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**Journeys of connecting: Understanding cultural connection for  
First Nations children and young people in out-of-home care in  
Victoria, Australia**

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

On the continent now known as Australia, European colonisation has greatly affected First Nations families' lives. As in other colonised contexts, there has been enormous cultural loss experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over time, in part because of child removal practices. In Australia, these practices resulted in the 'Stolen Generations', whereby 10–30% of all First Nations children were forcibly removed from their families, communities, Countries—and, by extension, cultures (Wilson, 1997). Today, recognition of this cultural loss and the importance of Indigenous children's rights to culture is reflected in international law (United Nations, 1989, 2007) and in contemporary out-of-home-care (OOHC) policy and practice. While cultural rights are recognised and protected, it remains that cultural connection is poorly understood and inconsistently supported in Australian OOHC systems. This thesis makes a critical contribution to better understanding how cultural connection is understood, and experienced in OOHC contexts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, including Aboriginal young people who have lived in OOHC, in Victoria, Australia.

Using a mixed-methods approach, underpinned by Indigenous Standpoint Theory, the findings highlight the complex nature of cultural connection as a process of culturally connecting, which intertwines identity and culture. It demonstrates the importance of reconceptualising cultural connection as a journey of culturally connecting, experienced over time. The findings highlight how journeys of culturally connecting are best supported by Indigenous peoples, in accordance with Indigenous relationality, to impart knowledges of mob and ancestry that are pertinent to belonging, identity and the practice of mob-specific culture.

This thesis shows that it is possible to better support cultural connection in OOHC where cultural disconnection has already occurred. However, there are no easy set of solutions to realise cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people within a system that produces cultural disconnection by design. The best way to support cultural connection is to prevent First Nations children and young people from entering OOHC in the first place. Our self-determination, as First Nations peoples, is paramount to this venture.

## **Dedication**

*To my family, past, present and future*

*With thanks to all members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander  
community in Victoria who participated in this research.*

## **Declaration**

This is to certify that:

- the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy, except where indicated in the preface;
- due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and
- the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed:

Jacynta Marie Krakouer

## **Preface**

- This thesis was edited by Elite Editing, and editorial intervention was restricted to Standards D and E of the Australian Standards for Editing Practice.
- Financial support for this research was provided by the Australian Government ‘Research Training Program’ Scholarship, with top-up scholarships also received from Murrup Barak at the University of Melbourne, and the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences ‘Indigenous Research Training Support Scheme’ at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Thank you for your financial support throughout my candidature.

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## Cultural and Racial Terminology

Within this thesis, various terms are used interchangeably to refer to the sovereign First Nations peoples whose lands and territories occupy Australia, including the Torres Straits. These terms include ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’, ‘Torres Strait Islander’, ‘Indigenous’, ‘Indigenous Australian’ and ‘First Nations’. These terms are deliberately used interchangeably to reflect the diverse preferences for terms of address held by First Nations peoples in Australia, while also reflecting the reality that we are referred to using these various terms in Australian society, including within government policy and legislation. Where possible, specific Nation terms are used when known (e.g. ‘Noongar’, ‘Wurundjeri’). Terms used to refer to Indigenous peoples in international contexts include specific Nation terms (e.g. ‘Cree’) and ‘Indigenous’ with explicit reference to international contexts. The term ‘First Nations’ is used exclusively to refer to Indigenous peoples from Australia. Other terms are used throughout this thesis as appropriate with their context. Meanings for various cultural and/or racial terminology are described below.

### Contemporary Terminology

<b>Indigenous</b>	Within this thesis, the use of the term Indigenous is aligned with the definition used by the United Nations (UN) Working Group in developing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), where: Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system. (Cobo, 1986, as cited in Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013, p. 6)
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	<p>This definition acknowledges the unique political and legal status held by Indigenous peoples, and attempts to overcome racist and negative connotations associated with terminology used to describe Indigenous peoples.</p> <p>This thesis uses the term Indigenous in reference to particular peoples, cultures, places, identities and politics. It is, at times, used with a particular geographical signifier after its use (e.g. Indigenous Australian). It is predominately used in reference to Indigenous peoples whose ancestral and territorial lands occupy the continent now known as Australia, including the Torres Straits, but is also used at times to refer to Indigenous peoples globally when stated explicitly.</p>
<b>Aboriginal</b>	<p>In this thesis, the term ‘Aboriginal’ is used to refer collectively to Indigenous peoples whose ancestral and territorial lands occupy the Australian continent, excluding the Torres Strait Islands, sometimes used with a signifier, i.e. Aboriginal Australian. If used in reference to Indigenous peoples from international contexts, Aboriginal is used with a geographical signifier (e.g. Aboriginal Canadian). The term Aboriginal is capitalised in this thesis to emphasise its use as a proper noun, and to reclaim power in this identity. At times, the historical use of the term is used, beginning with a lowercase ‘a’ (see <i>Historical Terminology</i>).</p>
<b>Torres Strait Islander</b>	<p>Refers to Indigenous peoples whose ancestral and territorial lands occupy the many islands of the Torres Straits, located above the northern tip of mainland Australia (the Cape York Peninsula), and between the island of New Guinea. Within this thesis, Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised as possessing a shared colonial history with Aboriginal Australian peoples—including one of dispossession and forced movement to mainland Australia—yet retain their own cultural ways of knowing, being, doing as sometimes distinct from Aboriginal Australian peoples.</p>
<b>South Sea Islander</b>	<p>Refers to the Australian-born descendants of peoples from the Pacific Islands who were kidnapped or otherwise ‘moved’ as part of a slave trade movement to ‘supply labour’ to the sugarcane fields in Queensland.</p>
<b>First Nations</b>	<p>First Nations is a term that refers to Indigenous peoples and emphasises their sovereignty in belonging to an Indigenous Nation group that existed prior to invasion/colonisation. This term is growing in popularity, particularly in Australia, where the term highlights the heterogeneity of Indigenous peoples from diverse Nation groups, thus highlighting the unique social, political and legal status held by Indigenous peoples worldwide. Despite the usage of this term to refer to Indigenous peoples in international contexts, in this thesis, the term First Nations is used exclusively to refer to Indigenous peoples from Australia. Importantly, the term ‘First Nations’ does not have historical baggage attached to its use.</p>

<b>Black</b>	Used in this thesis, respectfully, in reference to people who identify, and/or are racially perceived, as Black, often (but not exclusively) because of the colour of their skin. This includes Indigenous peoples from Australia, who may identify as Black regardless of skin colour, as well as Black peoples from African-American communities in the United States. In this thesis, the term ‘Black’ is capitalised to reclaim power in this identity as a historical and contemporary signifier of race. See <i>Historical Terminology</i> for uses of this term that begin with a lowercase letter.
<b>Blackfulla</b>	Refers to Indigenous peoples from Australia who use this word to refer to themselves as Black while emphasising their distinctiveness as both Black and Indigenous.

## Historical Terminology

<b>aboriginal/ aborigine/ Aborigine</b>	A historical term used to refer to a First Nations person whose ancestral and territorial lands occupy the Australian continent, including the Torres Strait Islands, predominately used in a racist and derogatory manner. The terms ‘aborigine’ (both capitalised and beginning with a lowercase), and the lowercase use of the term ‘aboriginal’, are now considered offensive and are only used in this thesis in its historical context, including when quoted from a historical source.
<b>black</b>	Derived from eugenics and discourse about (white) racial superiority, the term ‘black’ is a historical term used in reference to non-white skin colour. In the Australian context, it was used to refer to a First Nations person whose skin colour was visibly non-white, and of darker colouring in appearance. Used in a racist and derogatory manner as a marker of racial inferiority. When beginning with a lowercase ‘b’, the term ‘black’ is now considered offensive and is only used in this thesis in its historical context, including when quoted from a historical source. Where the term is used in this thesis in reference to the North American context, refer to the definition of the term ‘Black’ under <i>Contemporary Terminology</i> .
<b>native</b>	Similar to ‘aboriginal/aborigine’, a historical term used in reference to a First Nations person whose ancestral and territorial lands occupy the Australian continent, including the Torres Strait Islands, predominately used in a racist and derogatory manner. It is now considered an offensive term, and is only used in this thesis in its historical context, including when quoted from a historical source.
<b>full-blood</b>	Based on eugenics, a historical term used to refer to a First Nations person whose ancestry was deemed to have no Anglo-Celtic and/or European lineage, with approximation made as to their ‘blood-quantum’. The term was used in a paternalistic, racist and derogatory manner, on the basis of skin colour, where

	‘full-blood’ indicated ‘full-aboriginal blood-quantum’ (i.e. someone with two First Nations parents and no Anglo-Celtic and/or European ancestry). It is now considered an offensive term, and is only used in this thesis in its historical context, including when quoted from a historical source.
<b>half-caste</b>	Based on eugenics, a historical term used to refer to a person who was considered to be ‘one-half black’. In the Australian context, it was used to refer to a First Nations person whose ancestry was deemed to have included ‘mixed’ First Nations and Anglo-Celtic and/or European heritage, with approximation made as to their ‘blood-quantum’. In practice, the term ‘half-caste’ was used arbitrarily, at the discretion of those with colonial power to assign identity status on the basis of skin colour, and to justify forcible child removals of First Nations children throughout the Stolen Generations in Australia (see Wilson, 1997). It is now considered an offensive term, and is only used in this thesis in its historical context, including when quoted from a historical source.
<b>part-aborigine/ part-aboriginal</b>	A historical term used to refer to a First Nations person whose ancestral and territorial lands occupy the Australian continent, including the Torres Strait Islands, and whose ancestry was deemed to have included ‘mixed’ First Nations and Anglo-Celtic and/or European heritage, with no estimation as to ‘blood-quantum’. It is now considered an offensive term, and is only used in this thesis in its historical context, including when quoted from a historical source.

## Other Terminology

<b><i>Bringing Them Home</i> report</b>	Refers to the report of the <i>National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families</i> , short-titled ‘ <i>Bringing Them Home</i> ’, which was published in 1997 by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.
<b>Colonisation</b>	Refers to the ongoing act, and process, of large-scale population movement from one territory to another, with the aim to establish new hierarchies and control the original inhabitants of that territory (i.e. Indigenous peoples) to extract resources, labour or establish a new colony for one’s own privilege or gain. In settler-colonial contexts, in which the coloniser has come to stay rather than extract and leave, colonisation is understood in this thesis as an ongoing process—‘a structure, not an event’ (Wolfe, 2006, p. 402)—that has not ended.
<b>Community member</b>	In this thesis, from Chapter 5 (methodology) onwards, the term ‘community member’ is used to refer to the Indigenous participants who took part in the survey aspect of this research. It is used to highlight participants’ positionality as community members of the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

	community in Victoria with unique knowledges to contribute, not just as participants in research, but as peoples with lived experience of Indigeneity in the Victorian context.
<b>Davis report</b>	Refers to the report of the <i>Family is Culture: Independent Review of Aboriginal Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in New South Wales</i> , which was published in November 2019, and authored by Professor Megan Davis.
<b>Family is Culture report</b>	Refers to the same report mentioned above under ‘Davis Report’, which is short-titled ‘ <i>Family is Culture</i> ’.
<b>Foster care</b>	Defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a) as ‘a form of out-of-home care where the caregiver is authorised and reimbursed (or was offered but declined reimbursement) by the state/territory for the care of the child. (This category excludes relatives/kin who are reimbursed.)’ (p. 89).
<b>High-risk birth alert</b>	A term used in New South Wales relating to ‘an unborn child who is the subject of a pre-natal report under Section 25’ of the <i>Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998</i> (NSW) (NSW Government, 2021). Also known as an unborn report in other jurisdictions.
<b>Indigenous Standpoint Theory</b>	In this thesis, the term ‘Indigenous Standpoint Theory’ refers to a critical theory, and mode of analysis, originally coined by Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata (1997, 2007a). In this thesis, Indigenous Standpoint Theory does not refer to one’s standpoint as positionality, but rather as a critical theory that provides insight into the interface between the Indigenous and the Western (including knowledge systems), as well as the spaces in-between.
<b>Invasion</b>	In this thesis, ‘invasion’ is used in reference to colonisation, in which the term ‘invasion’ more accurately describes the experience of British arrival and settlement in Australia from an Indigenous perspective as one of invading the territories of sovereign First Nations peoples.
<b>Investigation</b>	Defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a) as ‘the process whereby the relevant department obtains more detailed information about a child who is the subject of a notification’ (p. 89).
<b>Kinship care</b>	A form of out-of-home care defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a) as occurring: where the caregiver is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a relative (other than parents)</li> <li>• considered to be family or a close friend</li> <li>• a member of the child or young person’s community (in accordance with their culture)</li> <li>• reimbursed by the state/territory for the care of the child (or who has been offered but declined reimbursement).</li> </ul> For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, a kinship carer may be another Indigenous person who is a member of their community, a compatible community, or from the same language group. (p. 91)

<b>Long-term (out-of-home) care</b>	Defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a) as occurring when a child or young person has been in ‘continuous out-of-home care for two years or more’ (p. 89).
<b>Notification</b>	Defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a) as ‘contact made to an authorised department by people or other bodies alleging child abuse or neglect, child maltreatment, or harm to a child’ (p. 90).
<b>Out-of-home care</b>	Out-of-home care is the care of children and young people aged 0–17 years who are unable to live with their primary caregivers. It involves the placement of a child or young person with alternate caregivers on a short-or long-term basis. It is defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a) as ‘overnight care for children aged under 18 for which there is ongoing case management and financial payment (including where a financial payment has been offered but has been declined by the carer)’ (p. 91). Out-of-home care includes foster care, kinship care and residential care (among other forms of care).
<b>Out-of-home care admission</b>	Refers to a child or young person’s entry (or admission) into out-of-home care, in line with the definition of out-of-home care given above.
<b>Out-of-home care placement</b>	Refers to a child or young person’s placement in out-of-home care, wherein a placement refers to a particular household with a particular carer/group of carers, in line with the definition of out-of-home care given above.
<b>Permanent care (order)</b>	A legal arrangement whereby the guardianship, and parental responsibility, of a child or young person is transferred to an individual (carer). See also ‘third-party parental responsibility order’.
<b>Residential care</b>	Defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a) as ‘a type of [out-of-home] care where the placement is in a residential building whose purpose is to provide placements for children [and young people], and where there are paid staff’ (p. 92).
<b>Respite care</b>	Defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a) as ‘a form of out-of-home care used to provide short-term accommodation for children and young people where the intention is for the child to return to their prior place of residence’ (p. 92).
<b>Restoration</b>	See ‘Reunification’.
<b>Reunification</b>	Defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a) as ‘a planned process of safely returning and enabling a child to remain at home with their birth parent(s), family, or former guardian after a period of time in care when it is in the child’s best interests to do so, and where it will safeguard the child’s long-term stability and permanency. In practice, reunification tends to be nearly exclusively with birth parents’ (p. 93). Reunification is also referred to as ‘restoration’.
<b>Short-term (out-of-home) care</b>	Occurs when a child or young person has been in continuous out-of-home care for a period of 2 years or less.

<b>Standpoint</b>	The term ‘standpoint’ is used in this thesis to refer to one’s positionality. It is not synonymous with Indigenous Standpoint Theory (see definition above).
<b>Substantiation</b>	Defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a) as a ‘child protection notification . . . that was investigated . . . and where it was concluded that there was reasonable cause to believe that the child had been, was being, or was likely to be, abused, neglected, or otherwise harmed . . . [and includes cases for] children who have been abandoned, or whose parents are deceased’ (p. 92).
<b>The Cultural Interface</b>	Refers to Martin Nakata’s (1997, 2007a) work in which the Cultural Interface is understood as a terrain upon which Indigenous peoples traverse both the Indigenous and the Western, as well as all of the spaces in-between, with agency.
<b>Third-party parental responsibility order</b>	<p>A finalised third-party parental responsibility order is defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2021a) as</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">an order transferring all duties, powers, responsibilities, and authority to which parents are entitled by law to a nominated person(s) whom the court considers appropriate. The nominated person may be an individual, such as a relative, or an officer of the state or territory department responsible for child protection. Third-party parental responsibility may be ordered in the event that a parent is unable to care for a child, with parental responsibility then transferred to a relative, or other nominated person. Finalised third-party parental responsibility orders can be a long-term order or a short-term order. (p. 87)</p> <p>In different Australian jurisdictions, third-party parental responsibility orders can also be referred to as ‘permanent care’ or ‘long-term guardianship’ care where a child is placed with a carer ‘under an order where parental responsibility is transferred to them’ (AIHW, 2021a, p. 89).</p>
<b>Young people</b>	In this thesis, from Chapter 5 (methodology) onwards, the term ‘young people’ is used to refer to the Indigenous participants who took part in interviews for this research. It is used to highlight participants’ positionality as young people with a lived experience of out-of-home care, not just as participants in research, but as peoples with lived experience of Indigeneity and out-of-home care.

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACAC	Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care
ACCO	Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation
ACPP	Aboriginal Child Placement Principle
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AFL	Australian Football League
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
ATSICPP	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle
BDAC	Bendigo & District Aboriginal Co-operative
CCYP	Commission for Children and Young People (Victoria)
CSP	cultural support plan
GMAR	Grandmothers Against Removals
LSIC	Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children
MDAS	Mallee Districts Aboriginal Services
NABSW	National Association of Black Social Workers
NAIDOC	National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
OOHC	Out-of-Home Care
PCO	permanent care order
PM	Prime Minister
QLD	Queensland
SA	South Australia
SCRGSP	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision
SEWB	social and emotional wellbeing
SNAICC	SNAICC—National Voice for Our Children (formerly Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care)
TAS	Tasmania
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
VACCA	Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
VACL	Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages
VIC	Victoria
WA	Western Australia

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Aunty Barbara Cummings died in September 2019, aged 71. Her book—*Take the Child: From Kahlin Compound to Retta Dixon Children’s Home* (Cummings, 1990)—provided a harrowing account of her childhood, during which she was institutionalised in Northern Territory (NT) homes designed to assimilate Aboriginal children into white society. Aunty Barbara Cummings was one of tens of thousands of children who were forcibly removed from their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and cultures during the twentieth century as part of the Stolen Generations. Her story is well known because she raised awareness of the abuse that occurred during the Stolen Generations in the NT. Her staunch activism contributed to the national *Bringing Them Home* inquiry (Wilson, 1997), and along with many survivors of the Stolen Generations, she provided evidence of the enduring effects that forcible child removal has on multiple facets of an Indigenous person’s life (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2018).

Today, thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people continue to be removed from their Indigenous families, communities and cultures in Australia, in rates that rival, if not exceed, those of the Stolen Generations (AIHW, 2021a). There are historical continuities between past and present child removals: all contemporary child protection removals are court mandated and utilise coercive state power, such as police, in the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their parents and families, as was the case in some instances during the Stolen Generations. Further, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) has nearly doubled in the past 10 years, from 11,468 at 30 June 2010 (AIHW, 2011) to 21,523 at 30 June 2020 (AIHW, 2021a), and ‘is projected to increase by 54% by 2030’ (Liddle et al., 2021, p.

39). This is happening in a context where so much disconnection has occurred through successive intergenerational removals of First Nations children from their First Nations parents, families, communities and Countries.

This thesis is concerned with exploring First Nations people's understandings of cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people growing up in OOHC environments in Victoria, Australia. Cultural connection is a policy priority within all Australian OOHC settings (AIHW, 2020b; SNAICC—National Voice for Our Children, formerly Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care [SNAICC], 2017), designed to prevent the cultural loss and disconnection produced particularly as a result of the Stolen Generations. This thesis will show that in practice, cultural connection is poorly understood and poorly supported. Throughout, I make a dual argument that while cultural connection for First Nations children and young people in OOHC contexts has numerous benefits along individual and community lines, and consequently must be prioritised, cultural connection also features in contemporary OOHC contexts as a site of policy compliance because cultural disconnection is a known effect of historical child removal practices. While cultural disconnection is not only caused by child removal and placement in OOHC, this thesis is specifically interested in cultural connection in OOHC because of its explicit policy objective within all Australian OOHC systems.

In contemporary practice, cultural disconnection remains an ongoing risk for Indigenous children in OOHC. Cultural connection has come to be understood as a criterion to be achieved within the governance structure of child protection and OOHC systems in a context where placement in OOHC confers developmental risks. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, placement in OOHC includes the risk of loss of connections with family, community, Country and culture. In

other words, although desired by First Nations communities and individuals, cultural connection as a policy goal exists in OOHC to ameliorate the risk of cultural disconnection produced by child protection and OOHC systems. Cultural connection, as it exists in policy and practice, thus serves as a tool to moderate the risks involved with child protection removal. This critical argument runs alongside my contention that we must, nonetheless, prioritise efforts to ensure cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people when family disconnection occurs or is placed at risk, for the wellbeing of the child or young person, and for the wellbeing—and survival—of the community.

This thesis will demonstrate that a more robust conceptualisation of cultural connection is paramount to efforts to prioritise cultural connection within child protection and OOHC systems. Adopting an Indigenous standpoint, historicising Indigenous child removal and its impact on cultural connection, and then utilising a mixed-methods approach with those who have, and have not, experienced OOHC, this thesis argues that cultural connection is best understood as a process of *culturally connecting*, involving certain knowledges, feelings, actions and mechanisms to learn culture and enable processes of connecting. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, these processes of connecting take place at the Cultural Interface—a site ‘constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, [and] different systems of thought’ (M. Nakata, 2007a, p. 199). I keep at the fore of this thesis the critical positioning of cultural connection within a system that sustains a continued risk of cultural disconnection by its design. In this way, this thesis does not—and should not be used to—enable the continued placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in non-Indigenous homes (including with kin) while simultaneously ‘ticking the culture box’.

## 1.1 The Lens of Indigenous Standpoint Theory

This thesis deals specifically with questions relating to culture and identity for First Nations children and young people growing up in OOHC. These questions are informed by my experiences working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people growing up in OOHC. Our experiences and identities shape who we are, what we value, and our outlook on the world. In a research context, this subjective lens has been referred to as our ‘standpoint’, a term originally coined in feminist research to articulate how the gendered positioning of the researcher (and its associated marginalised or dominant status) influences the entire research process (Collins, 1986; Harding, 1992; D. E. Smith, 1974).

Our standpoint dictates what topics of interest we choose to pursue, why we ask the kinds of questions we ask, why we think certain questions are more important than others, and how we choose to go about answering the questions we think are of value. It comprises our unique social position and the various forms of capital embodied within it (i.e. gender, cultural and economic), as well as our unique ways of knowing, being and doing (or in research terms, our epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies) (Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2017; Walter & Andersen, 2013). Whether we are conscious of this subjectivity, the standpoint through which researchers view the world influences their conduct of research.

For Indigenous peoples, our standpoint is shaped by our Indigeneity. Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata (1997, 2007a) first applied standpoint theory to an Indigenous context in his 1997 thesis, which became the book *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines*. Martin Nakata (2007a) articulated how Western and Indigenous knowledge systems shape understandings of culture and Indigeneity, theorising the ‘Cultural Interface’ as a terrain upon which Indigenous peoples traverse

both their Indigeneity and Western culture, as well as all of the spaces in-between. In the conduct of research, shared experiences of oppression and marginalisation in settler-colonial contexts thus influence how Indigenous peoples approach research, how we choose to conduct research, what knowledges we choose to privilege, and how certain knowledges shape the research journey.

However, Indigenous Standpoint Theory is also a critical mode of inquiry that can be utilised in the conduct of research. As articulated by M. Nakata (2007a), ‘standpoint theory . . . is a method of inquiry, a process for making more intelligible the “corpus of objectified knowledge about us” as it emerges and organises understandings of our lived realities’ (p. 215). In this way, Indigenous Standpoint Theory is also concerned with positionality and power (M. Nakata, 1997, 2007a). This is critical to enabling Indigenous peoples to ‘speak back’ to the ways in which we are typically positioned within hegemonic discourse.

