenous people, in general, is still 'not clearly understood or grounded in evidence' (Blignault, et al, 2014, p.20). However, drawing on healing models of practices informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, strengths-based approaches, incorporating trauma informed principles and restorative justice measures are considered fundamental to aid recovery from trauma and improve the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians (Atkinson, 2013: Menzies, 2019; Blignault, et al, 2014).

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