Three principles are central to Indigenous Standpoint Theory. First, ‘Indigenous peoples are entangled in a very contested knowledge space at the Cultural Interface’ (M. Nakata, 2007a, p. 215). This principle speaks to the ways in which Indigenous subjectivities—including those of the researcher—are produced and situated within ‘complex sets of social relations’, inclusive of the broader societal environment, experienced in our everyday lives (M. Nakata, 2007a, p. 215). The second principle central to Indigenous Standpoint Theory acknowledges Indigenous agency, but recognises that our agency is ‘framed within the limits and possibilities’ of what can be known from our positions constituted at the Cultural Interface (M. Nakata, 2007a, p. 216). M. Nakata (2007a) explains that this is ‘experienced as a push-pull between Indigenous and not Indigenous positions’ (p. 216), where our positionality is constituted in relation to others. Here, we are also cognisant that the tensions at the Cultural

Interface constantly ask us—as Indigenous peoples—‘to be both continuous with one position at the same time as being discontinuous with another’ (M. Nakata, 2007a, p. 216). The third principle of Indigenous Standpoint Theory makes visible the tensions produced by this positioning, noting the tensions, ambiguities and complexities created when ‘Indigenous and non-Indigenous dualities’ co-exist (M. Nakata, 2007a, p. 216). At the Cultural Interface, we see the diversity and complexity embodied in Indigenous subjectivities and lived realities, where the tensions associated with living within these contested spaces are evident. Critically, Indigenous Standpoint Theory enables us to make sense of our difference, ‘to help us understand our varied responses to the colonial world’ and to enable us to untangle ourselves from the constraints imposed by our positionality at the Cultural Interface (M. Nakata, 2007a, p. 217).

For this thesis, Indigenous Standpoint Theory enables me to take a critical position to help make sense of Indigenous subjectivities produced within a contested space. This critical position has been applied throughout this thesis, and has informed every aspect of this research, from design, method, data collection and analysis, to write-up and dissemination. It is especially useful in Chapters 6 and 7, in reporting, and later analysing (Chapter 8) research participants’ diverse experiences of navigating culture and identity in OOHC contexts. Further, when critical subjectivity is conscious in research—as is the case when applying Indigenous Standpoint Theory—reflexivity throughout the research process is not only possible, but it is owned. This is a cornerstone of social work as a discipline, which ‘prioritises the needs of others over personal gain; advocates [for] responsible use of power and authority in ways that serve humanity; [and] supports considered and reflective self-awareness’ as articulated in the Australian Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* (2020, p. 10). It is thus an extension of my professional commitment as a social worker to apply critical reflexivity

in research. Moreover, it is my responsibility as a First Nations researcher to harness research as a critical tool to privilege Indigenous subjectivities while highlighting the politicised spaces within which they exist (Rigney, 1999, 2007).

Finally, my own position—as a Noongar woman—has shaped this entire research project from its initial inception right through to the final submission of this thesis. It has enabled me to resolve the inherent tension between balancing a project of ‘knowledge construction’ in the Western academy with a distinctly, and unapologetically, Indigenous way of doing research. Just as Western research is influenced by the researcher’s social and cultural position, Indigenous research is influenced by the researcher’s individual experiences of Indigeneity, regardless of the methods chosen to interrogate the topic of interest. It is this acceptance that has enabled me to critically reflect on how every single design, method and analytical choice in this project has been influenced by my positionality and who I am.

## **1.2 Who Am I?**

I am a Mineng Noongar woman from the south-west region of Western Australia (WA). I have lived in Naarm (Melbourne) for most of my life and am accepted by both my own Noongar community and the Victorian First Nations community where I live. I have strong kinship ties throughout the south-west of Australia, I can trace my Noongar family lineage back four generations, and I can name several family groups who I am related to by surname.

Originally from southern WA, my father, Phil Krakouer, and my mother, Lynn Krakouer, moved to Naarm in their early twenties so that my father could pursue a career as a footballer in the Australian Football League (AFL)<sup>1</sup>. As a result, I did not

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<sup>1</sup> At the commencement of my Dad’s football career, the AFL was known as the Victorian Football League (VFL). The VFL changed its name to the AFL in 1990 (AFL, 2020), while my Dad retired in 1991.

live with my extended family growing up, nor did I live on Noongar boodja (Country). Despite this, my father is a strong Noongar man who imparted kaartidijin (knowledge) Noongar and taught me to be proud and strong in my culture throughout my childhood, adolescence and adult years. Annual visits to WA throughout my childhood and adolescent years enabled me to spend time with my Noongar moort (family), my Pop (RIP), Nan (RIP), cousins, Aunties, Uncles, nieces and nephews, who also taught me kaartidijin and about my place in my family and community. I learned to value the importance of family in developing my sense of self as a Noongar woman.

I have non-Indigenous heritage from my mother's side of the family. My mother's side of my heritage can be traced to Britain on my maternal grandmother's side, and on my maternal grandfather's side, my heritage includes Canadian, German and Russian influences. I do not identify with my non-Indigenous heritage, however, for the simple reason that I do not know what it means to be British, Canadian, German or Russian. I perceive myself as Black, and I am racially perceived by others as a Black, Brown or 'mixed race' woman who could never pass as 'white' because of my darker skin colouring.

There have been times in my life where I have grappled with merging my Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities. For example, while I connected with the Koori community as a child, predominately through playing basketball and netball at carnivals with my Yorta Yorta peers, at the same time, my siblings and I were the only Aboriginal children at our primary school. Living off-Country exacerbated this sense of difference I felt in my childhood and adolescent years. My personal experiences—and my experiences of my own Indigeneity—have piqued my interest in this thesis topic. For me at least, my identity as a Noongar woman has been both a source of strength—and confusion—at different points in my life.

I graduated as a social worker from the University of Melbourne in 2009 and, shortly thereafter, commenced working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families in the child protection and OOHHC sector. During my experiences working with Indigenous children and young people, particularly in the foster care system, I noted several young people grappling with issues of Indigenous identity and belonging. I had clients who did not identify as Indigenous, those who only identified with the ethnic background of their foster carers (e.g. Greek) despite not possessing any of their bloodline, others who identified as Indigenous but were not proud, and those who identified as Indigenous but had no idea which mob or community they belonged to. In an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation (ACCO), we were taught in our work, as caseworkers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, to connect our clients to their First Nations cultures because that connection would ultimately lead to an improved sense of belonging, resilience and stability in often chaotic OOHHC contexts. In practice, however, connecting Indigenous children and young people to their culture was not well defined and ultimately dependent on the caseworker's level of cultural knowledge.

As a Noongar caseworker, I focused on the relational aspects of cultural connection in my work. Part of this included speaking to Indigenous children and young people about their family, kin and community ties, and exploring their understanding of place and belonging; facilitating attendance at community events to network and socialise with other First Nations children, young people and community members; speaking to First Nations family members to gain information needed to complete cultural support plans (CSPs); and, where possible, facilitating Return to Country visits so that children could visit their ancestral lands and spend time with their community. Other caseworkers in my team would rely on carers to foster connection to culture for

their clients. These experiences led me to question what is ‘normative’ practice in fostering cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people growing up in OOHC, and, more critically, what is cultural connection in the first place? I would not have thought to ask these questions if it were not for my experiences as a Noongar woman who is connected to family and culture, noting that understandings of culture are varied.

### **1.3 Understanding and Defining Aspects of First Nations Cultures in Australia**

Culture is a difficult construct to define, and debates exist as to whether culture is intangible and indefinable (Rowse, 2010). Rather than entering conceptual debates about the intangibility of culture, within this thesis, I use a definition of culture that is concerned with ethnicity and race. This refers to the ways in which culture manifests itself within groups of people with shared ethnic or racial backgrounds. In this sense, culture refers to a set of shared knowledges, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions, behaviours, customs, norms, expressions and idioms that humans learn, via repeated exposure and immersion, as part of a member of a distinct ethnic, racial and/or cultural group. This definition is concerned with how culture guides actions and behaviours among a group of people that share a common cultural, racial and/or ethnic background.

For Indigenous peoples, one of the issues with understanding contemporary Indigenous cultures is the tendency of settler populations—including Western researchers—to understand Indigenous cultures in a past sense, locked into a version of Indigeneity that is historically bound and trapped at the point in time of first contact with the coloniser. Twentieth century anthropologists—who were preoccupied with ‘difference’ and studying those Indigenous cultures deemed ‘more untouched’ by European influences (Hollinsworth, 1992)—typically pursued studies of First Nations

cultures within three dominant discourses: the racist, the savage, and the romantic (Bolt, 2010). These discourses, which positioned Indigenous peoples and cultures as exotic, foreign and primitive, continue to influence contemporary understandings of our cultures, particularly among non-Indigenous Australians. This has led to the romanticisation of certain aspects of our cultures—such as music and the arts—as foreign and exotic, while other aspects of our cultures are ignored, dismissed or framed as problematic.

Aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures that are celebrated within non-Indigenous settler-colonial society include traditional dancing, playing the yidaki ('didgeridoo'), and cultural artefacts such as 'dot paintings' and 'boomerangs'. For example, in Reconciliation Week we see First Nations artwork displayed on the jerseys of AFL players, 'welcome to Country' ceremonies performed for the non-Indigenous gaze with clapsticks and boomerangs, and encouragement for non-Indigenous peoples to 'acknowledge' the Traditional Owners of the land they live or work on. However, those values of our cultures that are more aligned with many other cultures—such as the importance of family and shared caring responsibilities for children—can be overlooked. Furthermore, judgement is often based on incorrect stereotypes, with Indigenous people who look—and act—more 'like non-Indigenous people' frequently dismissed as 'assimilated', 'not traditional', 'urban' or 'not Indigenous enough' (Heiss, 2012). Throughout Australia's colonial history, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have had multiple forms of contact with Western cultures, many of which have been violent and have required the transformation of culture to resist genocide and assimilation.

Within the last 40 years, there has been a resurgence of writing about First Nations cultures by First Nations authors and researchers. Numerous publications have

also described, identified or explored aspects of First Nations cultures in contemporary contexts (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] & Pascoe, 2018; Arabena, 2008; Carlson, 2016; Fejo-King, 2013; Kickett-Tucker, 2009; Krakouer et al., 2018; Martin, 2008, 2017; Mudrooroo, 1995; SNAICC, 2011; Walter, 2017). Arguably, the most concerted effort to do so in recent times was the literature review undertaken by Salmon et al. (2018a) as part of the *Mayi Kuwayu National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing*. It set out six broad, and interrelated, domains of Indigenous cultures relevant here, as they provide insight into what constitutes Indigenous cultures: cultural beliefs and knowledge; language; connection to Country; family, kinship and community; the expression of culture and cultural continuity; and Indigenous self-determination and leadership (Salmon et al., 2018a). There is also complexity and diversity within, and between, First Nations cultures in Australia, as well as shared cultural attributes and values, as highlighted by Salmon et al. (2018a):

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are complex and diverse. There is no single culture or people. Overall Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures can be understood as connection to Country and community; respect for Elders, kinship and family connections; gender and age roles; identity; language, art and ceremony; and spirituality and storytelling. (p. 24)

While distinct culturally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do share some similar traditions, norms, beliefs and values within the larger group. For example, Nyungar novelist Mudrooroo (1995) describes how although Indigenous Australia is heterogeneous, and is formed by a land of many mobs, what unites First Nations peoples is the way in which each mob views family and kin as sacrosanct. The notion of family is broader in Indigenous cultures compared with Western cultures, and Elders in communities are considered Aunties and Uncles without necessarily being biologically

related (Fejo-King, 2013; Krakouer et al., 2018; SNAICC, 2011). Rules for marriage and reproduction within communities are also particularly complex (Fejo-King, 2013; Field, 2021). Anthropologist Eriksen (2004) argues that if cultural superiority is measured by level of sophistication, then First Nations peoples should be considered ‘the most’ advanced cultures because of the complexity of our kinship systems and spiritual beliefs.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culture dictates social rules and norms about how to be in our social groups, as well as expectations of behaviours. Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) Muriel Bamblett and her colleague Peter Lewis state that:

Culture is central to identity. Culture defines who we are, how we think, how we communicate, what we value and what is important to us. My culture, like all Aboriginal cultures, is the longest continuing culture in the world. It is sophisticated and holistic—linking spirituality with politics, education, economics, land care, and the law. (Bamblett & Lewis, 2006, p. 44)

In this sense, culture is like a ‘roadmap’ or ‘handbook’ that guides actions and behaviours. Culture establishes behavioural expectations for people within a cultural group; influences how people respond when others do not conform to cultural norms; and establishes law/lore, language and expressions. Culture is a holistic entity that permeates all aspects of our life (Bamblett & Lewis, 2006). It is a unique feature of being human that is not hardwired into our brains, but learned over time (Eriksen, 2004; Pitman et al., 1989).

While this thesis does not provide a full examination of First Nations cultures, it is important to know that our cultures are, at times, understood in ways that are problematic by Western settler-colonial society. The depiction of our cultures within

settler-colonial society has largely failed to acknowledge the ways in which our cultures have evolved to survive. The framing of our cultures in certain ways—that suit, or seek to benefit, non-Indigenous society—may indeed be part of the problem facing child protection and OOHC systems seeking to prioritise cultural connection.

#### **1.4 First Nations Cultures in Australian Out-of-Home Care Contexts**

While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children<sup>2</sup> comprise nearly 8% of the Australian child population (aged 0–14 years) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2016) at 30 June 2020, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (aged 0–17) constituted 41% of Australia’s OOHC population (AIHW, 2021a). In recognition of the cultural loss experienced by Indigenous peoples as part of child removal practices during the Stolen Generations, Indigenous children’s rights to culture (United Nations [UN], 1989, 2007) are now prioritised in contemporary OOHC policy and practice in Australia. For example, in all states and territories, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) is written into legislation or policy to protect Indigenous children’s rights to culture (SNAICC, 2017). One of the elements of the ATSICPP specifically aims to ensure that ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children [and young people] in out-of-home care are supported to maintain connections to their family, community, culture and country, especially children placed with non-Indigenous carers’ (SNAICC, 2017, p. 5).

In Australian OOHC settings, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people’s rights to culture are protected via the pursuit of ‘connection’ as a policy goal of the ATSICPP. That is, within policy and legislation, it is espoused that

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<sup>2</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) uses self-identification to determine the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status of respondents in the national Census of Population and Housing. The question ‘Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?’ (ABS, 2014) is ‘asked to identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples [where] the responses to this question are captured automatically from mark box responses on the form’ (ABS, 2017).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people have the right to ‘maintain, and receive support for, their connections to family, community, culture and Country’ while residing in OOHC (SNAICC, 2017, p. 3). Unfortunately however, the application of the ‘connection’ element of the ATSI CPP has been problematic across all states and territories (Hunter et al., 2020). For example, connection to culture for First Nations children and young people in OOHC is often measured via the completion of CSPs—detailed plans that aim to provide comprehensive information about children’s cultures, including their First Nations families, kinship systems, mob groups, totems and communities, which form a part of a child’s case plan (Baidawi et al., 2017). These plans are used to ensure First Nations children and young people develop or maintain connections to culture while living in OOHC. In Victoria, s.176.2 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic) stipulates that ‘the Secretary must provide a cultural plan to each Aboriginal child in out of home care’, and, within policy, it is stated that cultural plans are to be endorsed within 19 weeks of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering OOHC. However, the AIHW (2020b) found that of those Indigenous children required to have a cultural plan in Victoria, 59.9% had a current, documented and approved cultural plan (at 30 June 2020), while 40.1% did not. This is lower than the figures reported nationally, where ‘69% of the 16,100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC had (and were required to have) a current, documented and approved cultural support plan at 30 June 2020’ (AIHW, 2021b).

Policies and practices to maintain—and strengthen—cultural connection vary greatly not only between jurisdictions, but between OOHC providers and agencies. In Victoria, cultural connection is also measured by adherence to the ATSI CPP placement

element,<sup>3</sup> the organisation of Return to Country trips, and s.18 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic) (the *Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program*), all under the oversight of the Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People. In New South Wales (NSW), a ‘Quality Assurance Framework’ and an ‘Aboriginal Cultural Connections Questionnaire’ is used to enable child protection caseworkers to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s cultural needs (SNAICC, 2021a). And in the NT, legislative amendments to the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* (NT) from March 2020 stipulate that care plans, which ‘include a section on culture’, are required to be filed for First Nations ‘children who are in care, or are proposed to be in care, during court proceedings’ (SNAICC, 2021b, p. 28). Other practices in the NT used to support cultural connection include ACCO-run programs such as ‘Aboriginal Children with Aboriginal Carers’, which seeks to ‘enable family and community participation in care planning’, among other things (SNAICC, 2021b, p. 28). This reflects the variability evident in policies and practices designed to foster cultural connection across Australia’s OOHC jurisdictions.

Despite the variability in policies and practices designed to foster Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people’s cultural connections, many policies and practices that aim to foster cultural connection do not appropriately measure Indigenous children and young people’s feelings of cultural connection (Krakouer et al., 2018). That is, governments and OOHC providers use process, or proxy, indicators of cultural connection, such as placement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kin,

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<sup>3</sup> The ATSI CPP placement elements sets out a preferred hierarchy of placement options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who enter, and live in, OOHC. At the top of the placement hierarchy, placement with Indigenous and non-Indigenous family are given equal priority, followed by placement with another Indigenous person, preferably from the child’s own mob group. Placement with unrelated non-Indigenous caregivers is weighted at the bottom of the ATSI CPP placement hierarchy, where it is emphasised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people should only be placed in this arrangement after all other placement options have been exhausted (SNAICC, 2017).

and compliance with cultural support planning, rather than measuring actual connection, as highlighted in the AIHW (2020b, 2021b) ATSI CPP indicators reports. Consequently, cultural connection requires a more conceptually rigorous understanding, informed by Indigenous peoples' knowledges and experiences, to improve policy and practice to prevent cultural disconnection, or at least minimise its harm where prevention has not been successful. Efforts to prevent cultural disconnection within OOHC systems always take place alongside a continued risk to cultural connection by design. That is, in removing Indigenous children from their Indigenous families, the risk of cultural disconnection is present. This critical positioning is crucial to advance understandings of cultural connection in OOHC that benefit First Nations children and young people, which is a central aim of this thesis.

## **1.5 Thesis Structure**

My thesis aims to answer the research question *'How is cultural connection understood and experienced by First Nations peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, Australia?'* and is structured across eight chapters. This introduction comprises the first chapter, the purpose of which is to introduce my positionality, the research aims, key concepts, methodological approach and structure of my thesis.

Chapter 2 historicises the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family life and cultures, noting the eras of invasion, frontier warfare, segregation, merging/absorption and assimilation. The narrative then focuses specifically on the history of the Stolen Generations, describing the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family life and cultures were purposefully disrupted, sometimes with genocidal intent. While the policy era shifted from assimilation to self-determination, Chapter 2 shows there were continuities across the various policy eras—noting that despite change in the self-determination era, invasion

into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family life and cultures has not ended.

Contemporary overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in Australian child protection and OOHC systems is discussed, highlighting the ways in which overrepresentation is an enduring feature of Australian child protection and OOHC systems. It is within this context—of increasing overrepresentation—that Chapter 3 positions culture as a response—initially by First Nations peoples—to the enduring threat of assimilation and cultural loss via placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in white homes.

Chapter 3 explores the concept of cultural connection and how it emerged from Aboriginal activism in response to the placement of Aboriginal children in white homes after the 1970s. I argue that it has transformed into a site of bureaucratic policy compliance, where the wellbeing of the child is centred. I articulate the importance of cultural connection to community survival, and that maintaining distinct features of cultural difference is central to the survival of First Nations peoples themselves. I introduce the ‘cultural determinants of health approach’ that has come to underpin cultural connection policies in OOHC, while also drawing the reader’s attention to the ways in which time and age in care correlate with the risk of cultural disconnection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Here, I argue that OOHC is experienced as a contemporary site of elimination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, noting that cultural connection itself features in OOHC in response to the cultural disconnection produced by the state. In other words, child protection and OOHC systems now utilise cultural connection as a policy and practice tool to ameliorate the harms produced when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are removed from their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families,

communities and cultures. This is a critical position through which the empirical research presented in the subsequent chapters should be read.

In Chapter 4, I conceptualise cultural connection as beginning from the point of learning culture, that is, that cultural connection is the result of learning culture within a particular cultural milieu. Since Western theories developed within the tradition of cultural anthropology, and cross-cultural and developmental psychology, inform contemporary understandings of cultural connection, and cultural identity, within Australian OOHC contexts, theories about learning culture—including enculturation, acculturation and immersion—are considered. Convergence, and divergence, between Western and Indigenous understandings on learning culture are highlighted before a synthesis of the gaps in the literature concerning cultural connection in Australian OOHC contexts is presented, thereby situating the importance of this research.

Having historicised colonisation's impact on Indigenous family life, and explored how cultural connection emerges as a key concept within the operation of Indigenous child protection and OOHC, Chapter 5 presents the methodology for the quantitative and qualitative components of this study. I discuss the mixed-methods approach used, encompassing a mixed-methods survey with open-ended interviews, to explore First Nations community members' and young people's understandings and experiences of cultural connection in Victoria, Australia. The utilisation of Indigenous Standpoint Theory enables a research design that prioritises the voices of First Nations peoples, and aims to enable First Nations people's voices greater influence over future policy change in the context of OOHC practices in Victoria. Nearly 200 First Nations adults aged over 18 (termed 'community members' in this thesis) living in Victoria completed the survey, which aimed to ascertain how cultural connection is understood, while 10 Aboriginal young people, who had lived in OOHC, aged 15–25, took part in a

single in-depth interview about their experiences of cultural connection within, and beyond, OOHC. Most young people lived in non-Indigenous homes while residing in care, including with non-Indigenous family. Methods for data analysis—including descriptive statistics, comparisons across groups using tests of statistical significance, and thematic analysis—are also discussed in Chapter 5 before the findings are presented.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the findings of the data collected as part of this research. Chapter 6 outlines the findings from the survey, including findings based on both quantitative and qualitative data, structured according to my conceptualisation of cultural connection as consisting of knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions. Descriptive statistics and comparisons of groups using tests of statistical significance are presented, alongside thematic analysis of qualitative responses to open-ended questions in the survey. It was found that kinship and ancestry knowledges—which enabled identity knowledges to be understood—were important to Indigenous children’s cultural connections from the perspective of community members, while First Nations peoples themselves were a central ‘mechanism’ to enable Indigenous children to be ‘immersed in culture’ and develop cultural connection. Feelings of pride and belonging were highlighted as important evidence of cultural connection, while actions were invariably diverse—and contested as an inappropriate ‘measure’ of cultural connection. The importance of Indigenous notions of *relationality*—whereby Indigenous children come to learn their place and belonging in relation to others, and the world around them (Graham, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2017)—were paramount across the various dimensions (knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions) of cultural connection.

Chapter 7 presents the findings from the interviews with Aboriginal young people who had a lived experience of OOHC, where Braun and Clarke’s (2006)

thematic analysis framework was used to identify themes in young people's stories of cultural connection. The diversity, and complexity, of young people's experiences of cultural connection at the Cultural Interface are apparent with exposure to Aboriginal family and cultural norms occurring intermittently, or not at all, for most young people. Various barriers and enablers to cultural connection are discussed, including the importance of Aboriginal young people's agency to self-determine what their journey towards cultural connection may entail. Importantly, the constraints imposed by the OOHC system itself are highlighted, noting issues with cultural support experienced by all Aboriginal young people in this research.

Chapter 8 presents the discussion, and final chapter, in this thesis. The discussion is focused around three key messages: (1) cultural connection is not a definitive end point, but a process that requires a reconfiguration of cultural connection as a *journey of culturally connecting*; (2) Indigenous relationality is core to an understanding of Indigenous children and young people's journeys of culturally connecting; and (3) the Victorian OOHC system struggles to enable genuine opportunities for Indigenous children and young people to engage in their journeys of culturally connecting. The implications of this research for policy and practice in OOHC contexts fits within a framework that highlights the imperativeness of preventing the removals of Indigenous children from their Indigenous families in the first instance, while also working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to find solutions to the problem of cultural disconnection. I argue that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people's journeys of culturally connecting take place within systems that create the risk of cultural disconnection, and at this intersection, we must question the feasibility, and role, of the OOHC system in supporting cultural connection.

This thesis sets out to elucidate a better understanding of cultural connection in OOHC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people by asking First Nations peoples what cultural connection is, what it means to them, and how culture is learned within OOHC contexts. In the chapters that follow, we learn that cultural connection is diverse, complex and experienced as a journey over time. It intertwines the complexity of learning and practising culture, along with developing cultural identity, over time, in accordance with Indigenous notions of relationality. Indigenous children and young people's agency is particularly important to this journey, where knowledge of family, mob and ancestry; immersion in culture with First Nations mob and peoples; and feelings towards culture and identity provide insight into how cultural connection can be better applied in OOHC contexts. This understanding of culturally connecting emphasises the importance of First Nations peoples to supporting First Nations children and young people's journeys of culturally connecting. The importance of preventing cultural disconnection in the first place is illuminated, which is pertinent to ensure that the harms inflicted throughout the Stolen Generations are not repeated.

## **Chapter 2: The ‘Problematism’ of First Nations Family**

### **Life and Cultures**

First Nations peoples have a contentious relationship with Australian child protection and OOHC systems. To understand this fraught relationship, this chapter historically contextualises First Nations family life and childhoods in the Australian settler-colonial state. The impacts of frontier massacre and violence, policies of protectionism, and the Stolen Generations on First Nations family life and cultures are described and analysed. I argue that Australian government policy and practice, including that within the colonies of NSW, Tasmania (TAS), South Australia (SA), Victoria (VIC), Queensland (QLD) and WA prior to 1901, resulted in First Nations childhoods, family life and cultural practices being continually disrupted and viewed as problematic throughout colonisation.

Following nearly two centuries of massacre, genocide and forced assimilation as a result of colonisation, sustained change from the 1970s occurred for First Nations peoples in Australia (Broome, 2019; Reynolds, 1996). This change included groundbreaking race-based legislation, policies of self-determination, land rights, and other action that has enabled First Nations voices to be heard by governments (Broome, 2019). The 1967 referendum was especially transformative, enabling the Commonwealth to make national laws with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for the first time (a power previously held by states and territories). This meant that from the 1970s onwards, First Nations peoples were uniformly extended human rights across the Commonwealth of Australia, inclusive of political, civil, economic and social rights (such as voting rights, the right to freedom of movement, property ownership and earning wages comparable with non-Indigenous Australians) (Broome, 2019). However, while some laws began to apply uniformly

across the continent, child protection and OOHC services remained the domain of individual states and territories.

In First Nations child welfare contexts, significant change also occurred from the early 1970s onwards. This included the establishment of ACCOs that specialise in First Nations child welfare; increasing shifts in funding, clientele and power from governments to ACCOs; major reviews into Aboriginal children in child protection; and the establishment and incorporation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (ACPP) into state and territory legislation or policy (M. Davis, 2019; Dyer, 1980; Libesman, 2014; Lock, 1997; Tilbury, 2013). However, in the midst of this change, there were also unsettling constants: systemic and societal racism, entrenched poverty, and the continued overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in contemporary child protection and OOHC systems.

The construction of First Nations childhoods, family life and cultures as problematic is an enduring constant in the Australian settler-colonial state (Dunstan et al., 2020). As this chapter will demonstrate, this problematisation of First Nations childhoods, family life and cultures operationalises itself in First Nations child protection contexts through disproportionate removals of First Nations children from their families. While socioeconomic disadvantage stemming from invasion, and the genocidal policies that accompanied it, is a reality for many First Nations families, this chapter argues that the problem to be solved is not First Nations children and families. Instead, the continual desire for a white Australian future—built on illegitimate claims to sovereignty—has resulted in state and nationhood anxieties that play out by punishing First Nations families that do not conform with white Australian standards. As argued throughout this chapter, the problem is the sustained desire for a white Australian future. It is this desire that results in First Nations childhoods, family life and

cultures being continually disrupted and viewed as problematic in the modern Australian settler-colonial state.

## **2.1 Problematising First Nations Peoples: From Invasion to the Stolen Generations**

A considerable amount of literature has been written about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history in Australia, both pre- and post-invasion (Berndt & Berndt, 1999; Broome, 2019; Elder, 2003; Evans et al., 1988; Foley, 2011; Haebich, 1992, 2000; McGrath, 1995; Morgan et al., 2007; Neale et al., 2014; Read, 1999; Reynolds, 1996, 2005, 2007, 2013, 2021; Wilson, 1997). I do not intend to provide a comprehensive account of that history, but instead to provide a historical perspective on how First Nations childhoods, family life and cultures have been problematised in the Australian settler colony. This helps to contextualise the experiences of First Nations cultural (dis)connection presented later in this thesis.

Prior to invasion, First Nations familial and cultural systems in the land now known as Australia had developed over centuries, constantly evolving in response to changing environmental and evolutionary threats (Berndt & Berndt, 1999). Although cultural ways of being, doing and thinking varied throughout the more than 250 different language groups belonging to First Nations peoples on the Australian continent (AIATSIS, n.d.-b), family life within First Nations communities was communal, and caring responsibilities for children were shared among its members (SNAICC, 2011). Among First Nations collectivist communities, each community member—including children—had roles and responsibilities for the overall functioning and wellbeing of the community (Berndt & Berndt, 1999).

The arrival of the British in 1788 brought about the decimation of First Nations family life as it was once known. While the British colonisers saw the Eora people in

Botany Bay (the area now known as Sydney), differences between Western and Indigenous land management practices led to the colonisers' proclamation of *terra nullius*, a Latin expression meaning 'no man's land' (Broome, 2010, 2019; McGrath, 1995; Perkins & Langton, 2010). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples did not utilise the land in accordance with post-Enlightenment 'modern' standards, which enabled a declaration of British sovereignty while simultaneously reducing First Nations peoples to 'unenlightened' sub-humans, primitives, or at best noble savages (Broome, 2010, 2019; McGrath, 1995).

Following the declaration of *terra nullius*, colonisers forcibly dispossessed First Nations peoples of their land through frontier violence and warfare (Reynolds, 1996). Non-Indigenous scholar Patrick Wolfe (1994) contends that in settler colonies, such as Australia, where the desire was to establish a new colony (rather than to extract resources or exploit the slave labour of 'natives'), the Indigenous population were seen as 'getting in the way' of settlement. Wolfe (1994, 2006) theorises this phenomenon as the 'logic of elimination', arguing that in settler-colonial societies, the presence of the 'native' interferes with colonisation. Thus, while the British were settling the land to establish colonies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were seen to be obstructing progress, 'civilisation' and the establishment of a homogenised national identity when they resisted invasion (Reynolds, 2007). In this way, genocide against First Nations peoples was enabled (Faulkner, 2016; Wolfe, 1994, 2006).

First Nations families were viewed as problematic by virtue of their existence in the new colonies. Children, women and men were viewed with equal disregard, as

evidenced in the following Indigenous oral history account of the massacres, as told by Ya-idthma-dthang<sup>4</sup> man, ‘Mr Birt’, from north-east Victoria:

My mother would sit and cry and tell me this; they buried our babies in the ground with only their heads above the ground. All in a row they were. Then they had tests to see who could kick the babies’ head off the furthest. One man clubbed a baby’s head off from horseback. They then spent the rest of the day raping the women, most of whom were then tortured to death by sticking sharp things like spears up their vaginas till they died. They tied the men’s hands behind their backs, then cut off their penis and testicles and watched them run around screaming until they died. They killed in other bad ways too. (J. Roberts, 2008, pp. 19–20)

Throughout at least 100 years post-invasion, massacre of First Nations peoples was the means through which the land was cleared for settlement by the British (Reynolds, 2013). Perhaps partly to enable the brutal frontier violence and genocide that ensued, First Nations peoples were dehumanised by the invaders with a rather ‘hostile indifference’ (Tatz, 2011). First Nations peoples were considered nothing more than pests; this widespread perception is evident in a passage published in the *Colonial Times* in Tasmania in 1832:

. . . the custom that has been almost universal among certain Settlers and their servants whenever the Natives have visited their neighbourhood, to consider the men as wild beasts whom it was praiseworthy to hunt down and destroy and the women as only fit to be used for the worst of purposes. The shooting of blacks is spoken of as a matter of levity. (Elder, 2003, p. 41)

The Indigenous struggle for survival against superior European weapons resulted in the widespread death of Indigenous populations (Broome, 2010, 2019).

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<sup>4</sup> Alternate spellings include Jaitmatang and Jaithmathang. These alternate spellings are listed on the ‘AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia’ (AIATSIS, n.d.-a), and the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) ‘Aboriginal Languages of Victoria’ map (Culture Victoria, 2016), respectively.

Eventually, the population of Indigenous peoples dwindled, and by the late 19th century, surviving Indigenous peoples were increasingly rounded up, segregated and confined to reserves, missions or pastoral stations away from white populations (Reynolds, 2013). The popularisation of Social Darwinism and eugenics at the time resulted in the widespread assumption that Indigenous Australia's fate was sealed: they were an unevolved, inferior race, doomed to eventual extinction, and thus, the coloniser's role was simply to smooth the 'dying pillow' of the Indigenous race (Wilson, 1997). It was thought that elimination of the 'native' would soon be complete; the assertion of British sovereignty would go unquestioned, and the establishment of a unified national identity would ensue.

However, protectionist and segregationist policies—that involved the placement of First Nations peoples onto missions and reserves—were viewed as inadequate by the early 20th century because of an apparent upsurge of Aboriginal peoples of 'mixed' lineage (Wilson, 1997). From here, assimilation became the tool used to continue the 'logic of elimination' and the genocide of First Nations peoples.

## **2.2 Eradication Through Assimilation: The Stolen Generations**

Throughout the 19th century, war and frontier violence over territory resulted in discourse that constructed First Nations peoples as nuisances to be eradicated from the population in ways that resembled vermin being exterminated from homes. When it became evident that Aboriginal peoples were not 'dying out' because of a rising number of 'half-caste' children, assimilation policies were forcefully adopted by governments to create a unified, white national identity in line with the 1901 White Australia policy<sup>5</sup> (Morgan et al., 2007; Wilson, 1997). Nationally, assimilation policies came into effect

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<sup>5</sup> The White Australia policy was formally pursued via the introduction of the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (Cth). One of the first pieces of legislation introduced by the new Commonwealth Government of Australia, it legislated the restriction of non-British migration to Australia, thus formally enforcing the White Australia policy (Broome, 2019; Hollinsworth, 2006).

in the 1910s to 1920s to address the ‘half-caste problem’, with forcible removals continuing until the 1970s (Wilson, 1997). The goal of assimilation policies was to ensure

that all Aborigines shall attain the same manner of living as other Australians, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and being influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians. (McConnochie, Hollinsworth, & Pettman, 1991, pp. 110–111, as cited in Ranzijn et al., 2010, p. 81)

While the above statement (which was formulated at the Native Welfare Conference of 1951) mentioned all Aboriginal people, in practice, assimilation policies specifically targeted fair-skinned Aboriginal children. In doing so, assimilation policies constructed fair-skinned Aboriginal children as problems to be solved.

While dark-skinned Aboriginal children, as well as adults and families, were still constructed as problematic, eugenics notions of ‘full-blooded’ Aboriginal people dying out still prevailed. Because it was thought that ‘full-blooded’ Aboriginal people would soon be extinct, governments believed that a sinister form of genocide practice—removal of children from their cultures<sup>6</sup>—would make the ‘Indigenous problem’ disappear. At the time, the widespread belief was that if ‘half-caste’ children were removed from their Indigenous families, they would become assimilated into white society (Wilson, 1997). After a few generations, the ‘Indigenous problem’ (that is to say, Indigenous peoples) would then no longer exist. Genocide would be completed by preventing Indigenous peoples from raising their children in their cultures, communities and families (Tatz, 2011).

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<sup>6</sup> This practice was common overseas as well, and significant enough that the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP), article 7(2), specifically links genocide and child removal, stating that ‘Indigenous peoples have the collective right to live in freedom, peace and security as distinct peoples and shall not be subjected to any act of genocide or any other act of violence, including forcibly removing children of the group to another group’ (UN, 2007).

Throughout this period, First Nations peoples did not possess freedom of association or freedom to marry who they wanted to marry (Wilson, 1997). Instead, the lives of First Nations peoples were controlled by the 'Protectorate of Aborigines' or the 'Native Welfare' (Haebich, 1992, 2000; Kidd, 1997). The aim was to control First Nations procreation and prevent 'mixed-blood' First Nations peoples from reproducing with 'full-blood' First Nations peoples (Wilson, 1997; Wolfe, 1994). Thus, through miscegenation and assimilation, it was thought that the country would subsequently prosper, (white) nationhood would be strengthened, and its future adult citizens would be responsible members of society that would behave in accordance with Western values. In Linda Briskman's (2003) words, First Nations children would start to 'think white, act white, and in the end, be white' (p. 5). Cultural genocide could be completed if First Nations children were removed early enough from their First Nations families and 'brought up in the ways of the white man' (Reynolds, 1996, p. 170).

Indeed, assimilation policies have disrupted First Nations family life and cultures in profound ways that have had ongoing deleterious effects. The exact numbers of children removed are unknown and difficult to quantify; however, it is estimated that in excess of 10,000 First Nations children were removed between 1920 and the 1970s: nationwide, rates ranged from at least 10% to more than 30% of all First Nations children removed (Read, 1999; Wilson, 1997). The language of benevolence was used extensively in state and territory legislation to justify removals, leading some to argue that Indigenous child removals throughout the Stolen Generations era were motivated by misguided benevolence, or genuine child protective concerns (in line with the standards of the day), on the part of white Australians (Manne, 2001; Windschuttle, 2010).

However, abhorrent living conditions, particularly in institutions, prevailed. Instances of cruel mistreatment; neglect; and physical, sexual and emotional abuse were frequent (Wilson, 1997). First Nations children forcibly removed were forbidden to speak their languages and practice their cultures, instead being forced to speak English and provided with a menial education to prepare them for domestic and farmhand servitude to white Australians (Reynolds, 1996). They were taught to shun their Aboriginal ancestry, suppress their Aboriginal cultures, marry who they were given permission to marry, and ultimately assimilate into white society. Some Aboriginal children were even told that they were white (Wilson, 1997). Others were told that their parents had either died or did not want them (Wilson, 1997). These actions were not undertaken in the best interests of First Nations children, but in the best interests of the white Australian nation: future white Australian nationhood could be built on achieving cultural genocide (S. Nakata, 2018).

### **2.3 Changing Attitudes, Changing Policy: From the 1967 Referendum to Today**

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, a wave of civil rights movements occurred for Black peoples internationally, from the United States to South Africa to Australia. These civil rights movements saw increasing human rights granted to Black peoples. For Indigenous peoples in Australia, the occurrence of the 1956 Gurindji (Wave Hill) walk-off (led by Vincent Lingiari) and the 1965 Freedom Rides (led by Charlie Perkins) were watershed moments for change (M. Davis, 2014; Foley, 2011). Later, the successful passing of the 1967 Referendum was a historically significant event that resulted in changes being made to the Australian Constitution (Broome, 2019). Significantly, the ‘race power’ was added to the Constitution in 1967, thus granting the Commonwealth the constitutional authority to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander peoples (as opposed to states and territories maintaining this exclusive right) (M. Davis, 2014). The Constitution was also amended to enable the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the national census count (Chesterman & Galligan, 1997). While real change for First Nations peoples as a result of the Referendum is debatable (M. Davis, 2014; Foley, 2011), the 1967 Referendum was, nonetheless, a watershed moment in Australia's history. It passed with 90.77% 'yes' votes and was the first time in our nation's history that the Constitution was changed (Broome, 2010; Foley, 2011). Indeed, the 1960s saw significant changes to legislation and policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Following the 1967 Referendum, the 1970s and 1980s saw increasing self-determination granted to First Nations peoples under the leadership of the Whitlam and Hawke Labor governments. As articulated by former chairperson and special rapporteur of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, Erica-Irene Daes (1993), 'the right to self-determination is best viewed as entitling a people to choose its political allegiance, to influence the political order under which it lives, and to preserve its cultural, ethnic, historical, or territorial identity' (pp. 4–5).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s self-determination era, power was increasingly shifted from government to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. For example, the late 1960s and 1970s saw citizenship and voting rights granted to First Nations peoples, the beginning of the land rights movement (i.e. the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1972 and the 1975 return of Wave Hill land to the Gurindji people), the establishment of a national Indigenous voice to government (i.e. the 1973 National Aboriginal Consultative Committee), and significant change to racialised legislation and policy (such as the establishment of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth)) (Broome, 2019; Chesterman & Galligan, 1997; M. Davis, 2014; Foley, 2011).

In terms of self-determination and Indigenous governance,<sup>7</sup> the late 1970s and 1980s saw the establishment of various ACCOs, including child welfare-specific organisations such as VACCA, which was established in 1976 (Broome, 2019; VACCA, 2018). After decommissioning an earlier form of national Indigenous voice to government, the Hawke government subsequently passed legislation to establish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 1989, thereby enabling a unified Indigenous voice to government once again (Broome, 2019). Essentially, power was transferred from government (albeit slowly) to First Nations peoples to begin enabling Indigenous governance without direct government interference.

The 1990s self-determination era, under the leadership of the Keating Labor government, saw exciting advancements in Indigenous affairs. Most notably, the land rights movement gained traction with the Mabo decision handed down in the High Court in 1992. In *Mabo v. Queensland (No. 2)*, the High Court of Australia recognised native title as a property right that could co-exist with Australian sovereignty, and in doing so, declared *terra nullius* a legal fiction (Broome, 2019). Subsequently, the Commonwealth passed the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth), creating a framework by which First Nations land rights claims could be made.

Reconciliation also entered political parlance in the early 1990s with the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991 (Ranzijn et al., 2010). This was, in part, an aspect of the Commonwealth's response to the exposure of high rates of Aboriginal deaths in custody, as outlined in the release of the *1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Johnston, 1991). Indeed, government rhetoric towards First Nations peoples shifted throughout the 1990s self-determination

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<sup>7</sup> Within child protection, however, ACCOs have yet to have any involvement in statutory child protection services in Australia. Consequently, ACCOs have had limited power (both historically and in contemporary times) over decisions regarding state intervention into family life.

era, most strongly noted in former Prime Minister (PM) Keating's 1992 'Redfern speech', where he said,

. . . the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians. It begins, I think, with that act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. . . . (Keating, 1992)

Keating's Redfern address was a watershed moment of acceptance of fault for past government actions by an Australian PM. Action later ensued with the commission of the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* in 1995 (Wilson, 1997). The report of the National Inquiry—*Bringing them Home*—was released in 1997, subsequently giving the Stolen Generations a narrative and a history that was previously ignored. Indeed, the report had implications for Australian child protection and OOHC systems even though a National Apology to the Stolen Generations was not given by an Australian PM until 2008.

This brief history reveals that past wrongs committed against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been continually acknowledged—and sought to be addressed and redressed—by Australian governments since at least the 1970s. While there have been significant changes in Indigenous affairs since the turn of the century (such as the Closing the Gap initiative<sup>8</sup>), this chapter now focuses its attention on

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<sup>8</sup> The Closing the Gap initiative is a bi-partisan government agreement, which has been in place since 2008, to address inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Within its National Agreement on Closing the Gap, its stated objectives are 'to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments to work together to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians' (Australian Government, n.d.).

changes that have ensued in Australian child protection and OOHC systems from the end of the Stolen Generations until today.

## **2.4 Change in Australian Child Protection and Out-of-Home Care Systems**

Since the 1970s, there have been many changes to Australian child protection and OOHC systems and practices. One of the most significant has been the ACPP. To varying degrees, the ACPP came into effect across all states and territories, within state and territory legislation or policy,<sup>9</sup> since the 1980s in recognition of the harmful effects of removing Aboriginal children from their cultures, families and communities (Tilbury, 2013). Initially, the ACPP set forth a hierarchy of placement options for Aboriginal children entering state care because of child protection concerns (Libesman, 2014). Its inception was the result of concerted advocacy efforts by ACCOs and Aboriginal activists, such as the late Aunty Mollie Dyer (VACCA, 2018).

The ACPP is now known as the ATSICPP. The placement hierarchy in the revised ATSICPP states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people should be placed with kin as a first preference, with no differentiation made between Indigenous and non-Indigenous family or kin (SNAICC, 2017). When no family members are available to provide care, as a second preference, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people should be placed with another First Nations person from their own (or another) community. Finally, when all other placement options have been exhausted, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

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<sup>9</sup> As each Australian state and territory governs their own child protection and OOHC policies and practices, application of the ATSICPP (formerly known as the ACPP) varies throughout Australia. There is no Commonwealth piece of legislation that governs the application of the ATSICPP throughout the states and territories. Rather, the ATSICPP was adopted nationwide over time by individual states and territories to ensure ‘best practice’ with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in child protection and OOHC contexts.

and young people should only be placed with unrelated non-Indigenous carers as a last resort (SNAICC, 2017).

The ATSI CPP aims to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's right to culture by prioritising placement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family or community members when they enter care, and, in doing so, aims to prevent assimilation, as well as provide for children's 'best interests'. Although it has now changed to include a focus on five core elements—placement, prevention, partnership, participation and connection—the ATSI CPP placement hierarchy is a longstanding, and significant, feature of Australian child protection and OOHC practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (SNAICC, 2017; Tilbury, 2013). In fact, the various elements of the ATSI CPP are enshrined in legislation for each Australian jurisdiction, and the placement hierarchy is outlined in similar descending order across each state and territory (Libesman, 2014; Tilbury, 2013). Indeed, the ATSI CPP is a hallmark achievement for ACCOs who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

In addition to the ATSI CPP, contemporary Australian child protection and OOHC systems are guided by international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 (UN, 1989), and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) 2007 (UN, 2008). The UNDRIP (UN, 2008) espouses multiple rights—including the protection of land rights, cultural rights, rights to identity at individual and collective levels, and the right to self-determination<sup>10</sup>—for Indigenous peoples worldwide. The UNCRC is the most widely ratified human rights convention in history,

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<sup>10</sup> Although the UNDRIP includes the right to self-determination for Indigenous peoples worldwide, it is restricted by the competing principles clause at Article 46(1) which states that the Declaration cannot be interpreted in ways that undermine 'the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent States' (UN, 2007).

and it articulates a host of children’s rights, including the salience of culture and family to children. For example, the UNCRC articulates a child’s right to know and reside with their parents (unless removal from parents is warranted, and in the best interests of the child, because of protective concerns) (UN, 1989). The UNCRC and the UNDRIP provide a solid foundation for contemporary Australian child protection and OOHC systems. Importantly, they echo the necessity of self-determination for Indigenous peoples worldwide who encounter child protection and OOHC systems (Libesman, 2014).

Australian child protection and OOHC practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is also guided by *The National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2021–2031* (Department of Social Services [DSS], 2021). The overarching vision of the National Framework is that ‘children and young people in Australia have the right to grow up safe, connected and supported in their family, community and culture’, ‘free from harm and neglect’ in order to ‘reach their full potential’ (DSS, 2021, pp. 3, 8). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people ‘experiencing disadvantage or who are vulnerable’ are a priority group within the National Framework, in which addressing the overrepresentation of First Nations children and young people in child protection systems is stated as a key action for all Australian governments (DSS, 2021, p. 7). Embedding the full ATSI CPP is a core principle of the National Framework, with the AIHW monitoring the implementation of the five elements of the ATSI CPP across all states and territories in their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle Indicators reports<sup>11</sup> (AIHW, 2020b, 2021b).

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<sup>11</sup> Several indicators are used by the AIHW to monitor compliance with the ATSI CPP. At the time of writing, the placement and connection elements of the ATSI CPP were measured using indicators relating to the placement hierarchy, the completion of CSPs and reunification (AIHW, 2021b). New indicators for the prevention, partnership and participation elements of the ATSI CPP were under

While the National Framework represents a coordinated, whole-of-government approach (between the Commonwealth and the states and territories) to child welfare, the provision of statutory child protection services is the responsibility of Australian states and territories. The Commonwealth provides support for universal prevention, early intervention and targeted secondary services to support Australian families. However, there is variability in how states and territories govern their statutory child protection and OOHC services with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Libesman, 2014; Tilbury, 2013). To varying degrees across the country, policies that aim to foster Indigenous self-determination in child protection and OOHC systems are evident. For example, in Victoria, the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) program aims to transfer the guardianship of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in OOHC to an ACCO by 2021<sup>12</sup> (Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2018), with the goal of ‘49% of Aboriginal children on contractible orders case managed by ACCOs at June 2020’ (SNAICC, 2021e, p. 13). In NSW, a commitment was made by the state government to ensure improvement in the case management of Aboriginal children in OOHC (NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation, n.d.); however, this ‘Aboriginal Case Management Policy’ is reported as not yet fully implemented in practice (SNAICC, 2021a). There are many promising child protection and OOHC practices with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples evident throughout Australia, as

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development at the time of writing. These included the receipt of prevention services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (prevention element); expenditure and services received by ACCOs in relation to child protection and OOHC (partnership element); governments consulting with, or including input from, ACCOs in relation to OOHC case, and cultural, planning (partnership element); and, the participation of the child and family in case and/or cultural planning or decision-making (participation element) (AIHW, 2021b).

<sup>12</sup> At the time of submission of this thesis, the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people being case-managed by an ACCO in Victoria at the end of 2021 had not yet been reported. Thus, this thesis was unable to provide commentary as to whether the ACAC target had been met.

highlighted by the SNAICC in their annual reviews of state and territory compliance towards the ATSI CPP (see, for example, SNAICC, 2021b, 2021d, 2021c).

Importantly, First Nations families and communities are being increasingly recognised as important to First Nations children's long-term developmental outcomes, as evidenced by the widespread adoption of the ATSI CPP in legislation. Unlike the assimilation era, placement hierarchies prioritise placement with First Nations family; ACCOs are utilised across the country to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities provide care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and court-ordered removals of First Nations children and young people from their families must be justified. Aboriginal children are no longer removed on the basis of skin colour or blood-quantum, and certainly, there is an increasing focus on ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who enter the OOHC system reside with Indigenous family.<sup>13</sup> There is also increasing monitoring and oversight of child protection and OOHC practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from independent sources, such as the UN (UNCRC and UNDRIP) and, in Victoria and South Australia, through dedicated commissioners for Aboriginal children and young people (Commission for Children and Young People [CCYP], n.d.; Lawrie, 2019).

Furthermore, in contemporary Australian child protection and OOHC systems, the salience of First Nations cultures to First Nations children's safety and wellbeing is also better understood. This will be the focus of the next chapter. Indeed, there have been a multitude of changes to child protection and OOHC policies and practices with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since the 1970s. Australian child

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<sup>13</sup> However, there is also a more critical view that this is not being taken seriously enough, that family finding is under-resourced and half-hearted, and that kinship carers do not receive adequate support (see, for example, Davis, 2019). This critique will be discussed further in the next chapter (Chapter 3).

protection and OOHC systems are vastly different to what they were 50 years ago. And yet, the rates of removal by child protection are still increasing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and remain high relative to the size of the population.

## **2.5 First Nations Overrepresentation in Australian Child Protection and Out-of-Home Care Systems**

Despite much change, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are grossly overrepresented in OOHC (AIHW, 2021a; Bamblett & Lewis, 2007; Cunneen & Libesman, 2000; Hunter et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2019; Tilbury, 2009; Valentine & Gray, 2006). As of 30 June 2020, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people represented 41% of the OOHC population despite comprising only 8% of the general child population in Australia (AIHW, 2021a; ABS, 2016), sparking growing concerns of a second Stolen Generation. However, First Nations overrepresentation in child protection and OOHC systems is an enduring feature of Australia's history.

While the records of actual numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children residing in OOHC were limited, reports from various jurisdictions highlighted First Nations overrepresentation in child protection and OOHC systems throughout the 1970s. For example, in QLD, O'Connor (1993) reported that 'from the early 1970s, there was a recognition from the lowest levels in the Department of Children's Services . . . that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were over-represented in state care, and importantly, in institutional care' (p. 17). In northern Queensland institutions, correspondence and submissions written by the Department of Children's Services in the 1970s noted that 'more than 50 per cent of children' were Indigenous (O'Connor, 1993, p. 17). In Victoria, 45% of Aboriginal children were in OOHC in 1977, with this

number dropping slightly to 40% in 1980 (VACCA, 2018). A 1977 VACCA memo reported that 90% of Aboriginal children placed in non-Aboriginal foster care homes were later returned to institutional care and subsequently institutionalised, thus indicating that Aboriginal children were not returning home, or receiving good quality care, at this time (VACCA, 2018). Despite the end of official assimilation policies, high numbers of First Nations children were still residing in institutional care throughout the 1970s (J. Roberts, 2008).

Although data were not as readily available as today, there is evidence that First Nations overrepresentation in child protection and OOHC systems was a feature throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 1997, the *Bringing Them Home* report found that First Nations children continued to be overrepresented in Australian child protection and OOHC systems (Wilson, 1997). In 1993, there were 2,419 Indigenous children in care out of a total of 12,363 of all children in OOHC: this equates to 19.7% of Indigenous children in OOHC despite Indigenous children only constituting 2.7% of all Australian children at the time (Wilson, 1997). This overrepresentation was even higher in the NT—42.3% of the OOHC population were Indigenous in 1993. Systemic racism was named as one of the reasons for enduring Indigenous overrepresentation in child protection and OOHC systems.

In 1993 in Victoria, overrepresentation was also stark—12% of all children in care were Indigenous. In relation to Victoria, the *Bringing Them Home* report stated that in 1994–95 Aboriginal children were three times more likely to be notified to the department than other children and as at June 1995 they were five times more likely to be on a protection order. As at 30 June 1994 Aboriginal children were twelve times more likely to be involved with placement and related support services than other children. (Wilson, 1997, p. 386)

These figures do not read too dissimilarly from today's national rates of overrepresentation, in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are 8 times more likely to receive child protection services, 10 times more likely to be under a care and protection order, and 11 times more likely to be in OOHC (AIHW, 2021a).

Since 1998, the AIHW has reported national child protection data annually for each financial year. Their first Child Protection Australia report—recording data for the 1996–97 financial year—noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children resided in OOHC at the rate of 16.3 per 1,000 compared with 2.5 per 1,000 for all other children (AIHW, 1998). In percentage terms, nearly 20% of children in OOHC in 1997 were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Indeed, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children residing in OOHC has continued to climb since the late 1990s. Specifically, over the past 14 years, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in OOHC in Australia has nearly tripled from 30.1 per 1,000 at 30 June 2006 to 56 per 1,000 at 30 June 2020 (AIHW, 2007, 2021a).

### **2.5.1 Explaining Overrepresentation**

The overrepresentation of First Nations children in child protection and OOHC systems is not a crisis unique to Australia. Internationally, Indigenous overrepresentation in child protection and OOHC systems is also evident in Turtle Island/North America (United States of America (USA) and Canada) and Aotearoa/New Zealand (Atwool, 2016; Cram et al., 2015; M. Jones, 2010; Lawler et al., 2012; Trocmé et al., 2004). In the Australian context, non-Indigenous social work scholar Clare Tilbury (2015) attributes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in child protection and OOHC systems to a complex interaction between historical and contemporary macro, micro, individual and systemic factors. She argues that

overrepresentation is a consequence of the enduring effects of colonisation—which have resulted in Indigenous socioeconomic disadvantage across multiple measures—coupled with institutional racism, bias and a lack of cultural competence in tertiary-intervention dominated statutory systems (Tilbury, 2015).

Settler-colonial theory (Wolfe, 1994, 2006), coupled with theorising on Indigenous childhoods (Faulkner, 2016; S. Nakata, 2018), help me to articulate an alternative explanation for Indigenous overrepresentation in child protection and OOHC systems, which historically contextualises Indigenous experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage. Wolfe (1994, 2006) asserts that while official assimilation policies have ended, the end goal of settler-colonial societies is colonial completion, which requires the elimination of the ‘native’ via genocide or assimilation. Colonial completion cannot be achieved until an inclusive national identity has been established. Thus, while First Nations peoples continue to assert their own sovereignty (for example, in Australia, through activism such as Invasion Day protests on January 26), nationhood anxiety around illegitimate claims to sovereignty play out (Faulkner, 2016). This nationhood anxiety results in the intensive governance of First Nations childhoods in the Australian context (Faulkner, 2016). Torres Strait Islander political theorist Sana Nakata (2018) has also written about the continuance of paternalistic interventions into Indigenous childhoods and family life, arguing that Australian governments have been unable to move beyond the construction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as child-like and inferior to non-Indigenous (white) Australians. S. Nakata (2018) contends that these paternalistic interventions often target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during childhood out of a desire to produce future citizens that do not undermine the political legitimacy of the state.

While settler-colonial theory and theorising on Indigenous childhoods are contestable, these theories can be used to demonstrate that what is at stake for Indigenous children and young people in child protection and OOHC systems is a matter of individual and collective survival against eliminatory logics. Australian child protection and OOHC systems have operated differently for Indigenous children and families. For example, the first *Child Protection Australia* report in 1998 noted that the pattern of substantiation differed markedly for Indigenous children compared with non-Indigenous children. Indigenous children were more likely to be the subject of substantiation for neglect, while non-Indigenous children were more likely to be the subject of a physical abuse substantiation (AIHW, 1998). The report stated that some of the factors that contributed to Indigenous overrepresentation were ‘high rates of poverty and unemployment among Indigenous families; the high incidence of single-parent families; cultural differences in child-rearing practices; the high incidence of alcoholism; and, lack of access or ability to access appropriate support services’ (AIHW, 1998, pp. 18–19). While some of these reasons (such as high incidences of substance use) can result in genuine protective concerns for all children, other reasons (such as poverty and cultural differences in child-rearing practices) unfairly discriminate against, and stigmatise, Indigenous families.

In contemporary contexts, there are other reasons besides systemic racism for enduring First Nations overrepresentation in OOHC, including the legacy of past policies of forced removal, intergenerational effects of previous separations from First Nations family, and a higher likelihood of living in the lowest socioeconomic areas. However, it is important to recognise that these explanatory factors for First Nations overrepresentation in OOHC are historically contextualised by the problematisation of First Nations family life and cultures, where systemic racism is at the root of this

continuing problematisation. That is, systemic racism underpins overrepresentation through the problematisation of Indigenous family life, yet simultaneously, there are factors such as socioeconomic deprivation and ongoing trauma that also contribute to, and explain, overrepresentation. For example, in the *Bringing Them Home* report, other reasons given for overrepresentation were the enduring effects of past forcible removals and socioeconomic deprivation within Indigenous communities (Wilson, 1997). However, this socioeconomic deprivation is a structural outcome of colonisation, which dislocates Indigenous peoples from land and their ability to sustain their livelihoods while also enacting discriminatory policies that prevent employment, commerce or access to earnings. In child protection contexts, socioeconomic deprivation is interrelated with child neglect substantiations.

In 2019–20, substantiations for neglect for Indigenous children were higher compared with non-Indigenous children (32% and 18%, respectively). Indeed, explanatory factors for contemporary Indigenous overrepresentation include socioeconomic deprivation, homelessness and insecure housing, parental substance use, mental health concerns, and family violence (Liddle et al., 2021), some of which have resonance with reasons reported by the AIHW for overrepresentation in 1998. However, the surveillance of Indigenous families by child protection authorities is still experienced differently compared with non-Indigenous families. This is, in part, due to higher rates of socioeconomic deprivation (along with other drivers of overrepresentation) *as well as* the ongoing problematisation of Indigenous family life and cultures. Indeed, understandings of neglect and poverty are subject to much interpretation.

### **2.5.2 The Intersection Between Poverty and Neglect Substantiations**

Over the past 10 years, a growing body of international research has drawn linkages between experiences of poverty and neglect substantiations in child protection systems. Research has noted that while not all people who experience poverty harm their children, families living in poverty are more likely to be involved with child protection systems (Ainsworth, 2021; Bradt et al., 2015; Bywaters et al., 2020; Gupta, 2017; Hansen & Ainsworth, 2009; Morris et al., 2018). Poverty also features as particularly prominent in substantiated neglect cases (Ainsworth, 2021; Bywaters et al., 2020; Gupta, 2017).

Gupta (2017) argues that contemporary social work interventions in child protection contexts have been influenced by the broader political agenda (neoliberalism), and consequently tend to focus on individual pathology. Parents are blamed for their ‘dysfunction’, and solutions to child maltreatment cases focus on correcting ‘parental pathology’ (such as parents obtaining housing or employment, or undertaking parenting courses) (Gupta, 2017; Hansen & Ainsworth, 2009). At this juncture, structural inequality—and other macro factors, such as the economy, the broader political agenda, power and racism—are overlooked by social workers and not addressed in child maltreatment interventions (Ainsworth, 2021; Bradt et al., 2015; Bywaters et al., 2020; Gupta, 2017; Hansen & Ainsworth, 2009; Morris et al., 2018).

Indeed, child abuse and neglect is complex. Gupta (2017) acknowledges that ‘decision making in cases of neglect is not straightforward, is open to interpretation and is influenced by professionals’ values, emotions and organisational contexts’ (p. 23). However, at the same time, understandings of child abuse and neglect—as well as children’s ‘best interests’—are culturally bound and value laden. Underlying all child protection interventions into the private realm of family life are, as Gupta (2017) words

it, ‘moral judgements about normative parenting’ (p. 23). For Indigenous peoples in Australia, constructions of normative parenting are based on a middle-class ‘white, Anglo-Christian, nuclear family’ (Dunstan et al., 2020, p. 323).

Poverty has been an enduring feature of family life for many First Nations peoples since invasion. For the past 5 years, the Family Matters campaign—an Indigenous-led consortium spearheaded by peak Indigenous child and family welfare body, SNAICC—has identified poverty as a root cause underlying Indigenous overrepresentation (Hunter et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2017, 2018, 2019). Poverty among Indigenous Australians is widely acknowledged. In fact, the Commonwealth of Australia has regularly reported on socioeconomic disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in a range of publications, including the *Closing the Gap* (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019) and *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* reports (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2016).

However, poverty is statistically more likely to affect Indigenous peoples living in remote parts of Australia—such as communities in the NT—because of a range of factors, such as employment and education opportunities. In their 2016 Census paper, non-Indigenous researchers at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Francis Markham and Nicholas Biddle, stated that there is growing income disparity between Indigenous peoples in urban versus remote locations. They articulated the need for urgent policy action to address growing rates of poverty among Indigenous peoples living in very remote locations in Australia (Markham & Biddle, 2016). The income disparity ‘gap’ is widening for Indigenous peoples living in remote Australia.

Yet, while poverty tends to be more prevalent in very remote parts of Indigenous Australia, so too is the likelihood of living in OOHC. Children living in remote and very

remote parts of Australia are more likely to be the subject of a child protection substantiation than are children from urban parts of Australia. In fact, the AIHW (2021a) reported that at 30 June 2020 ‘the rates for children in remote and very remote areas were more than twice that of those in major cities for children living in out-of-home care’ (p. 53). In these areas, the population distribution is largely Indigenous: proportionally, Indigenous Australians constituted 25% of the remote population in 2016 (ABS, 2016).

Children who live in lower socioeconomic areas are also more likely to be the subject of a child protection substantiation in Australia, and this disproportionately affects Indigenous children (AIHW, 2021a). The AIHW (2021a) stated that ‘Indigenous children who were the subjects of substantiations were more likely to be from the lowest socioeconomic areas (41%) compared with non-Indigenous children (32%)’ (p. 26) in 2019–20. Evidently, Indigeneity, poverty and involvement in child protection systems are interrelated.

Neglect is also one of the most commonly substantiated types of child maltreatment evidenced among Indigenous children who encounter Australian child protection systems. While emotional abuse was the most common type of child maltreatment substantiated for all Australian children in 2019–20, Indigenous children had higher rates of neglect substantiations (32%) than non-Indigenous children (18%) (AIHW, 2021a). Understandings of emotional abuse have shifted over time (Connolly & Morris, 2011; Doyle & Timms, 2014; Fernandez, 2014), with emotional abuse perhaps being previously categorised exclusively under ‘neglect’ substantiations in past decades. In contrast, neglect substantiations have at their core the persistent inability to provide for a child’s basic needs, including the provision of clothing, food and shelter (Doyle & Timms, 2014). However, within many international child protection systems,

consideration of parental (or carer) intent is overlooked when determining whether child neglect exists (Gupta, 2017). It is one matter to deliberately withhold food or accommodation from a child when means to procure food are readily available; it is another when the means to obtain food or housing are not available.

In many parts of Australia, both urban and remote, housing is becoming increasingly unaffordable and scarce (Cho et al., 2021; Daley et al., 2018). Cities such as Melbourne and Sydney have precarious and high-priced housing markets where middle-income families and millennials have been reported to struggle with housing (Chau, 2018, 2019; Daley et al., 2018; Wright, 2021). Homelessness and insecure housing are concerning issues in Australia that evidence entrenched structural inequality. However, Indigenous peoples are more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to live in overcrowded homes (SCRGSP, 2020) and are also more likely to experience homelessness (AIHW, 2019; SCRGSP, 2020). While it is culturally appropriate for several generations of family members to live in the same household for Indigenous peoples, stress as a result of overcrowding is also reported among Indigenous peoples (SCRGSP, 2020). In 2016, most (70%) Indigenous peoples who were homeless lived in severely overcrowded homes,<sup>14</sup> while more than half of Indigenous peoples experiencing homelessness lived in very remote areas (AIHW, 2019). Indeed, housing issues are amplified for many Indigenous peoples compared with non-Indigenous Australians.

Child maltreatment is complex, and certainly, there are cases where state intervention is necessary. However, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, social workers or child protection practitioners do not effectively consider the structural

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<sup>14</sup> As stated by the AIHW (2019), ‘the main type of homelessness experienced by Indigenous Australians was living in “severely crowded” dwellings; that is, dwellings that need 4 or more extra bedrooms’ (p. vi) on Census night in 2016.

inequalities and broader macro factors that affect a family's ability to support and care for their children. Child protection and OOHC systems—particularly in Western countries, such as Australia—tend to be risk-averse and individually focused (Connolly & Katz, 2019). The strengths of family and culture tend to be overlooked when considered alongside 'risks'. Families are not always viewed within their broader context. Rather than looking to the broader issues impacting a family's circumstances, Gupta (2017) argues that neglect has been constructed as an issue that children need to be rescued from, rather than being supported to thrive in. This is potentially a result of the lopsided investment in tertiary child protection services: only 17% of the nearly A\$6 billion spent annually on Australia's child protection and OOHC systems is dedicated to prevention and early intervention supports (Teager et al., 2019). However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are disproportionately subject to child protection interventions because of neglect, which evidence suggests is interrelated with poverty. It highlights the ways in which child protection systems are experienced differently by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### **2.5.3 Structural Racism, Differential Treatment and Differential Impacts**

Understandings of children's 'best interests' are historically and culturally bound, and are therefore subject to interpretation and change. For First Nations peoples, children's 'best interests' have historically been premised on notions of whiteness, thus resulting in the concerted assimilation efforts of the 20th century Stolen Generations. Racism is one of the constants throughout Australia's history, which clearly evidences enduring negative constructions of First Nations peoples as problematic. Racism refers to a belief that one cultural, ethnic or racial group is in some way superior to another cultural, ethnic or racial group (Markwick et al., 2019). Differential treatment, and the construction of racial superiority and inferiority, are at the core of covert and overt

experiences of racism. Furthermore, systems and processes that have differentiated impacts on racial groups, even when unintentional, are structurally racist. Research has found that the belief in racial superiority has been used to defend public instances of racism, thereby perpetuating the superiority/inferiority divide between two racial groups (Markwick et al., 2019).

Contemporary experiences of racism against First Nations peoples are well documented. A quantitative analysis of 2011, 2012 and 2014 Victorian Population Health Surveys noted that in comparison to adults from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, First Nations peoples in Victoria are seven times more likely to experience racism (Markwick et al., 2019). Racism, power and Indigenous inferiority have been subjects of writing by many First Nations peoples in Australia, such as Chelsea Watego (formerly Bond) (Bond, 2017; Mukandi & Bond, 2019), Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2009, 2015), Amy McQuire (2019b, 2019a) and Nayuka Gorrie (2017).

Discussing the implications of race and racism for health educators in Australia, Munanjahli and South Sea Islander scholar Chelsea Watego has described how racism exists at both interpersonal and structural levels across multiple policy settings, including health and criminal justice systems (Bond, 2017; Bond et al., 2018; Watego et al., 2021). In a 2018 paper, Watego and her colleagues used Charles W. Mills's (1997) concept of the 'Racial Contract' to argue that First Nations peoples are not the intended beneficiaries of wealth and a 'fair-go' for all Australians (Bond et al., 2018). In this paper, they highlight how the law is applied differently to Indigenous peoples in Australia (Bond et al., 2018), where this cannot be attributed to the proposition that First Nations peoples are somehow more 'deviant', 'lawless', 'corrupt' or 'immoral'. That is, despite human rights advances and the application of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth), the construction of First Nations peoples as inferior remains ingrained in the

Australian psyche. It then operates at a structural level (often subconsciously) and changes the way that systems respond to First Nations families. Indeed, as with the criminal justice system, structural racism operates within Australian child protection and OOHC systems as well.

Within contemporary Australian child protection and OOHC systems, structural racism is most notably evident via the intensive governance and over-surveillance of Indigenous families and childhoods seen during the paternalistic Northern Territory Emergency Intervention (NTER), which commenced in 2008. The NTER was a controversial measure that suspended the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)* to control, and correct ‘dysfunctional’, Indigenous family life in the NT (Macoun, 2011). It received both criticism (see Moreton-Robinson, 2009; Watson, 2009) and support (see, for example, Langton, 2008) from First Nations peoples. Regardless of whether the NTER has been an effective policy, it was racially motivated, and it did intensively govern the lives of First Nations children and families via punitive measures such as welfare quarantining and the deployment of the military. It is evidence of contemporary structural racism within Australian child protection systems.

Further evidence of structural racism is highlighted by Cobble Cobble woman and law professor Megan Davis in the *Family Is Culture* review of the NSW child protection and OOHC systems:

We know the child protection system today has resonance with historical practices because Aboriginal people have said so and we must not only listen but hear what they are saying. Their view is supported by research, cited in this report, and voluminous Commonwealth, state and territory commissions of inquiries, parliamentary inquiries and reviews. Often contemporary casework practice reinforces the memory of the authoritarian state that dominated and subjugated Aboriginal lives during the protection era. It animates real fear. Some Aboriginal people fight the system, many give up for

fear or exhaustion, defeated. When police are used for removal, especially riot police, this has historical continuity. When babies are removed at hospitals or a pre-natal risk notification is made because the mother is Aboriginal, this has historical continuity. When siblings or twins are separated in care, this has historical continuity. When families reach out to FACS [child protection] for a carer assessment and are ignored and telephone calls go unreturned, this has historical continuity. When mums and dads are given unrealistic, unachievable goals in order to have their children or grandchildren restored to them, this has historical resonance. Some of the restoration goals are incontrovertibly impossible to be achieved. Some of these practices demonstrate concrete examples of institutional racism. The system is replete with practice that renders our people voiceless and powerless. (M. Davis, 2019, p. xvi)

Child protection systems render all families voiceless and powerless, often disproportionately targeting low income families: the system engenders fear, mistrust, anxiety and hostility for all subject to child protection intervention. However, structural racism is apparent in the *way* child protection systems are deployed against First Nations peoples, where Indigeneity is seen as a *prima facie* risk factor for child protection intervention. As an example, in one Australian study, administrative data retrieved from a child protection authority in QLD were used to examine the factors associated with child protection recurrence: it was found that ‘Indigenous status was a stronger predictor of subsequent reports and investigations than a rating of “high risk” on the risk assessment tool’ (Jenkins et al., 2018, p. 188). In another study, WA administrative data were analysed using logistic regression ‘to determine the factors associated with an increased risk of infant removal’ (O’Donnell et al., 2019, p. 90). It was found that Aboriginality accounted for double the risk of infant removals, and that Aboriginal parents who had their infants removed ‘were more likely to be living in

remote to highly remote areas compared to non-Aboriginal families' (O'Donnell et al., 2019, p. 92).

Ultimately, structural racism is an enduring feature—not a bug—of Australian child protection and OOHC systems. All of the other causes that are attributed to First Nations overrepresentation in child protection and OOHC—including poverty, family violence and substance abuse—can be explained by structural racism. First Nations overrepresentation in the two most coercive systems of governance—child protection and criminal justice—is not an accident.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

While the practices undertaken in contemporary child protection and OOHC systems with First Nations children and families have changed since the 1970s, there are attitudes, biases and social determinants that have not shifted. Whether Indigenous overrepresentation is the result of assimilation efforts (i.e. the logic of elimination), or the result of a complex matrix of micro and macro factors (such as poverty, racism and trauma that stem from invasion), the fact remains that Indigenous children experience Australian child protection and OOHC systems differently to non-Indigenous children. Some of the ways in which Australia's child protection and OOHC systems operate differently for Indigenous children are beneficial. The ATSICPP, for example, positively discriminates against Indigenous children to prevent culturally inappropriate placements (where possible) and ensure the maintenance of Indigenous children and young people's cultures. However, there are higher rates of intervention into Indigenous family life in the Australian settler-colonial state, and for all the policy change, this disruption to kin and Country has been a constant in the lives of many First Nations communities. Amid this context, given Australia's history of invasion and continued intervention into First Nations family life, lies an important challenge for social work.

Whether intended or not, Australian child protection and OOHC systems must ensure that they do not repeat the mistakes of the past by assimilating Indigenous children into non-Indigenous society. At this nexus is the fundamental importance of culture for First Nations children as a protective mechanism against assimilation. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 3: Resistance to Assimilation—A Critical Examination of Cultural Connection in Out-of-Home Care**

The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care is a complex issue. It is a systemic phenomenon that continues to grow across the continuum of statutory child protection involvement. Once again, this year's report shows that our children continue to enter statutory child protection systems at a greater rate, are more likely substantiated, are admitted to orders at higher rates, stay longer and exit via reunification or restoration far less frequently. *We have borne witness to this statistical norm for so long that I fear many have become desensitised to the realities that it represents for our children.* (Lewis et al., 2019, p. 3, italics my emphasis)

This is how Natalie Lewis and Richard Weston, the former co-chairs of the SNAICC *Family Matters* campaign, opened their 2019 report into the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC. The numbers of Aboriginal children removed from their parents have been increasing since the end of the assimilation era (M. Davis, 2019). This is the case despite regular inquiries and reports that have sought to examine how child protection and OOHC systems function, as well as their effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. In 2017, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse observed that since 1990, there were 'no fewer than six national and at least 18 state or territory inquiries into the effectiveness of child protection systems that included a focus on the treatment of children in out-of-home care' (McClellan, 2017, p. 32). The Davis *Family is Culture* report cites an Allen Consulting paper in 2015 that identified 'at least 25 Ombudsman inquiries, Auditor-General inquiries, commissions of inquiry, judicial reviews, parliamentary inquiries and Royal Commissions into various

aspects of child protection practice and policy across the eight jurisdictions’ (Allen Consulting, *Measuring Progress Under the National Framework: Evaluation of Progress Under the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children*, 2015, p. 35, as cited in M. Davis, 2019, p. 8) This is all to say that child protection and OOHC systems are a site of regular (what Davis describes as ‘ritualistic’) bureaucratic review and analysis.<sup>15</sup>

In this chapter, I aim to understand how cultural connection has come to figure as a key concept in OOHC policy and practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The chapter emphasises the leadership and activism of Aboriginal women, in particular, in drawing attention to the importance of culture and the effects of cultural disconnection on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. By demonstrating the continuity of overrepresentation alongside efforts to support cultural connection in OOHC, I argue that a more critical and nuanced understanding of how cultural connection functions within OOHC is needed. There is little doubt that cultural connection is as important as placement stability to Indigenous children and young people growing up in OOHC (Krakouer et al., 2018). This chapter is interested in how cultural connection operates as an effort to ameliorate the risk of cultural disconnection within a system that continues to place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC at disproportionate rates to the rest of the population.

This chapter tackles this tension by first characterising the contemporary OOHC context and identifying how time and age in care and overrepresentation correlate with the risk of cultural disconnection. The experience of child protection and OOHC systems as sites of ‘elimination’ for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

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<sup>15</sup> While policy is not just developed following inquiries and reviews, the number of inquiries and reports that have examined Australian child protection and OOHC systems are evidence of government awareness of the dysfunction that exists within these systems.

community is then discussed, alongside policy and practice efforts to foster cultural connection in OOHC. I introduce a definition of cultural connection articulated by the SNAICC (2017) in which cultural connection—as a policy objective—concerns the maintenance or (re)establishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s connections to family, community, culture and Country in OOHC. Second, I historicise ‘cultural connection’ (as a moment of policy change) by emphasising the impact of Aboriginal activism and self-determination (that is, the freedom and power to pursue and govern your own interests without interference<sup>16</sup>) in countering the assimilationist<sup>17</sup> impacts of child removal. In this way, it becomes clear how Aboriginal activists worked to strengthen cultural connection in response to a system that was creating the risk of disconnection. Third, this places in context how culture has come to be understood as pertinent to health and wellbeing. By looking closely at policy and practice, this chapter seeks to demonstrate how the pursuit of ‘cultural connection’ risks moving from being a political site of Aboriginal activism to ameliorate the harms of child removal to being a bureaucratic site of system compliance. Fourth, I argue that a strengthened understanding of cultural connection is one that makes visible the continued risk to cultural connection in OOHC. This is a critical position from which the subsequent chapters and the empirical research presented should be read, and results in a double

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<sup>16</sup> This definition of self-determination uses the concepts of positive and negative freedom, articulated by social and political theorist, Isaiah Berlin (1958). For Indigenous peoples, self-determination must include not only the freedom to control your own affairs and govern your own interests—political or otherwise—but also the freedom from government or state-sanctioned interference in managing your own affairs.

<sup>17</sup> In Australia, assimilation policies came into effect around 1910-20s to address the rising numbers of so-called ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Assimilation policies were pursued through forcible removals of so-called ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (now known as the ‘Stolen Generations’), which continued until the 1970s (Wilson, 1997). The goal of assimilation policies was to ensure ‘that all Aborigines shall attain the same manner of living as other Australians, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and being influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians’. (McConnochie, Hollinsworth, & Pettman, 1991, pp. 110–111, as cited in Ranzijn et al., 2010, p. 81). Please note that the terms ‘half-caste’ and ‘Aborigine’ are offensive terms that are no longer acceptable to use to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but have been used here in their historical context. See Chapter 2 for further detail.

argument: first, that where family disconnection occurs, cultural connection must be prioritised to counter assimilatory effects, and for the wellbeing of the child or young person; and second, that these well-placed and important efforts to protect children and young people and their cultural connection can be pursued within a broader critical project that shows how the OOHC system is a risk to cultural connection by its design.

### **3.1 Characterising the Contemporary Child Protection and Out-of-Home Care Context in Australia**

The contemporary Australian OOHC context is one that can be characterised by four features that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities face that are distinct from non-Indigenous Australians. First, Indigenous families experience higher rates of child protection removals, which are particularly pronounced during infancy, while Indigenous children stay in care longer without plans for exit or reunification from OOHC (in reference to those children for whom reunification was a possibility<sup>18</sup>) (AIHW, 2020a, 2021a; Krakouer, 2020). Second, Indigenous children are overrepresented across key decision points of the child protection system, including protection orders involving child removal (AIHW, 2021a; Liddle et al., 2021). Third, the Indigenous community, as a whole, experience contemporary child protection and OOHC systems as one of intergenerational trauma and complexity—arguably, as a site of ‘elimination’. Fourth, there are specific policies that relate to cultural planning and cultural connection to prevent cultural disconnection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who live in OOHC. These four experiences are considered in turn, relying on both empirical and conceptual scholarship.

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<sup>18</sup> For example, the AIHW (2021a) report states that ‘in 2019–20, there were about 28,900 children in out-of-home care, *excluding those on long-term guardianship or custody orders, for whom reunification was a possibility*. Of these children, over 5,300 (19%) were reunified during this time. Reunification rates were lower for Indigenous children compared with non-Indigenous children (15% and 21%, respectively). This was consistent across all age groups’ (AIHW, 2021a, p. 67, italics my emphasis).

### 3.1.1 Age of Removal and Time in Out-of-Home Care

The removal of infants from their mothers is a concern that reflects continuity between historical and contemporary Indigenous child removal practices. Between 2019 and 2020, Indigenous children under the age of one were admitted to OOHC at a rate of 46.6 per 1,000, 10 times the rate for non-Indigenous children under the age of 1 year (4.6 per 1,000) (AIHW, 2021a). The M. Davis (2019) review of the NSW OOHC system also drew attention to the high rates of child protection reports made when Aboriginal babies are still *in utero*. Using a representative sample of 200 cases, the qualitative data collected and analysed for the review found that almost a quarter (23.5%) of babies removed from their mother at birth (or shortly thereafter within the hospital setting) were Aboriginal (M. Davis, 2019).

In WA, an analysis of national and state administrative government data<sup>19</sup> found that between 2011 and 2015, there was an increase in newborns removed because of child protection concerns within their first seven and 31 days of life (O'Donnell et al., 2019). In this study by O'Donnell et al. (2019), it was also noted that 'Aboriginality was associated with almost double the risk of infant removal' (p. 95), and that once removed, Aboriginal children were more likely to linger in care. Further, the Davis report details that in NSW, having one child removed from the mother's care was in itself a 'high-risk indicator' that gives risk to a 'high-risk birth alert' during a mother's pregnancy. In short, Indigenous children are removed at a young age (often as infants), are predominately placed in non-Indigenous homes, and have case plans wherein

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<sup>19</sup> National data from the 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017 AIHW Child Protection Australia reports were used, as well as additional data provided by the AIHW. These data were analysed in conjunction with linked state administrative data provided by the WA Department of Communities—Child Protection and Family Support Division and the Department of Health.

reunification is not listed as a possibility<sup>20</sup> (AIHW, 2021a; CCYP, 2019; M. Davis, 2019).

It is also the case that Indigenous children remain in the OOHC system longer compared with non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2021a; Liddle et al., 2021). Across all age groups, Indigenous children experience long-term OOHC at higher rates than non-Indigenous children—Indigenous children aged 2–4 years experienced long-term OOHC at 13 times the rate of non-Indigenous children aged 2–4 years (30.2 per 1,000 and 2.3 per 1,000, respectively) at 30 June 2020 (AIWH, 2021a). Permanency outcomes are also experienced differently by Indigenous children compared with non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2021a). For example, between 2019 and 2020, ‘reunification rates for Indigenous children were lower compared to non-Indigenous children (15% for Indigenous children and 21% for non-Indigenous children, respectively)’, while a lower proportion of Indigenous children left OOHC to a third-party parental responsibility order<sup>21</sup> compared with non-Indigenous children (1.6% for Indigenous children and 2.5% for non-Indigenous children, respectively) (AIHW, 2021a, p. 67). In all, it is evident that Indigenous children are not only more likely to enter care as newborns, but also more likely to remain in care for longer than non-Indigenous children, and are less likely to achieve timely permanency than non-Indigenous children.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in the *Family is Culture* review, it was found that ‘in the majority of cases where a child had a care plan filed, the plan did not identify restoration to the parents as a possibility (84.1%)’ (Davis, 2019, p. 346).

<sup>21</sup> A finalised third-party parental responsibility order is defined by the AIHW (2021a) as ‘an order transferring all duties, powers, responsibilities, and authority to which parents are entitled by law to a nominated person(s) whom the court considers appropriate. The nominated person may be an individual, such as a relative, or an officer of the state or territory department responsible for child protection. Third-party parental responsibility may be ordered in the event that a parent is unable to care for a child, with parental responsibility then transferred to a relative, or other nominated person. Finalised third-party parental responsibility orders can be a long-term order or a short-term order’ (p. 87). In different Australian jurisdictions, third-party parental responsibility orders can also be referred to as ‘permanent care’ or ‘long-term guardianship’ care, where a child is placed with a carer ‘under an order where parental responsibility is transferred to them’ (AIHW, 2021a, p. 89).

Early child removal has implications for cultural connection on account of the high numbers of Indigenous children placed with non-Indigenous carers. Nationally, 57% of Indigenous children in OOHC lived with non-Indigenous family members or carers at 30 June 2019 (AIHW, 2020b). If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enter care earlier, remain in care longer, and reunification and permanent care with Aboriginal family members is not considered possible, then the likelihood of them ever being raised within their Indigenous culture is poor. This complicates the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to learn culture, and indeed for the OOHC system to foster cultural connection. Ultimately, given the high rate of placement of Aboriginal children with non-Indigenous carers; higher rates of infant removals (as highlighted by the AIHW, 2021a; M. Davis, 2019; and O’Donnell et al., 2019); the longer length of stay in OOHC; and the reduced likelihood of Aboriginal family reunification, the cultural appropriateness of Aboriginal children’s placements in OOHC is deeply concerning.

### **3.1.2 Overrepresentation**

Overrepresentation is another way that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community experiences child protection and OOHC systems. As reported in the 2021 AIHW *Child Protection Australia* report, Indigenous children were overrepresented at every child protection and OOHC phase and in increasing numbers on previous years:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were receiving child protection services at eight times the rate of non-Indigenous children, an increase on 2016–2017 figures (AIHW, 2021a, pp. 14, 16).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children received substantiations at nearly seven times the rate of non-Indigenous children, an increase from 40 per 1,000

Indigenous children to 43 per 1,000 Indigenous children since 2015–16 (AIHW, 2021a, pp. 27, 35).

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were admitted to OOHC at 10 times the rate for non-Indigenous children, increasing from 12 per 1,000 Indigenous children to 14 per 1,000 Indigenous children since 2016–17 (AIHW, 2021a, pp. 50, 59).

Without change, the population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in OOHC is projected to increase by 54% by 2030 (Liddle et al., 2021). Such change will not come easily, and nor will it be achieved by child protection and OOHC systems in isolation from other social policy. Despite commitment from the then PM Kevin Rudd, in his Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008 (Parliament of Australia, n.d.), it is evident that change is difficult to achieve. As highlighted in the previous chapter, disproportionality is related to the problematisation of Indigenous childhoods, family life and cultures, but it is also a result of historically contextualised issues—such as homelessness, family violence, substance use and parental mental health concerns—that result in child safety concerns. Consequently, as M. Davis (2019,) writes in the *Family is Culture* report, ‘to be effective, any reform to law, practice and policy must respond to the extent and intergenerational nature of the trauma that has been caused and compounded by the state’ (p. 8). The most recent AIHW *Child Protection Australia* report also acknowledges this, identifying the underlying reasons for overrepresentation as including ‘the legacy of past policies of forced removal’ and ‘intergenerational effects of previous separations from family and culture’, as well as serious matters of child safety in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are also overrepresented in ‘hospital admissions for injuries and assault’, ‘experiences of homelessness’ and ‘involvement in the youth justice system’ (AIHW, 2021a, p. 27).

As highlighted in the previous chapter, overrepresentation is a complex issue, explained by multiple factors, and the experience of intergenerational trauma in child protection and OOHC systems by Indigenous peoples is described in multiple scholarly publications (Cunneen & Libesman, 2000; Funston & Herring, 2016; Newton, 2019; Tilbury, 2015; Turnbull-Roberts et al., 2021; Valentine & Gray, 2006). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community's experience of child protection and OOHC systems, then, can be described as one of intergenerational and complex trauma and is not attributable to any single policy in isolation.

### **3.1.3 Intergenerational Trauma and Complexity: An Experience of 'Elimination'?**

In making sense of the contemporary context around OOHC, this chapter examines child protection policies as historically connected to, rather than disconnected from, practices of colonisation. In this context, it is helpful to recognise how cultural connection has been emphasised in the activism of Aboriginal women seeking to ameliorate the impact of intergenerational practices of child removal. Aboriginal activism against child removals (and subsequent placement in non-Indigenous homes) is just as strong today as it was in the 1970s, with grassroots movements such as Grandmothers Against Removals (GMAR) voicing concern (Briskman, 2003; Dyer, 1980; Haebich, 2000; Lock, 1997; Perske & Behrendt, 2017; Tilbury, 2013). GMAR opposes the ongoing removal of Indigenous children from their families, communities and cultures, arguing that 'forced removals' in the NSW context are a repetition of the Stolen Generations (Gibson, 2018; Grandmothers Against Removals, 2018; Perske & Perske & Behrendt, 2017). GMAR's activism falls within a counter-assimilation framework: asserting the importance of returning children to Indigenous families, communities and cultures, and opposing 'racist' systemic removals of Indigenous

children. For example, GMAR activist, Aunty Deb Swan, articulates the imperativeness of returning Indigenous children to family and culture:

Their cultural plan is to give [removed children] books. The cultural plan should always be that you return them to family. They need to be living [culture] with their family—that's how they learn. Taking them away from their family and culture is the most traumatic thing. (Thorburn & Syed, 2017)

While cultural plans are part of an Indigenous child's case plan—which specifies how care and protection needs will be met, such as where children are to live—GMAR's activism demonstrates the reality that for many Indigenous parents and grandmothers who seek support from GMAR, cultural planning is viewed as insufficient to address the family and cultural disruption that results from placement in OOHC. While Indigenous researchers have demonstrated the ways in which Indigenous culture provides continuity, stability, identity and belonging for children growing up in OOHC (Bamblett & Lewis, 2007; K. Bennett, 2015; Carriere, 2007; Richard, 2004), it is important to distinguish when this evidence is emphasised to *prevent removals*, such as in the activism of GMAR, and when it is emphasised as an *amelioration* for the known risks (if not harm) that arises when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children come into contact with child protection and OOHC systems. Given the overrepresentation, and rates of placement of Aboriginal children with non-Indigenous carers, for many people within Indigenous communities, OOHC and permanent care (that is, the transfer of legal guardianship from the state to a specified carer) are viewed as the end goal of assimilation. First Nations peoples' lack of trust and confidence, and fear, in child protection and OOHC systems endures.

#### **3.1.4 Policies and Practices Concerning Cultural Connection in Out-of-Home Care**

Cultural connection is a term used to refer to a child's right to culture, as highlighted within human rights frameworks such as the 1989 UNCRC and the 2007

UNDRIP, to which Australia is a signatory (UN, 1989, 2007). In addition to other rights, these pieces of human rights treaties articulate Indigenous children's rights to culture. They do so not on a basis of empirical evidence as to its benefits, but on a normative basis as a foundation for justice for Indigenous peoples. For example, Indigenous children have the right to preserve their identity and learn about their cultures, particularly when they grow up in care displaced from their families, as stipulated in the UNCRC<sup>22</sup> (UN, 1989) and the UNDRIP (UN, 2007). Further, Article 30 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) states that children who belong to a minority group have the right to 'enjoy their culture', while Articles 8, 9, 11 and 12 of the UNDRIP articulate Indigenous peoples' rights to belong to community; practice, teach and revitalise their cultures; and be free from cultural destruction and forcible assimilation. Ultimately, human rights frameworks aim to protect Indigenous children's right to be raised in accordance with the values, beliefs and traditions espoused in their culture of origin, without being subjected to cultural denigration. This includes safeguarding—and fostering—diverse enactments of spirituality, values and traditions in line with a person's cultural background. Human rights frameworks make this argument irrespective of whether it has demonstrable benefits, but as a matter of normative value: adhering to these rights respects the humanity and dignity of Indigenous peoples and is a form of justice. In this way, cultural connection can be understood as a rights-based form of justice for Indigenous peoples, which also enables wellbeing through connection to a child's Indigenous culture.

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<sup>22</sup>Article 8 (children's right to preserve their identity); Article 9 (children's right to maintain contact with parents/family when separated because of 'best interests' concerns); Article 20 (due regard given to the continuity of a child's cultural background when removed from parents/family and placed in alternative care, such as foster care); and Article 30 (children's right to enjoy their culture) of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) are of most relevance.

In Australia, the ATSI CPP is used to guide best practice and decision-making for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection and OOHC systems (SNAICC, 2017). Five interconnected elements—prevention, partnership, placement, participation and connection—are enshrined in all Australian state and territory child protection and OOHC legislation or policy (SNAICC, 2017). The ATSI CPP placement element specifies a hierarchy of preferred placement options when Aboriginal children enter OOHC. It prioritises placement with family to protect connection to culture through the maintenance of family relationships. However, ‘family’ can mean either Indigenous or non-Indigenous family, and consequently, the placement of Aboriginal children with non-Indigenous family is compliant with the highest level of the ATSI CPP (Baidawi et al., 2017). This is relevant within the contemporary context because the proportion of Aboriginal children placed with Aboriginal carers is low (25% in 2018 in Victoria, see CCYP, 2019, pp. 21, 78; and nationally, 42% at 30 June 2020, see AIHW, 2021b), and reunification rates are lower for Aboriginal children (AIHW, 2020a; Krakouer, 2020). In NSW for example, the M. Davis (2019) review showed that placement with Aboriginal families is concerning; over 40% of cases contain no assessment of Aboriginal family as potential carers. Placement decisions and case planning for Aboriginal children also often occur without Aboriginal family involvement, despite policies such as Aboriginal Family-Led Decision Making (AFLDM), which requires Aboriginal family involvement at key child protection and OOHC decision points in an Aboriginal child’s life (CCYP, 2019; M. Davis, 2019). Thus, the ATSI CPP placement element alone cannot guarantee cultural connection.

Once placed in OOHC with non-Indigenous carers (including non-Indigenous family members), *cultural disconnection* becomes a risk for Indigenous children. For

example, in a systemic inquiry in Victoria in 2018, ‘a significant number’ of the 82 Aboriginal children and young people spoken to for the inquiry ‘said they felt disconnected from culture, family and community and that being in care had made this worse’ (CCYP, 2019, p. 21). Nationally, in 2016, a survey of 296 Indigenous young people living in OOHC throughout Australia found that 30.7% of respondents felt ‘little or no connection with culture’ (McDowall, 2016). The connection element of the ATSI CPP specifically seeks to address the maintenance and (re)establishment of cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children growing up in OOHC (SNAICC, 2017). In doing so, the connection element seeks to prevent cultural disconnection such as that seen throughout the Stolen Generations, while also highlighting the importance of cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children growing up in OOHC. While not mentioned explicitly, it is equally important to foster cultural connection, and prevent cultural disconnection, for Indigenous children who have exited OOHC via permanent care as well.

Research has been undertaken to understand how cultural disconnection (and placement with non-Indigenous carers, including non-Indigenous family members) occurs within a policy environment that is deeply committed to the ATSI CPP. In 2016, as part of the *Taskforce 1000* review, the Victorian CCYP (2016, p. 13) found that the then DHHS, as well as mainstream OOHC providers, offered poor cultural safety to Indigenous children in OOHC, in contravention of their human rights. Employees at ACCOs, in research undertaken by non-Indigenous academic Terri Libesman (2011), also articulated how cultural considerations tend to come second to other placement matters, such as stability, education and sibling contact. This finding was supported by later research undertaken by non-Indigenous researchers Philip Mendes, Bernadette Saunders and Susan Baidawi (2016), who found that cultural connection was viewed as

‘one of many hierarchical needs’ (p. 8) by non-Indigenous agencies and workers in the leaving care and post-care period, often considered as secondary to issues of immediate concern, such as housing. This meant that cultural connection was ascribed equal, or less, importance to other considerations. Conversely, Aboriginal workers and agencies saw cultural connection as a fundamental need and, hence, a primary consideration in all ‘best interests’ decision-making processes (Baidawi et al., 2017; Mendes et al., 2016). Long and Sephton (2011) and Cripps (2012) have also drawn attention to the complexities that abound concerning ‘best interests’ considerations for Indigenous children and families in child protection contexts. Thus, diverse understandings of the importance of cultural connection exist within child protection and OOHC systems, and in many cases, cultural considerations compete with other factors, such as stability, that contribute to wellbeing. Indeed, there is more nuance to the complexities of cultural planning aside from balancing ‘best interests’ priorities; however, it is important to highlight that cultural connection can come as a secondary factor in an OOHC system that is driven by responses to risk and crisis (Connolly, 2017). There is no guidance in legislation as to what priority to place on different ‘best interests’ considerations, including cultural connection. Placement decisions are complex, often based on the availability and approval of family members as carers, and strict rules pertaining to carer approvals within OOHC systems (Causon et al., 2019; CCYP, 2016; Richardson et al., 2005, 2007). These are complex decisions, often underpinned by a value basis.

Despite the complexities of cultural planning, there is well-intentioned legislation and policy in place to safeguard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s connection to culture. In addition to the ATSICPP, several policies and practices aim to foster, and protect, Aboriginal children’s connection to culture in OOHC, including CSPs; Return to Country trips to connect with Country, mob and kin;

and cultural awareness training for child protection practitioners and non-Indigenous carers (AIHW, 2020b; Causon et al., 2019; CCYP, 2016; Libesman, 2011; Lindstedt et al., 2017; VACCA, 2021a). For example, the SNAICC (2017) states that children's connection to Aboriginal culture can be achieved by ensuring the following conditions are met:

- 'Cultural care [or support] plans are developed, resourced, and implemented for every child.
- Carers make and are held accountable for their commitment to maintaining cultural connections for children.
- Cultural care arrangements are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure an enduring commitment to maintaining connections is demonstrated.
- Reunification is considered early, and, plans and culturally safe supports [are] put in place to support reunification where it is identified as possible.
- Options for reunification and reconnection are regularly reviewed, supported and advanced wherever possible.
- Decisions relating to permanency of care do not cause harm by severing the potential for future cultural connections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.' (p. 5)

CSPs (also known as 'cultural plans' in Victoria) are utilised throughout Australia as part of an Aboriginal child's case plan (AIHW, 2020b; Causon et al., 2019; SNAICC, 2017, 2021a, 2021b, 2021e). They articulate essential information designed to foster cultural connection and meet an Indigenous child's cultural needs. While each state and territory has its own guidance and templates for cultural support planning, information contained in CSPs may include details about the child's mob, family and kin relations; their totem; and/or activities to undertake to foster cultural connection.

This level of individual detail is necessary given differences in children's developmental stages, and the heterogeneity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, such as over 250 language, or Nation, groups throughout Australia (AIATSIS, n.d.-b).

However, problematically, CSPs are not always of good quality. This tends to be pronounced when responsibility for cultural plans falls to child protection and non-Indigenous, non-government (mainstream) organisations. For example, in NSW, the M. Davis (2019) review found that

in almost half of the cases in the sample ( $n = 94$ , 47%) the cultural plans developed by FACS [child protection] for Aboriginal children in care did not meet the cultural needs of the child . . . [and] were not extensive or specific enough to promote children's cultural connections. (p. 339)

In Victoria, despite improved processes and policies whereby CSPs must be developed within 19 weeks of entering care for all Aboriginal children in OOHC, an independent inquiry found that 'just over half (54%) of Aboriginal children and young people in care knew their family background'<sup>23</sup> (CCYP, 2019, p. 21). Furthermore, of those required to have one, nearly 60% of Indigenous children in OOHC in Victoria had a current, documented and approved cultural support plan at 30 June 2020 (AIHW, 2021b).

There are concerns that meaningful cultural connection efforts are not undertaken in Australian OOHC systems (Hunter et al., 2020). Many of the policies and practices designed to foster connection to culture are well intentioned; however, there is a disconnect between policy and practice, which results in cultural connection efforts

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<sup>23</sup> This relates to a recent policy requirement in Victoria that all Aboriginal children in care have a Cultural Plan within 19 weeks of entering OOHC, amended from the previous timeframe of 16 weeks (VACCA, 2021a). This policy change demonstrates an improvement in cultural planning policies in the Victorian context.

falling short of desired outcomes. This disconnect is, in part, a result of a lack of conceptual clarity outlining what cultural connection specifically entails in OOHC contexts, from the perspectives of First Nations peoples. In historicising cultural connection in OOHC, I seek to demonstrate the original intent of cultural connection policies from a First Nations standpoint.

### **3.2 Historicising Cultural Connection in Out-of-Home Care**

Colonisation has fractured First Nations family and community connections to secure control of territory and population (Wolfe, 2006), and bring political legitimacy to new states that would otherwise not be considered liberal or democratic (S. Nakata, 2018). This has been pursued across periods of protectionism, assimilation and self-determination (Dunstan et al., 2020). However, while settler-colonial theory risks ‘eliminating’ Indigenous peoples anew by failing to ascribe more attention to the agency and activism of Indigenous peoples (Konishi, 2019), in historicising cultural connection as a principle in OOHC policy, it is evident that Indigenous peoples themselves (especially women) have been central to advocating the necessity of cultural connection. That is to say that the ATSI CPP has a history in the counter-assimilationist activism of First Nations women, such as Aunty Margaret Tucker and her daughter Aunty Mollie Dyer (F. Davis, 2011).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as part of the self-determination era, Indigenous voices were articulated and heard in ways that were previously denied. In the OOHC context, notable activist Aunty Mollie Dyer played a crucial role in voicing continued opposition to Aboriginal children being adopted into non-Aboriginal care (F. Davis, 2011; Dyer, 1980; Haebich, 2000). Non-Indigenous anthropologist Anna Haebich writes,

Beginning with an initial desire simply to stop removals and placements with white families, Dyer and her counterparts elsewhere in Australia quickly broadened their platform to demand the abandonment of culturally inappropriate child welfare practices . . . Western-style adoption was unacceptable to most Aboriginal people and many saw adoption into white families as the ultimate step in the process of assimilation leading to permanent loss of the children from the Aboriginal community. . . . The solution lay in placing children who could not remain with their own families with other Aboriginal families through the agency of self-managing Aboriginal organisations. (Haebich, 2000, pp. 601–602)

Aunty Mollie Dyer’s resistance to Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal adoption was underscored by the necessity to survive. That is, by ensuring that Aboriginal children could remain connected to family, community and Country—and not be placed away from Indigenous family and community permanently—the assimilationist efforts of the government could be resisted, and Aboriginal people across hundreds of nations would continue to exist. In other words, whereas Wolfe (2006) describes a ‘logic of elimination’ at play in settler-colonial policies, history shows that Aboriginal people worked deliberately and actively to ensure the survival of future generations. With survival as the driver behind resistance, it was thought that if Indigenous children were raised with Indigenous families, culture could be successfully transmitted and, subsequently, assimilation could be prevented. As articulated by Uncle Brian Butler, an Aranda and Luritja man, and one of the founding members of the Aboriginal organisation SNAICC,

Children are the guarantee of the survival and reproduction of any people. They are our future generations who we will entrust with the laws, practices and customs which we in turn have tried to keep alive. Our laws, practices, languages (where they survive) and customs are at the same time our reason for survival and the guarantee of our survival.

Without them we have no distinct identity. We believe it is necessary to keep these customs alive because the alternative is destructive, individualistic and short-sighted. It does little or nothing to contribute to the future survival and advancement of the [Indigenous] population of the world, let alone that of Australia. (Butler, 1993)

Cultural connection was thus imperative to ensuring Indigenous survival, as articulated by Wiradjuri human rights activist Paul Coe, who stated, ‘We are hoping for, and pushing for, the revitalisation of Aboriginal culture: It is the only possible means of counteracting the present government policy of assimilation’ (as cited in Tatz, 1979, p. 87).

Connected to the revitalisation of Aboriginal culture, pride in Aboriginality was considered central to resistance efforts by several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists, such as Charles Perkins, Doug Nicholls and Bob Maza (Attwood, 2020).

Commenting on the political resistance movements of the time, non-Indigenous historian Bain Attwood notes that

there was a strong movement amongst Aboriginal people, whether full-blood or of mixed descent, to build up and maintain an Aboriginal culture—to be a people of dignity and worth, with pride in their racial traditions and culture. They referred to this as ‘Aboriginality’. (Attwood, 2020, p. 315)

Counter-assimilation activism and political resistance included fostering a collective consciousness of Aboriginality, underpinned by pride in Aboriginality. This tied First Nations peoples from diverse backgrounds together in a struggle for equality and rights against their shared oppressors (Carlson, 2016). Reclaiming Aboriginality as a source of pride was, first and foremost, an act of counter-assimilation and political resistance within a context of widespread racism and inequality. It occurred during an

era where Aboriginal identity had long been defined,<sup>24</sup> and imposed on Aboriginal people, by non-Indigenous peoples and governments (Carlson, 2016). The reclamation of Aboriginality—and pride in that identity—was part of an Aboriginal resurgence in owning and defining our own identity. Aboriginal peoples reclaimed Aboriginality when it was previously denied or suppressed, and subsequently, pride in Aboriginality became a form of political resistance to ongoing oppression and racism. Aboriginal cultures thus became a weapon against assimilation that, in many ways, still serves this purpose today.

Culture was central to the fight for rights and equality throughout the self-determination era of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s because culture could operate as a point of distinctiveness that demonstrated Aboriginal peoples, their knowledges and practices—including kinship systems and land management systems—were surviving colonisation. Within the child welfare sphere, the ATSICPP is one example of how government policy has responded to these ongoing efforts from within the Indigenous community. This principle, adopted for the first time in 1984, is the result of the activism Aunty Mollie Dyer and others undertook, driven within and by ACCOs that people like Aunty Mollie Dyer established<sup>25</sup> (Dyer, 1980; Libesman, 2014; Tilbury, 2013). In this way, the principle, as advocated for by Aboriginal people, preceded subsequent human rights charters, including the UNCRC (UN, 1989) and the UNDRIP (UN, 2007).

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<sup>24</sup> Since invasion, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been labelled by non-Indigenous peoples using various terms, including (but not limited to) ‘native’, ‘aborigine’, ‘full-blood’, ‘half-caste’ and ‘part-Aboriginal’ (Carlson, 2016). For a nuanced discussion of the identity challenges experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (from an Aboriginal standpoint), see Bronwyn Carlson’s (2016) book *The Politics of Identity: Who Counts as Aboriginal Today?*

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, the history of the establishment of the ACCO ‘VACCA’. On VACCA’s website, Aunty Mollie Dyer is recognised as the founder of the organisation, and it is stated that ‘VACCA emerged from a long and determined Aboriginal Civil Rights movement in Victoria’ (VACCA, 2021b).

Responding to the needs of both Aboriginal children and Aboriginal communities (Lock, 1997; Wilson, 1997), the first principle of the ATSI CPP is prevention by prioritising keeping children at home with parents or, where that is not possible, the placement of Aboriginal children in OOHC with Aboriginal carers or family (noting that family can also include non-Indigenous carers<sup>26</sup>) (SNAICC, 2017). Placement with non-Indigenous family members is an important issue considering that many Indigenous children have one non-Indigenous parent. Although the data need to be treated with caution (because of issues where Indigenous status is not always asked or recorded, particularly in health systems), data held by the ABS showed that in 2019, 75% of all Indigenous children born in Australia had only one Indigenous parent (ABS, n.d.). Under the ATSI CPP, Aboriginal children are to be placed in non-Indigenous, non-family care only as a ‘last resort’ (AIHW, 2020b; SNAICC, 2017). As recommended in the *Bringing Them Home* report (Wilson, 1997, pp. 516–517), placement should be in accordance with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lore, with the notion of family informed by ‘local custom and practice’.<sup>27</sup> Historically, the ATSI CPP solely included the ‘placement principle’ (Lock, 1997), premised on the desire to ensure that ‘government intervention into [Aboriginal] family life does not disconnect [Aboriginal] children from their [Aboriginal] family and culture’ (Tilbury, 2013, p. 2). The

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<sup>26</sup> Indigenous peoples have a complex and politicised history with miscegenation. For example, miscegenation, controlled marriages and reproduction, and children of ‘mixed’ Aboriginal and European descent were part of assimilation ideologies for much of the 20th century in Australia (Solonec, 2013; Wolfe, 1994). For example, it was thought that non-Indigenous heritage would eradicate a person’s Aboriginality. Indigenous identity is complex, and most Indigenous peoples today have non-Indigenous heritage, whether they choose to identify with that heritage or not. See Dudgeon (2016) and Paradies (2006) for different Indigenous perspectives concerning Aboriginality and non-Indigenous heritage.

<sup>27</sup> In the *Bringing Them Home* report, in reference to the ‘Indigenous Child Placement Principle’ (now known as the placement element of the ATSI CPP), recommendation 51b states, ‘Placement is to be made according to the following order of preference, 1. placement with a member of the child’s family (as defined by local custom and practice) in the correct relationship to the child in accordance with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander law, 2. placement with a member of the child’s community in a relationship of responsibility for the child according to local custom and practice, 3. placement with another member of the child’s community, 4. placement with another Indigenous carer’ (Wilson, 1997, pp. 516–517).

placement principle itself was modelled off ‘the experiences of Native Americans with the *Indian Child Welfare Act 1978*’ (Tilbury, 2013, p. 2).

While a distinct site of policy, there is some connection between the ATSCPP and transracial adoption policy, both locally and internationally, concerning the importance of being raised within your own culture. For example, transracial adoptions in America were legalised during the 1960s,<sup>28</sup> subsequently leading to increasing numbers of children of colour being adopted by white parents (Myers, 2008). Led by the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), resistance to transracial adoptions grew, with a 1972 position paper by the Association stating that

Black children should be placed only with Black families in foster care or for adoption. Black children belong, physically, psychologically and culturally in Black families in order that they receive the total sense of themselves and develop a sound projection of their future. Human beings are products of their environment and develop their sense of values, attitudes and self-concept within their family structures. Black children in white homes are cut off from their healthy development of themselves as Black people. (Myers, 2008, p. 458)

This position garnered support among Native American communities as well, who, like Black American children, were overrepresented in foster, adoptive and institutional care settings at the time (Myers, 2008). Ultimately, as evidenced in the above statement from the NABSW, objection to transracial adoptions within Australia and North America was premised on the idea that Indigenous and Black<sup>29</sup> children should be raised by their families and communities to ensure survival against

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<sup>28</sup> Prior to this, interracial adoptions were rare, and social workers generally believed that children should be adopted into a family of the same ethnic origin. In fact, interracial adoptions were banned in some states before the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Myers, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that in Australia, Indigenous peoples are also racially perceived as, and/or consider themselves to be (regardless of skin colour), Black as well as Indigenous. This is due to our racial categorisation as both Black and Indigenous over time, evidenced in the way that Indigenous peoples in Australia refer to one themselves as Blackfullas.

assimilation. Culture was seen as fundamental to the development of a sense of self (as Indigenous and/or Black), and thus, disrupting children's cultural connection would affect wellbeing, for both the community and the child.

A meaningful and sustained connection to culture enables pride in Indigeneity, a sense of belonging and identity, and, ultimately, the successful resistance of assimilation and elimination. However, when children are removed from Aboriginal families, communities and cultures—and placed into non-Indigenous care (including with non-Indigenous family members)—exposure to Aboriginal family, community and culture can be reduced. This presents a challenge for Australian OOHC systems: how to foster and protect cultural connection in a context where being in OOHC risks cultural disconnection. The individual- and community-level objectives evident in Indigenous activism are poignant here: there is the dual need to protect Indigenous children and young people's wellbeing through connection to culture, while simultaneously ensuring the survival of Indigenous communities against the assimilatory effects of child removal.

The ATSI CPP is a noble effort to balance and prioritise Indigenous children's needs for safety, stability, belonging and cultural connection with the community's need for survival, all of which produce demonstrable benefits for individual and community wellbeing. It is a principle that harnesses, best it can, the values that Aunty Mollie Dyer and others fought so hard to protect. It is also a principle that has not been able to deliver a transformation in how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities encounter child protection and OOHC systems. It is a principle, in and of itself, that has been unable to address the age and time of Indigenous children and young people in OOHC, and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and young people in child protection and OOHC systems, together which maintain an ongoing risk of cultural

disconnection for new generations. In this context, Aboriginal activism focused on resisting assimilation (if not elimination) would come to sit alongside the emergence of new arguments around culture as a determinant of health.

### **3.3 The Benefits of Culture for Health and Wellbeing**

A growing field of scholarly study concerns understanding the importance of Indigenous cultures through a ‘cultural determinants of health’ lens (Bamblett et al., 2012; Bourke & Wright et al., 2018; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998, 2008; Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012). From an Aboriginal perspective, health is understood as a broad concept that includes benefits for both the individual and the community, with culture as central to health. This notion is encompassed within the 1989 ‘National Aboriginal Health Strategy’ definition of Aboriginal health:

Aboriginal health means not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being, thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their community. It is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life. (Australian Government, 2013)

Initially positioned within a ‘social determinants of health’ lens (Lowitja Institute, 2020), culture has come to feature more prominently as a standalone determinant of health that is deserving of deeper understanding, and Aboriginal scholars are leading efforts to define the cultural determinants of health and its various domains.

According to the Lowitja Institute (2020)—the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research institute in Australia—‘the cultural determinants of health constitute a conceptual framework based on Indigenous knowledge’ (p. 3) that highlight the various domains of culture and identity that improve—and serve as protective factors—for holistic health and wellbeing. This approach is strengths-based and rights-centred, whereby self-determination and ‘freedom from assimilation [or elimination]

and destruction of culture’—as some of the principles of the UNDRIP—come to feature prominently in Indigenous understandings of the cultural determinants of health (Lowitja Institute, 2020, p. 11; UN, 2007).

One of the earlier studies examining the link between Indigenous culture and wellbeing, conducted by Chandler and Lalonde (1998) in Canada, found that cultural continuity (what I term as survival in this thesis) is a protective factor against youth suicide among Indigenous communities in British Columbia. That is, ‘the degree to which different bands [or communities] are engaged in community practices that work to help preserve and restore their Native cultures’ results in varied youth suicide rates: the more communities were engaged in cultural continuity efforts, such as land claims and self-government, the lower the suicide rates among their youth (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998, p. 213). Other research has also highlighted the ways in which a strong, continuous culture is beneficial to members of that culture. For example, Browne-Yung et al. (2013) found that a strong sense of cultural identity can improve health and wellbeing for Aboriginal peoples in Australia, while Currie et al. (2013) found that identifying and feeling pride in your Indigenous culture promotes resilience while protecting against problematic substance use issues for Indigenous peoples in Canada. Other domains of culture, such as cultural expressions and practices (for example, caring for land or Country) have also been found to improve physical (Burgess et al., 2009) and mental health (Danto & Walsh, 2017), while the maintenance of social and cultural structures—such as traditional food procurement methods—has also been found to improve health outcomes (Anderson & Kowal, 2012). However, while various domains of culture—such as cultural expressions, practices, structures and cultural identity—have been found to improve individual and community health and wellbeing, the specific domains of the cultural determinants of health have been harder to define.

Without a clear understanding of what culture means to Indigenous peoples, it is difficult to understand *how* cultural connection can be achieved, particularly within a statutory system that embodies so many of the elements of assimilation.

In Australia, evidence shows the ways in which different aspects of First Nations cultures are beneficial to health and wellbeing. For example, research has indicated how returning to Country and being involved in traditional hunting and gathering practices improved the health of Aboriginal people with chronic diabetes from the Mowanjum community in Derby (O’Dea, 1984); how spiritual and cultural relationships to Country ‘increased identity, pride and self-esteem’ among Bangerang, Boonwurrung and Yorta Yorta peoples in Victoria (Kingsley et al., 2009, p. 295); and how Aboriginal sports teams—that enable connection with community—promote individual- and community-level social, emotional and physical health and wellbeing (Thorpe et al., 2014). In a systematic review by Salmon et al. (2018a, 2018b) about the cultural determinants of health, most of the studies reviewed showed the positive benefits of culture at both the individual and community levels to the overall improvement of holistic health and wellbeing (see also Bourke & Wright et al., 2018, for further details of the systematic review).

In their scoping review, Hunter et al. (2021) have also articulated the foundations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures important to social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) that both act as protective factors and build strength. Their conceptualisation includes connection to family, kin, community and mob (enabled via relationships); Country; pride and strength in identity (that enables belonging); and cultural activities and expressions (such as language, gatherings, singing and dancing) as foundations of Aboriginal cultures that serve as protective factors (Hunter et al., 2021). Indeed, Aboriginal conceptualisations of culture are

fundamental to health and wellbeing, particularly for Indigenous children (Priest et al., 2012).

Earlier research by Gee et al. (2014) identified ‘connection to culture’ (among other forms of connection, such as connection to family and kinship) as fitting within an Indigenous Australian perspective of the domains of SEWB. They define connection to culture as

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ capacity and opportunity to sustain and (re) create a healthy, strong relationship to their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage. This includes all of the associated systems of knowledge, law and practices that comprise this heritage. (Gee et al., 2014, p. 61)

While focused on the individual and their pursuit of SEWB, Gee et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of relationality<sup>30</sup> to any conception of the Indigenous ‘self’, noting that ‘this conception of [the] self is grounded within a collectivist perspective that views the self as inseparable from, and embedded within, family and community’ (p. 57). At this juncture, the importance of Aboriginal parents’ perspectives on culture and cultural connection for their children is salient.

Several Australian researchers have analysed data from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) to ascertain what aspects of culture enable Aboriginal children to ‘grow up strong’. For example, analysing the LSIC question ‘What is it about Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture that will help your child to grow up strong?’, Martin (2017, p. 93) found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents believed ‘family, culture, personal traits, identity, heritage, relationships, history and land’ (p. 93) were important aspects of Indigenous culture that helped children grow up

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<sup>30</sup> Goenpul distinguished professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson states that ‘relationality is grounded in a holistic conception of the inter-connectedness and inter substantiation between and among all living things and the earth, which is inhabited by a world of ancestors and creator beings’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2017, p. 71). Relationality thus encompasses living, and non-living, relationships between Indigenous peoples, Country, spirits, ancestors, kin, flora and fauna.

strong. Prehn et al. (2021) found that Aboriginal fathers believed that learning culture itself was pertinent to enable their children to ‘grow up strong’, while Colquhoun and Dockery (2012) and Lovett (2017) found that a strong identity as Indigenous is pertinent to enable Aboriginal children to ‘grow up strong’. Knowledge of cultural heritage, connection to family and community, and a sense of belonging and pride have also been considered important, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, to enable their children to grow up strong (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012). While not termed cultural connection, the findings of Prehn et al. (2021), Martin (2017), and Colquhoun and Dockery (2012) show that it is the ongoing experience of various domains of culture that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents believe enables their children’s optimal development. Importantly, these findings all highlight how connection to culture includes *knowledge* of culture; *mechanisms* to learn culture, such as relationships and connection with family and community; *feelings* such as pride and belonging; and *actions* such as the desire to raise your children as strong First Nations children.

Salient to the development of cultural connection for Indigenous children, however, is the socio-political context within which Indigenous children and young people learn culture and develop a sense of identity. Indigeneity can both subject a person to harm and, at the same time, shield them from that same harm. For example, culture can provide ‘a measure of sameness’ for children and youth (and can subsequently be experienced as a stabilising factor), but can also be experienced negatively in settler-colonial society (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008, p. 4). As articulated by Chandler and Lalonde,

If one’s culture is marginalized, or vandalized, or turned into a laughingstock; and if (because of colonization or decolonization or globalization) the familiar and trustworthy ways of one’s community are criminalized, legislated out of existence, or otherwise

assimilated beyond easy recognition, then woe be upon those transitioning toward maturity . . . The predictable consequence of such personal and cultural losses is often disillusionment, lassitude, substance abuse, self-injury and self-appointed death at an early age. (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008, p. 4)

The harm that Indigenous peoples are subject to because of their Indigeneity is arguably unavoidable while racism persists (particularly if you view the broader context within a ‘logic of elimination/assimilation’ paradigm). Meanwhile, the protective aspects of Indigenous cultures operate as a survival mechanism and, in doing so, foster resilience (Bamblett & Lewis, 2007). There is complexity in First Nations cultures because our people have survived over (at least) 65,000 years amid relatively recent concerted efforts to eliminate us over the past 230 years. Potentially, it is this phenomenon that has given rise to increasing interest in understanding First Nations cultures within a Western academic context. However, when culture is disrupted—as was the case for thousands of survivors of the Stolen Generations who were removed from their Indigenous families and communities—multiple negative outcomes can ensue (Atkinson, 2002; AIHW, 2018; Read, 1999; Wilson, 1997).

### **3.4 Historical Experiences of Cultural Disconnection in Care**

Against these benefits of cultural connection, numerous examples of cultural disconnection for First Nations children are evident historically. Throughout the Stolen Generations, First Nations children were subjected to cultural destruction and forced assimilation, were removed from family and community, and were unable to practise or enjoy their cultures (Wilson, 1997). In the contemporary context, these actions would constitute human rights breaches, in part because the deleterious effects of culturally inappropriate care on Indigenous children’s wellbeing have become known. Some of the effects of being removed from First Nations families and communities include disruption to identity and cultural knowledge (Wilson, 1997). Experiences of loss,

affecting belonging, featured in many of the oral histories told to the Royal Commission as part of the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry, some of which are articulated below:

I had to relearn lots of things. I had to relearn humour, ways of sitting, ways of being which were another way totally to what I was actually brought up with. It was like having to re-do me, I suppose. The thing that people were denied in being removed from family was that they were denied being read as Aboriginal people, they were denied being educated in an Aboriginal way. (*Confidential evidence 71, New South Wales: woman who lived from 5 months to 16 years in Cootamundra Girls' Home in the 1950s and 1960s; Wilson, 1997, p. 176*)

You spend your whole life wondering where you fit. You're not white enough to be white and your skin isn't black enough to be black either, and it really does come down to that. (*Confidential evidence 210, Victoria; Wilson, 1997, p. 176*)

The Stolen Generations evidence how cultural disconnection negatively affects children's wellbeing and identity development: At a personal level, cultural disconnection leads to conflict with identity, feelings of shame and loss, and a lack of belonging to First Nations family and community (Carlson, 2016; Wilson, 1997). At a community level, cultural disconnection disrupts the ability of Indigenous communities to transmit their cultures from one generation to the next and, ultimately, survive.

Cultural connection can be threatened via placement in OOHC, particularly when Indigenous children are not raised by Indigenous carers who share their cultural background. In regard to rearing Indigenous children in Australia, the SNAICC articulates that

the aim of parenting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is to let the child know who they are in relationship to their family, their kin, their people, their environment and the living spirits of their ancestors and land. These relationships define a child's identity by defining how they are connected to everything in life. (SNAICC, 2010, p. 21, as cited in SNAICC, 2011, p. 8)

However, the ability of non-Indigenous carers to impart key knowledge about relationality—with Indigenous family, kin, community and Country—is impaired by virtue of the fact that if they are not a member of the child’s Indigenous family and/or community, they may not have access to the kinds of knowledge needed to facilitate Indigenous notions of relationality. The director of the First Nations Caring Society in Canada, Kenn Richard (2004), argues that to impart Indigenous cultural knowledges and values onto children, one must first be Indigenous themselves:

Culture is complex but its transmission is simple. Put a child within a certain cultural milieu and an organic process of acculturation occurs. It is through everyday living that the values, beliefs and culturally prescribed behaviors are learned. This immersion in culture is the vehicle of acculturation. The agents of it are primary relationships in the child’s life, parents, relatives, educators and the like. If an Aboriginal child is being raised in a non-Aboriginal environment they will acculturate within its cultural context. I have met full blooded Aboriginal children who were culturally Dutch, British and Swiss. (Richard, 2004, p. 106)

This is a critical point: to derive the benefits of culture, children need to acquire the knowledge, values and relational aspects of that culture, which happens by growing up in that culture (through enculturation or immersion in culture). However, we must be cognisant about the impacts of cultural disconnection on Indigenous parents as well. For example, Chamberlain et al. (2020) found that (dis)connection to family, community and culture, as well as identity conflict or culture avoidance, need to be considered in having conversations about complex trauma with Indigenous parents in perinatal settings. The next chapter expands on these processes of learning culture, particularly when Indigenous children are raised in OOHC environments, often with non-Indigenous carers, with complex trauma present as well. However, the challenges of raising Indigenous children within their cultures are important to emphasise here.

If children are acculturated into the cultural context within which they are raised, this presents a challenge for Australian OOHC systems in safeguarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people's rights to cultural connection. Critically, even when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are placed in compliance with the ATSI CPP at the top of the placement hierarchy, they may still be raised by non-Indigenous carers or with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander carers whose cultural knowledge has been disrupted. At the highest level of the ATSI CPP hierarchy, placement with family is prioritised—no distinction is made between Indigenous and non-Indigenous family members, and no evaluation is undertaken of one's knowledge of the child's Indigenous culture. While some non-Indigenous family members or carers may be able to facilitate opportunities to learn and practise one's Indigenous culture, for more than half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC, these opportunities are likely to arise outside of the day-to-day routines of their immediate care environment. This raises a difficult but important question: In OOHC settings, how can Indigenous children and young people be raised with access to learn and practise their Indigenous cultures in accordance with their human rights if placed with non-Indigenous carers, or with Indigenous carers who have limited cultural knowledge? One answer to this question can be produced by better understanding what cultural connection means to Indigenous young people within the OOHC system, and this is exactly what the subsequent chapters of this thesis seek to understand.

### **3.5 The Continued Experience of Cultural (Dis)Connection in Out-of-Home Care**

While prevention and structural reform is pertinent to address Indigenous overrepresentation within Australian child protection and OOHC systems, the reality is that overrepresentation is an enduring problem despite concerted advocacy by

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists and ACCOs over the past 50 years.

Within this context of increasing overrepresentation, it is crucial to focus on Indigenous children and young people's experiences within these systems. This is especially important for those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in non-Indigenous care (including with non-Indigenous family members) considering that at 30 June 2020, only 42% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC lived with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander family members or carers (AIHW, 2021b).

Vanessa Turnbull-Roberts is a Bundjalung woman and activist who has publicly reflected a harmful experience of the NSW child protection and OOHC systems. A former social work and law student at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Vanessa is the winner of the 2019 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) 'Young People's Human Rights Medal' (AHRC, 2019). The award was bestowed on Vanessa because of her advocacy against 'forced adoption legislation' in the contemporary OOHC landscape (AHRC, 2019). In 2008, on the day when former PM Kevin Rudd gave his National Apology to the Stolen Generations, Vanessa was removed from her family at the age of 11 (Wang, 2019). Vanessa states that she entered foster care under 'falsified allegations of neglect', and, as a result, cycled through multiple homes with multiple non-Indigenous carers (Wang, 2019). In her own words, Vanessa says,

They came in and they intervened and it took them 11 years to remove me. Nothing was even wrong, and they would have known that had they represented my rights, my voice. I was placed in non-Indigenous homes. And in these homes, some were good people, [but] the majority [were] unsafe people. [But] every time I complained about either an abusive home, or something not being right, it took them months and months to action anything and it would just be the same cycle. (Silva, n.d.; Wang, 2019)

Vanessa's 'dark-skinned Aboriginal' father would tell her 'the moment you were born, bub, and I appeared at the hospital, a case worker was there' (Wang, 2019). As far as Vanessa is concerned, she is part of an ongoing Stolen Generations, stating that,

The Stolen Generation has never stopped. Assimilation has never stopped. This Stolen Generation is continued in our policies, it's continued in the action and it's continued when we take a look at the rates of incarceration<sup>31</sup> and we just look at why those people are in those places. They use this rhetoric that 'we're here to help and support you,' but we didn't put our hand up for support. We have our aunties and our uncles, our family and our kin. (Silva, n.d.; Wang, 2019)

Vanessa's experience is just one among many First Nations children who have been placed with non-Indigenous carers despite policy commitments and efforts to ensure the injustices of Indigenous child removal 'never happen again' (Parliament of Australia, n.d.), and that where it does Indigenous cultural connection in OOHC is a priority.

From the perspective of another young person who grew up in OOHC, Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta woman Merinda Dryden,<sup>32</sup> culture was paramount to ensuring feelings of stability and belonging:

Culture gave me a sense of belonging. It gave me a reason to look forward to something when I had nothing. Culture was all I ever had or knew. Everything else around me was constantly changing. I didn't have something solid that I knew was the truth. (VACCA, 2017)

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<sup>31</sup> There is a well-established link for Aboriginal people between incarceration and contact with child protection and OOHC systems. For example, this was first highlighted within the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Johnston, 1991), with later research referring both to youth justice involvement as a factor for child protection systems contact and vice versa (AIHW, 2020c; Baidawi & Sheehan, 2019; McFarlane, 2018; Sentencing Advisory Council, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Merinda entered OOHC when she was 3 years old, initially being placed with a non-Indigenous carer. She lived in nine different homes, changed schools 14 times and was separated from her two siblings while growing up in care. In 2022, Merinda was 24 years old (VACCA, 2017).

For Merinda, amid nine placement changes, 14 school changes, separation from siblings and the death of her mother, culture remained constant (VACCA, 2017).

Culture was a source of continuity and stability throughout her turbulent care history. In an OOHC context, where placement breakdowns, school changes and sibling separation are common, culture offers continuity when other aspects of life in care are tumultuous or unstable. Merinda's experiences demonstrate why cultural planning and cultural connection policies are salient in OOHC.

Kirsten Gray, a Muruwari/Yulalraay woman who grew up in OOHC with her non-Indigenous side of the family and current director of First Nations Policy for the Disability Royal Commission, has publicly reflected a different experience in which the stability provided by her placement came with the loss of First Nations cultural connection. For 13 years, Kirsten and her sister lived with her great aunt on her father's side of the family, thus experiencing stability and family connection (Gray, 2019). However, growing up, Kirsten felt longing to know her First Nations family, to know where she fit within that family, and to know who she was as a First Nations person. Kirsten states that her non-Indigenous side of the family could not answer those kinds of questions, and it took her more than 30 years to be able to identify as a Muruwari/Yulalraay woman (Gray, 2019):

Even though I was placed with my family, I think near enough isn't good enough. It's not the same as having the connection with my Aboriginal side. It still doesn't answer those questions. I think you grow up a little bit lost actually. Not knowing where you fit. You're kind of in-between those two places. And I still have questions . . . it's just so central to be able to place ourselves in this community. It's very central to who we are and our wellbeing. . . . It's the first question you get asked in community, 'who's your mob'. I think to be able to answer those questions, it's so important. . . . But you can't

learn all of that if you don't know where you're from. And that's a really key issue facing our kids in the out-of-home care system. (Gray, 2019)

As subsequent chapters of this thesis will show, these are not isolated experiences. Cultural disconnection remains a key impact for many Indigenous children entering child protection and OOHC systems. It is important and useful to acknowledge that this can be the case, even where the safety of the child and the stability of their home environment has been realised.

An advocate against Indigenous to non-Indigenous adoption in the Canadian context, Richard (2004) critiques the 'best interests' principle that has long underscored child protection and OOHC practice in many countries (including his own country, Canada), arguing that

the 'best interests of the child' principle has evolved over time, through policy, social work practice and the courts, to become the primary consideration in planning for a child. While the principle seems self-evident and culturally neutral it is defined subjectively through a value, knowledge and practice context that is decidedly Anglo European. The notion of the child and her best interests, as separate and distinct from her family, community and culture, is one that has its roots in the individualist orientation of European culture. (Richard, 2004, p. 102)

While adoption from foster care has been heavily restricted in the Australian context, contrary to experiences overseas (Butlinski et al., 2017), there are contemporary concerns among Indigenous peoples and organisations about 'the impact of [future] adoption on Aboriginal kinship and identity', as noted in submissions to the 2018 Australian Senate Parliamentary Inquiry into Adoption Reform (Turnbull-Roberts et al., 2021, p. 4). These concerns are underscored by the legacy of past—and present—removal practices wherein the complexities concerning the 'best interests' principle have relevance:

What is not clear is how the definition of best interests is applied in policy, legal and practice contexts within nation states, particularly for children and their families who are a minority group in a society controlled by a dominant class. For example, in the application of ‘best interests’ are the complexities of race, class, age and sex considered to ensure equality of treatment? There is no easy answer to this question. (Cripps, 2012, p. 26)

There is no doubt that child protection decision-making is complex. The ‘best interests’ principle may not necessarily be a problem in itself, but rather a signal that we must remain attentive to the priorities and values that underlie best interests decision-making. The values and ideologies that are prioritised when ‘best interests’ are conceptualised through an Anglo-European lens can result in problematic assumptions about risk and safety for Indigenous children. Similarly, the separation of child safety considerations at an individual level from collective interests is one that enables a prioritisation of the individual over community in a manner that risks diminishing both. For Indigenous peoples, culture has been advocated for as an essential mechanism through which to counter assimilation, improve health and wellbeing, and, ultimately, survive within the settler colony. Importantly, stability and safety must not operate as a trade-off for cultural connection: Indigenous children are deserving of—and require—safety, stability and cultural connection, and their communities are entitled to social policies that enable this.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

It is particularly salient to interrogate whether it is possible for Indigenous children and young people to build and sustain cultural connection while in OOHC, and what enablers and barriers exist that make that more or less possible. Clearly, the effort to do so must be undertaken with acknowledgement that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism that led to a powerful emphasis on cultural connection within

child protection and OOHC systems was originally enacted to stop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from being removed in the first place. As an Aboriginal researcher, I find this tension difficult to reconcile. There is an urgency in ensuring Indigenous children in OOHC have the best opportunities to build and maintain cultural connections, but this is not the same as the urgency to reduce overrepresentation and its impact on the assimilatory effect of Indigenous child removals. This thesis offers a valuable, empirical contribution to the former, centred on First Nations peoples' own experiences and voices, while maintaining a critical perspective that might also contribute to the latter. Both positions can be held at the fore, together with the critical understanding that the way cultural connection policies currently operate in OOHC—with a predominant focus on the best interests of the child, to the neglect of the needs of the family and community—risks the bastardisation of the original intent of the ATSI CPP, specifically its cultural connection element. This is paramount where the completion of CSPs, and placement with family in accordance with the ATSI CPP placement hierarchy, operate to measure compliance with the ATSI CPP cultural connection element (AIHW, 2020b). Critically, the pursuit of 'cultural connection'—within a system that removes Indigenous children from their Indigenous families and cultures by design—risks moving from being a political site of Indigenous activism to ameliorate the harms of child removal to being a bureaucratic site of system compliance. It is thus imperative to find meaningful ways to enable cultural connection for Indigenous children given the importance of culture both for the individual wellbeing of the child and for the wellbeing of the community, in a context where Indigenous children continue to be placed in OOHC at disproportionate numbers to the rest of the population. The next chapter explores avenues to enable meaningful cultural connection for Indigenous children and young people in OOHC, along with a deeper

analysis of the difficulties associated with learning culture, and the tensions that exist between ensuring child safety and enabling cultural connection within Australian OOHC systems.

## **Chapter 4: The Complexities of Cultural Support Planning: Enhancing the Application of Cultural Connection in Out-of- Home Care**

Culture is a complex phenomenon that has been studied across an array of disciplines, from anthropology, sociology, psychology and history to cultural studies. Developmental psychology underpins social work and child protection practice with First Nations children and young people in Western OOHC contexts. For example, Russian-American developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological model of development, which positions the family as the immediate, and most important influence, on the child, has been adapted to Australian social work practice via Harms's (2011, 2020) multidimensional approach to human development. Attachment theory, made prominent by British and American-Canadian psychologists Bowlby and Ainsworth (Bretherton, 1992), and other developmental theories concerning child wellbeing also inform child protection and OOHC work for all children and families, including Indigenous peoples in Australia and Canada (Carriere & Richardson, 2009; Jones et al., 2015; Menzies & Grace, 2020). As articulated by Cree/Assiniboine/Saulteaux social work professor in Canada, Raven Sinclair (2019), 'the paradigm from which social work [and child protection work] has been taught and practiced is western in theory, pedagogy, and practice' (p 12). The theoretical underpinnings that inform OOHC practice concerning cultural connection for Indigenous children are thus important to engage with. However, critical attention to how cultural learning theories, specifically enculturation and acculturation theories, position First Nations peoples, including the assumptions made therein, is equally important.

This chapter begins by reviewing theories on learning culture from anthropology and developmental psychology, namely enculturation and acculturation, highlighting their implications for learning Indigenous cultures. Attention is drawn to the essentialising discourse embedded within these theories on learning culture, wherein universalistic notions of cultural learning are implied. These Western perspectives on learning culture are then contrasted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on immersion in culture, including both scholarly and non-academic literature. These perspectives offer a distinct articulation of the importance of kinship, spirituality and relationality for Indigenous peoples in Australia. Here, the chapter highlights how Indigenous children in Australia may learn culture in family and kinship surroundings, while also articulating the complexities associated with learning Indigenous cultures within settler-colonial contexts such as Australia. The implications of these tensions between Western and Indigenous perspectives on culture and identity are then considered in the context of Australian OOHC, followed by a consideration of the difficulties inherent in cultural support planning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australian OOHC. Identity conflict experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in these contexts is then highlighted before synthesising existing scholarly understandings of cultural connection in OOHC. This chapter concludes by positioning the importance of this research with a conceptual positioning of cultural connection, informed by the extant literature, whereby I draw the reader's attention to the gaps in the literature concerning cultural connection in OOHC in Australia. This provides an original contribution to understandings of cultural connection in OOHC in Australia, and enables a new way of responding to these research gaps.

## 4.1 Western Theories on Learning Culture: Enculturation and Acculturation

Various theories about learning culture,<sup>33</sup> including cultural transmission, enculturation, and acculturation theories (Berry, 2014), are often touted as universal, meaning that their application is understood to be relevant across all cultures (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015). Implicit in some Western theories on learning culture, such as cultural transmission and enculturation, is the notion that repeated exposure to culture, via repeated contact with people from that culture, enables learning culture, inclusive of knowledges, rules, idioms, values and languages (Pitman et al., 1989; Rogoff et al., 2014). For example, cultural transmission theory involves three modes of learning culture: *vertical transmission* (culture is transmitted from parents to children, from one generation to the next), *horizontal transmission* (culture is transmitted from peers and siblings to others of the same generation), and *oblique transmission* (culture is learned from other adults, including extended family, and social institutions, such as formal schooling) (Berry, 2014; Pitman et al., 1989). Similarly, enculturation theory also speaks to the ways in which culture is derived through encasement in culture.

Enculturation refers to how human beings learn culture within their immediate environment, where ‘there is an encompassing or surrounding of the individual by one’s culture’, socialised by, among and around other members of the same cultural group (Rogoff et al., 2014, p. 547). This theory highlights how culture is acquired, organically and often without explicit instruction, through immersion in a particular cultural milieu among members of the same culture (Kruger & Tomasello, 1996). The values, norms, traditions, languages, and other forms of one’s culture are theorised as learned through

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<sup>33</sup> As stated in Chapter 1, culture is defined in this thesis as the set of values, traditions, attitudes, behaviours, expressions, knowledges, idioms, norms and customs that humans learn and develop, via repeated exposure and immersion, as part of a member of a distinct ethnic or racial group.

involvement in daily routines and practices, often influenced most by those in the immediate environment, such as parents, peers and community (Berry, 2014; Kruger & Tomasello, 1996; Rogoff et al., 2014). Thus, enculturation theorises that people are moulded by culture from birth, if not earlier, depending on the birthing rituals, beliefs, practices or traditions of their culture (Eriksen, 2004). The end result is that one acquires the language, knowledges, values, traditions and norms of their cultural group (Berry, 2014), where learning culture requires *socialisation* into a culture by members of that culture. However, enculturation has been theorised in various ways, sometimes as embedded within society and at other times in ways that separate culture from society (Shimahara, 1970), highlighting the complexity of learning culture, and indeed of culture itself. Enculturation thus assumes that the ‘cultural’ context around a child is relatively stable and consistent with the family group. However, First Nations children grow up at the Cultural Interface within and across cultures that encompass interactions between traditional, pre-colonial, settler-colonial and non-Indigenous contexts (M. Nakata, 2007a).

Enculturation theory has resonance with Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) later ecological systems theory, which, as highlighted previously, informs social work theory and practice in Australia. Bronfenbrenner (1986) conceptualised the various influences on the child within their direct and indirect environments, whereby family, peers and societal institutions, such as schools and churches, may have more or less of an influence on a child’s development, including learning culture. Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological systems theory also includes the influence of time on children’s development, noting that childhood development takes place within a particular cultural, social and historical context.

Despite being widely utilised and applied across multiple disciplines, including social work, Bronfenbrenner's (1986) theory has been subject to critique in different forms. For example, ecological systems theory has been critiqued for underplaying the influence of power, agency and structure on child development, instead focusing on the child as a recipient of socialisation and learning, predominately within the immediate nuclear family (Houston, 2017). Of particular note for Indigenous children in relation to reciprocal relations is the further critique that ecological systems theory does not include human–nature interconnectedness and its impact on child development (Elliott & Davis, 2018). As argued by Wiradjuri scientist Michael-Shawn Fletcher and colleagues, this 'dualism between nature–culture remains so entrenched in mainstream Western culture and environmental conservation that it is seldom critically challenged' (Fletcher et al., 2021, p. 2). However, this broader habitat of relations is encompassed within many First Nations traditional practices and knowledge systems, in which Indigenous peoples are not caught in a web of competing cultures but at intersections of Indigenous and non-Indigenous life (M. Nakata, 2007a). It is thus important to interrogate how learning occurs across multiple cultural contexts, especially when children belong to more than one culture. This is a point that acculturation theory seeks to shed light on.

Acculturation theory pays attention to the ways in which cultures can change, or adapt, in response to contact with different cultures. Berry (2014) defines acculturation as 'the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members' (p. 543). This contact may occur for different reasons, including migration, colonisation or invasion, or tourism (Berry, 2014). Initially arising out of concern for the impact of colonisation, and the imposition of European cultures, on First Nations peoples

worldwide, acculturation research nonetheless has a tenuous, and problematic, relationship with First Nations peoples (Berry, 2014; Dudgeon et al., 2016; Kvernmo, 2006). Primarily, this is because acculturation research has been concerned with how ‘minority cultures’ come to acquire aspects of the ‘dominant culture’, while still maintaining their own distinct culture, in which ‘acculturation strategies’ among cultural groups include ‘integration and assimilation versus separation and marginalisation’, while societal strategies include ‘multiculturalism versus segregation and exclusion [of the Other]’ (Berry, 2014, p. 550).

However, acculturation and acculturation strategies are not experienced as natural or direct exchanges for First Nations peoples, but instead often take place within a settler-colonial context premised on assimilation (if not elimination) of First Nations peoples. Despite the inherent power imbalances between First Nations peoples and the coloniser in these contexts, First Nations peoples have, and continue, to choose to navigate these power dynamics in creative and agentic ways (M. Nakata, 1997, 2007a). Torres Strait Islander theorist Martin Nakata draws attention to the ways in which Indigenous peoples choose to navigate, and negotiate, these tensions and complexities at the Cultural Interface, highlighting that

the choices and options that emerge in these spaces do not emerge neatly from one domain or the other or in support of one or the other but from this complex space where many sets of understandings are now inextricably interrelated with each other. (M. Nakata, 2007a, p. 200)

Indigenous peoples are not in-between two cultures, nor are we without power in being ‘subject to’ the dominant culture. Rather, the colonial experience transforms what Indigenous cultures are through the negotiations Indigenous peoples deploy in a changing world. Indigenous cultures are not static, but dynamic, thus challenging romantic and essentialising narratives of ‘Indigenous culture’ as only encompassing the

pre-colonial 'traditional' or the Western. Indigenous cultures are enduring; even when the West thinks it has achieved assimilation of First Nations peoples through language and education, how First Nations peoples think and produce knowledge of the world remains distinguished by a standpoint that is situated outside of the categories imposed upon us.

Dudgeon et al. (2016) and Kvernmo (2006) have critiqued acculturation research, arguing that it has predominately focused on the experiences of refugees and migrants, and these experiences have been uncritically applied to Indigenous peoples. Further, influential acculturation theorists, such as John Berry, have explicitly taken a universalist stance that acculturation processes are applicable to all people, regardless of historical, political and cultural contexts (Berry & Sam, 1997; Ngo, 2008).

Acculturation research has largely ignored the impact of colonisation and invasion on acculturation for First Nations peoples, in which colonial power and oppression of First Nations peoples have intersected to force assimilation (Dudgeon et al., 2016; Kvernmo, 2006). Dudgeon et al. (2016) argue that by failing to attend to the broader socio-political environment, acculturation research *on* or *about* (as opposed to *with*) Indigenous peoples has predominately applied uncritical ethnocentric Western norms, in which Indigenous peoples' agency, resistance and desire for cultural survival or reclamation has often been overlooked. Thus, acculturation research has, for the most part, ignored the possibility of Indigenous peoples resisting, and effectively navigating, integration or assimilation into the invading culture, or choosing to selectively incorporate elements of the coloniser's culture that are seen as beneficial (Dudgeon et al., 2016).

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, it is within this complex milieu that culture is learned. Given the impact of historical, and contemporary,

assimilation—which has resulted in the erosion of cultural knowledge and the removal of Indigenous peoples from traditional cultural environments—the dominant Western culture may be more accessible and identifiable than one’s First Nations culture. That is to say that some Indigenous families have a history of forcible assimilation, and removal from Indigenous family, community and Country, that has led to both cultural loss and cultural reclamation, which invariably influences children’s experiences of their Indigenous cultures. This is not a process that takes place solely in childhood or adolescence, but is instead a ‘lifelong process’ of learning culture (Pitman et al., 1989, p. 44). In this way, culture is fluid and evolving like a living organism, which speaks to the dynamic nature of culture (Pitman et al., 1989).

While culture is a fluid, organic process that naturally evolves over time, theories of cultural transmission, socialisation, enculturation and acculturation all demonstrate an understanding of culture as a learned product of human socialisation with people from your own, and other, cultural groups. The influence of broader societal contexts is also important. This is because culture entails more than the ‘learnt’ aspects of culture: it also includes ‘the way that different, more powerful, cultural contexts create (and impose) the conditions under which [culture] . . . in that particular context are transformed’ (Moll, 1995, p. 368). Here, all cultures are adaptive, changing and susceptible to external cultural influences.

## **4.2 First Nations Perspectives on Learning Culture**

While First Nations cultures are multifaceted and encompass diverse practices the world over, there is some First Nations scholarship that articulates the importance of immersion in culture. For example, Salmon et al. (2018b) state,

We are all born into, grow, work and live within a culture or cultures. These are maintained or modified when they are passed on, reinforced and practised in both

specific and general situations. The many definitions of culture all encompass culture-specific knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (including within culture variations according to rules), and all human life is culturally bound. (p. 1)

Noongar Elder, Aunty Hazel Brown, also articulates the notion of immersion based on her own childhood experiences in the novel *Kayang and Me*:

From our old people, we learned the rules. We were taught the rules, the traditions of Noongar people and the laws and rules of our old people. Everything was explained to us; we didn't have to go and read about it in someone else's book. What we knew, we learned it from our old people. (K. Scott & Brown, 2013, p. 128)

Similarly, M. Davis's (2019) definition of cultural connection articulates the importance of immersion in culture, in which connection to culture is '*gained through social experience . . . [and] refers to interdependent and reciprocal relationships between Aboriginal peoples and country which is sustained through cultural knowledge and practices*' (p. 320, italics my emphasis).

Enculturation can be observed to share similar principles with First Nations notions of immersion in culture but may also be communicated and experienced differently. For example, First Nations peoples' scholarship and stories quite consistently emphasise the importance of kinship, community and Country to learning culture, which shares similarities with enculturation but adds additional layers of complexity. Thus, for First Nations peoples, learning culture occurs via Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing, practised in particular forms of kinship, relationality and spirituality (Graham, 2014; Martin, 2008; Moreton-Robinson, 2017). Articulated in numerous publications by First Nations peoples outside of the OOHC field in Australia (e.g. Bourke, 1993; Fejo-King, 2013; O'Donoghue, 1993; K. Scott & Brown, 2013; SNAICC, 2011; Tucker, 1983; Walker, 1993), the salience of knowing, and possessing connection to, family, community and Country is critical for learning culture. For

example, Larrakia/Warumungu woman Christine Fejo-King (2013) articulates the intricacies of the kinship system for Warumungu and Larrakia peoples of the Northern Territory, highlighting the central role of the kinship system to learning and understanding law and heritage. Wergaia/Wamba Wamba Elder, and Professor, Eleanor Bourke (1993) highlights the importance of First Nations family and kinship systems to belonging, child-rearing and cultural survival, while Walker (1993) discusses the role of Elders in keeping the ‘spirit’ of Aboriginal people alive through imparting culture, wisdom and knowledge to the younger generations. Flip through the pages of the non-fiction books *Speaking From the Heart: Stories of Life, Family and Country* (Morgan et al., 2007) and *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia* (Heiss, 2018), and you will also read multiple stories of family, community and Country by First Nations peoples throughout Australia. Here, relationships and connections to family, community and Country are central:

Aboriginality lies in identification of an Aboriginal person’s relationships with their family and community. It is their relationships with their pops and grannies, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunties, cousins and Elders. Aboriginality lies in the meaningful way in which Aboriginal people interact with their people, with their feelings about their people and their home, with the way they think, work and talk. (VACCA, 2005, as cited in Bamblett et al., 2012, p. 36)

What has resonance with enculturation theory are the ways in which First Nations peoples in Australia learn their cultures through socialisation with members of their First Nations families and communities. However, this experience is complicated by colonisation, in which the disruption to cultural environments and practices constrains the possibility of immersion in culture for many First Nations children. This is most apparent in OOHC contexts, in which state-sanctioned child removal dislocates

First Nations children from the cultural environments of their First Nations families and communities.

While learning First Nations cultures is complicated by a range of factors, including the continuing impacts of colonisation, learning culture can be further threatened via placement in OOHC when First Nations children are not raised by First Nations carers who share their cultural background. For example, a national survey of 296 First Nations young people living in OOHC throughout Australia found that 30.7% of respondents felt ‘little or no connection with culture’ (McDowall, 2016), while a recent systemic inquiry conducted by the CCYP (2021) reported that First Nations children felt that disconnection from culture was exacerbated when living in state care. CSPs are one mechanism that has attempted to sustain and strengthen cultural connection for First Nations children living in OOHC, yet this is not without its challenges.

### **4.3 Challenges in Cultural Support Planning in Out-of-Home Care**

As highlighted in the previous chapter, cultural connection is measured indirectly via measures such as the completion of CSPs, placement in OOHC according to the ATSI CPP placement hierarchy, efforts to reunify First Nations children to parents, and ‘Return to Country’<sup>34</sup> programs (AIHW, 2020b). The complexity of

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Return to Country’ programs are offered by some OOHC providers in Australian jurisdictions to facilitate connection to a child’s traditional Country, particularly when they are not living on their Country. For example, in Victoria, VACCA provides Return to Country programs, stating that their program ‘facilitates Aboriginal children in care in Victoria (foster care, kinship care, residential care or leaving care) to visit the country of their language or clan groups. Travelling with a VACCA support worker, the Return to Country is part of the [child or] young person’s cultural plan and the trip includes all activities, accommodation, meals and travel and may include travel outside of Victoria. This enables the [child or] young person to fully immerse into [their First Nations] culture and learn about their ancestral connections. [It enables] . . . Young people who live in care or who are leaving care [to] have the opportunity to travel to their home country to experience their culture and country first hand; Visit sacred sites, share knowledge and learnings about songs, stories, art, tracks, places, landforms, plants, animals and natural resources; Learn from Elders and relatives about the significance of their heritage, stories, totems and clan and family obligations; [and], Foster long lasting connections with extended family, including siblings’ (VACCA, 2021c).

cultural connection can be minimised by these policy apparatuses, in which ‘often there is a perception on behalf of child protection and mainstream agencies that cultural connection can be “ticked off” by attending cultural events alone’ (SNAICC, 2021e, p. 4). Despite cultural connection being embedded in the ATSI CPP, and in some jurisdictions—such as Victoria—in legislation that mandates the completion of CSPs for all First Nations children in OOHC (*Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Permanent Care and Other Matters) Act 2014* (Vic); VACCA, 2021a), there are inherent difficulties associated with cultural support planning.

Cultural support planning (also known as cultural planning in Victoria) is the process through which statutory organisations, non-government organisations and ACCOs develop a plan to meet the cultural needs of First Nations children and young people in OOHC. This is undertaken in line with policies relating to cultural connection, such as the ATSI CPP connection element. For example, in Victoria, cultural planning forms part of a First Nations child’s case plan when they enter OOHC. There are numerous considerations regarding cultural plans under section 176 of the *Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Permanent Care and Other Matters) Act 2014* (Vic), including attention to the child’s cultural needs; their circumstances, including their age and length of time in OOHC; their ‘sense of belonging’ to their First Nations community; and contact with family and placement arrangements (i.e. with First Nations family, community or non-Indigenous carers).<sup>35</sup> While placements form part of a child’s case plan, which must reflect an Indigenous child’s cultural support needs,

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<sup>35</sup> According to s.176 of the *Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Permanent Care and Other Matters) Act 2014* (Vic), ‘The case plan for an Aboriginal child placed in out of home care must address the cultural support needs of the child, [and] the Secretary must provide a cultural plan to each Aboriginal child in out of home care that is aligned with the case plan for the child’. Furthermore, ‘the case plan must reflect and be consistent with the child’s cultural support needs, having regard to the child’s circumstances’.

compliance with the ATSI CPP placement hierarchy is constrained by a range of factors, such as the availability of carers when a placement is needed, knowledge of extended First Nations family who can be sought for placement availability, and bureaucratic requirements concerning the ‘approval’ of carers (Higgins et al., 2006; Richardson et al., 2005, 2007). CSPs are used to outline the mechanisms through which to impart knowledge—and enable action towards—ensuring children’s cultural connections can be upheld and fostered, as highlighted in the previous chapter.

However, achieving cultural planning objectives is difficult. In a study examining the difficulties associated with cultural support planning in Victoria, Baidawi et al. (2017) interviewed 32 OOHC child and family welfare professionals across six non-Indigenous, non-government (mainstream) organisations and one ACCO. They found that under-resourcing of ACCOs; tensions between non-Indigenous, non-government (mainstream) organisations and ACCOs; differing views between non-Indigenous and First Nations child and family welfare workers concerning the priority of cultural connection compared with other ‘best interests’ considerations; and the reluctance of some First Nations children to identify as First Nations—or even want connection with their culture—imposed constraints to cultural planning processes (Baidawi et al., 2017). Cultural ‘confusion, denial and uncertainty’ among First Nations children and young people (as perceived by child and family welfare workers), as well as difficulties in ascertaining children’s Indigenous identity status, also imposed barriers to the cultural planning processes (Baidawi et al., 2017, p. 735). Constraints are imposed on the cultural planning process when First Nations children and young people choose not to connect with their culture (or First Nations parents), do not identify as Indigenous, or demonstrate ambivalence towards their cultural heritage. As discussed below, Indigenous identity development has particular complexities in OOHC contexts.

## **4.4 Cultural Identity Development: Implications for First Nations**

### **Children in Out-of-Home Care**

Culture is a factor in the development of identity (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011), and some scholars highlight the complexities encountered by children in developing cultural identity while situated in acculturative or multicultural environments (Berry, 2018; Degener et al., 2022; Howarth et al., 2014). As highlighted by acculturation researcher John Berry,

As for acculturation, the issue of one's cultural identity comes to the fore during intercultural contact: individuals engage with two systems of cultural norms, beliefs and practices, and attempt to sort out who they are in relation to these two ways of living. (Berry, 2018, p. 186)

Some of this research assumes a binary choice between affiliation with one's 'heritage' or ethnic culture or the culture of the 'dominant society' in cultural identity development (Berry, 2018, p. 188). In addition to enculturation and acculturation theories, however, Martin Nakata's (2007a, 2007b) theorising on the Cultural Interface highlights that First Nations children do not exist within 'two worlds' or 'between cultures', but within an environment that encompasses degrees of complexity that Western knowledge and theories struggle to articulate. Instead, the 'culture' that First Nations children grow up within encompasses the interaction between 'traditional' or pre-colonial First Nations cultures, the settler-colonial context, and the non-Indigenous context. This has implications for Indigenous identity development, particularly in OOHC contexts.

M. Nakata (1997, 2002, 2007a) articulates how Indigenous identity has been 'formed' by colonisation, whereby the category of 'Indigenous' has been produced—by colonisation and Western knowledge systems—as a racialised, or Othered, category of

persons who are inferior and lack knowledge. This imposes limitations on how Indigenous identity is both enacted and understood. M. Nakata (2007a, 2007b) further argues that First Nations peoples are not caught in a web of competing cultures, but that we occupy positions in which the categorisation of us within different groups does not fully account for the complexity of Indigenous identity.

Indigenous identity has been extensively researched in the Australian context (B. Bennett, 2015; Bolt, 2010; Carlson, 2016; Dudgeon, 2016; Dudgeon & Oxenham, 1990; Gilbert, 2019; Paradies, 2006). Some of this research has highlighted that First Nations peoples are susceptible to identity challenges because of past policies of assimilation; sexual violence, which has resulted in many First Nations peoples possessing ‘mixed’ ethnic and cultural ancestry; ‘exemption’ policies by which First Nations peoples could apply to be designated as ‘not-Aboriginal’ in order to access civil rights and freedoms in line with non-Indigenous Australians (such as housing, employment and marriage); the impacts of colonisation on cultural loss; the construction and politicisation of ‘Indigenous’ identity; and the reality that First Nations cultures are positioned within a dominant white Anglo-Celtic Australian society (Bolt, 2010; Broome, 2010; Carlson, 2016; Hollinsworth, 2006; Solonec, 2013). Indigenous identity is consequently both complex and diverse because it is enacted and formed within a dominant white society that has attempted to eliminate, and assimilate, First Nations peoples.

Scholarship concerning Indigenous identity in Australia has highlighted the politicisation of this identity, whereby levels of authenticity have been attached to Indigeneity on the basis of certain features, often imposed within binary categories (Behrendt, 1995; Carlson, 2016; Fredericks, 2013; Langton, 1981). For example, Moreton-Robinson (2004) argues that ‘representations of the Indigenous “other” have circulated in white Anglo discourse since the 1700s’, in which racist representations of

Indigenous peoples have included notions of us as ‘treacherous, lazy, drunken, childish, cunning, dirty, ignoble, noble, primitive, backward, unscrupulous, untrustworthy and savage’ (p. 76). Western discourse has viewed Indigeneity as more authentic according to markers of culture deemed to be ‘traditional’ or pre-colonial (Chase, 1981; Hollinsworth, 1992; Moreton-Robinson, 2004; M. Nakata, 1995). This includes discourse about First Nations peoples living in accordance with ‘traditional’ lifestyles and values being more authentic than First Nations peoples judged as having ‘assimilated’ (Langton, 1981; Watson, 2014). Indigenous authenticity has also been attached to physical appearance (i.e. darker skin colour), living in impoverished circumstances, living in remote areas, living on Country, having lower levels of formal education, and being unemployed (Chase, 1981; Craven & Price, 2011; Hollinsworth, 1992; Langton, 1981; M. Nakata, 1995; Watson, 2014). Conversely, First Nations peoples who have fair skin or live in urban locations, with a white middle-class education and employment status, have been subject to questioning about the authenticity of their identity (Behrendt, 1995; Carlson, 2016; Craven & Price, 2011; Fredericks, 2013; Hollinsworth, 1992; Oliver, 2018) by both First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples. For example, Fredericks (2013) and Behrendt (1995) have both challenged conceptions of ‘urban Aboriginal identity’ as less authentic than First Nations peoples living in remote locations, while Langton (1981) has critiqued notions of Indigenous authenticity as being attached to simplistic markers of ‘difference’, such as poverty or location. First Nations peoples have also been subject to identity politics based on how they enact their Indigeneity, and whether it challenges or confirms assumptions about what constitutes Indigeneity.

Indigenous identity is further complicated and politicised by various factors, such as not always possessing knowledge of your First Nations heritage (Carlson,

2016), having First Nations heritage as well as multicultural ancestry (Dudgeon, 2016), identifying with ‘hybrid’ Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities (Paradies, 2006), being fair-skinned (B. Bennett, 2015), not possessing knowledge of your kinship lines (B. Bennett, 2015; Carlson, 2016), and having few ties to community (B. Bennett, 2015). Some of these factors have been highlighted as affecting ‘Confirmation of Aboriginality’ claims in which Indigeneity is determined according to identification as Indigenous, acceptance as Indigenous by your own or local community, and First Nations blood ancestry (Carlson, 2016). M. Nakata (1997, 2002, 2007a) has further illuminated the complexities, and constraints, imposed on Indigenous identity, highlighting how Indigenous identity, and culture, are negotiated at the Cultural Interface, where what he describes as ‘push-pull tensions’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds must be navigated, in addition to the limitations imposed by Western knowledge systems that influence how Indigenous identity can be known.

While this chapter is not an exhaustive synthesis of the literature concerning Indigenous identity in Australia, it will illuminate how Indigenous identity formation can be affected by placement in OOHC. While Indigenous identity is complicated and politicised by a range of factors, as described above, all of these issues are further complicated by placement in OOHC. Cultural disconnection, in which First Nations peoples are disconnected from family and community, can result from placement in OOHC. Discussing the risk of cultural disconnection for First Nations children who are placed in permanent care (where legal guardianship of a child or young person is transferred from the state to an individual), Cripps and Laurens (2015) cite the legal case *B & F* to argue that cultural identity is derived from participation in ‘the lifestyle, culture, and tradition of the community to which they [First Nations children] belong’ (*B & F*, 1998, as cited in Cripps & Laurens, 2015, p. 75). For First Nations children

removed from their First Nations families and communities because of placement in OOHC, identity conflict or confusion can ensue. For example, Gilbert (2019) notes that her Indigenous identity development was affected by her removal from her birth family at the age of 8 months as part of the Stolen Generations, while Clark (2000) documented the experiences of identity confusion encountered by seven First Nations people who did not always know they were Aboriginal as a result of removal from biological families as part of the Stolen Generations.

In Moss's (2009) research with Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander children and young people, feelings of identity confusion and cultural disconnection were related to not always knowing one's First Nations heritage, not knowing the details of one's kinship ties, and feeling estranged from First Nations parents. For example, one First Nations young person who experienced 'identity confusion' stated that their foster carer was their blood uncle, despite not having any kinship ties and being from a different cultural background to their foster carer (Moss, 2009). Another First Nations young person experiencing 'identity confusion' found out about her Aboriginality 1 year earlier, stating, 'It doesn't mean anything. I don't consider myself Aboriginal' (Moss, 2009, p. 316). In Baidawi et al.'s (2017) research, workers within the OOHC system, such as caseworkers, also described experiences with First Nations children and young people who chose not to identify as Indigenous.

Placement in OOHC can exacerbate, and further complicate, all of the issues encountered by First Nations peoples in constructing Indigenous identity. Not only does it produce cultural disconnection in which knowledge transmission about heritage and kinship lines may be affected, but placement in OOHC can also result in cultural dislocation (when First Nations peoples are removed from Country) and cultural disruption (when traditional First Nations cultural practice is affected). In Clark's

(2000) research, First Nations participants who were removed from their birth families spoke about the impact of cultural dislocation on their identity journeys, where reconnection to an ‘Indigenous way of life’ was viewed as pertinent to identity development. This reconnection was sought when cultural disconnection and cultural dislocation occurred, which may be different to the experiences of First Nations peoples whose connections to kin, community and Country are sustained in a context in which the cultural environment (and the practice of culture) are transformed by colonisation.

Being raised in transracial placements can also complicate cultural identity development in OOHC. International research has found that children in foster care from ‘ethnic minority’ backgrounds experience more identity conflict, difficulties and fluctuations in their ethnic identity<sup>36</sup> over time, especially when placed in transracial placements, compared with their peers who do not live in foster care (Degener et al., 2022). Degener et al.’s (2022) international systematic review highlighted that transracially placed ethnic minority children in foster care were prone to experience cultural disconnection and were susceptible to the influence of negative messages about their culture. These findings have similarity with literature written by transracial adoptees whose identity formation, and belonging to a cultural group, are complicated by placement with carers from different cultural backgrounds; experiences of racism, both interpersonal and societal, in which negative stereotypes about one’s birth culture can become internalised; and living in an environment where your ethnic culture, and issues of race, are marginalised (Sinclair, 2007; Willing, 2005, 2021). This has relevance for First Nations children in Australian OOHC, where the rate of placement

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<sup>36</sup> In this review, ethnic identity was defined as a social identity developed over the life course where a ‘subjective sense of belonging to a group of people with a same-ethnic background . . . is based on the conviction that roots, history, culture, norms, language and religion are shared with other members of an ethnic group’ (Degener et al., 2022, p. 203).

with non-Indigenous carers is high. Racial socialisation is consequently important in these contexts.

Ultimately, contrary to assumptions made within enculturation and acculturation theories that cultural contexts are either monocultural or multicultural yet predictable (in terms of the acculturation strategies employed by individuals), First Nations peoples' cultural contexts are dynamic and not singular. Within these dynamic cultural contexts, Indigenous culture and identity have been complicated and politicised by colonisation, as well as Western and Indigenous knowledge systems that inform how Indigeneity can be known. Within an OOHC context, scholarly literature further attests to the complexity of learning culture, and developing identity, for First Nations children in Australia. This literature has implications for cultural connection in OOHC: First Nations children living in OOHC require knowledge of their culture and ancestry, and need to live in a cultural milieu that enables culture to be learned and practised for cultural connection to ensue. However, we still do not know what cultural connection means in a colonising environment, or how cultural connection differs from cultural identity development. Nor do we understand how cultural knowledge can be transmitted when First Nations children live in OOHC (particularly with non-Indigenous carers), or how culture can be meaningfully practised and learned when First Nations children are removed from their First Nations families. Conceptual clarity, from the perspectives of First Nations peoples, is needed.

#### **4.5 Understandings of Cultural Connection in Out-of-Home Care**

In an extensive review (11,041 articles) of the evidence base, Salmon et al. (2018a, 2018b) identified six broad cultural domains, and sub-domains, that they consider comprise First Nations cultures. Based on the knowledge contained within 284 studies reviewed, these domains and sub-domains are as follows:

- Domain 1—Connection to Country. Sub-domains include living on Country, caring for Country, land rights and autonomy, spiritual connection, and health and traditional foods.
- Domain 2—Indigenous beliefs and knowledge. Sub-domains include spiritual and religious beliefs, traditional knowledge, knowledge transmission and continuity, and traditional healing.
- Domain 3—Indigenous language. Sub-domains include language revitalisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language education, and impacts of language on health.
- Domain 4—Family, kinship and community. Sub-domains include family and kinship, and community.
- Domain 5—Cultural expression and continuity. Sub-domains include cultural practices, art and music, and identity.
- Domain 6—Self-determination and leadership. Sub-domains include self-determination and wellbeing, leadership, and cultural safety (Salmon et al., 2018a).

Some of the sub-domains, such as ‘traditional foods’ and ‘cultural practices’, do overlap despite being conceptualised under different domains (i.e. Domain 1 and Domain 5, respectively), thus evidencing the complexity in defining interrelated aspects of culture. Nonetheless, Salmon et al.’s (2018a) review gives insight into how First Nations cultures can be conceptualised and compartmentalised into constitutive parts.

Within the research literature, a limited number of Australian projects have attempted to produce understandings of cultural connection in OOHC. In the *Family is Culture* review undertaken in NSW, a robust research design enabled the review of the relevant extant literature pertaining to cultural connection in OOHC, as well as analysis

of input received by a range of stakeholders, including First Nations families and communities, government representatives, academics, and First Nations peak bodies, as well as case file reviews and other data analysis (M. Davis, 2019). A definition of ‘cultural connection’ is provided, noting that “‘Connection’ in the Aboriginal sense of the term is notoriously difficult to define as it is a concept which does not seem to hold non-Indigenous equivalence’ (M. Davis, 2019, p. 320). M. Davis (2019) states that

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, ‘connection’ to family, community, culture and Country is a fundamental concept which is central to one’s sense of identity, belonging and wellbeing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people understand ‘connection’ to be *gained through social experience* and involves interaction with families, communities and ancestors associated with a particular area that is related to them. In this sense, ‘connection’ refers to *interdependent and reciprocal relationships* between Aboriginal peoples and Country which is sustained through cultural knowledge and practices. (p. 320, italics my emphasis)

This definition articulates the importance of relationality, belonging, identity and wellbeing—as well as the importance of social experiences with family, community and Country. It also highlights the ways in which culture and connection are essential aspects of identity and, therefore, wellbeing, highlighting the compatibility between M. Davis’s (2019) definition of cultural connection, and Aboriginal models of SEWB that include cultural connection (see, for example, Gee et al., 2014, and Dudgeon et al., 2020, as mentioned in the previous chapter). However, there is a need to better understand the components of cultural connection outlined in M. Davis’s (2019) definition, specifically as it relates to First Nations children and young people in OOHC contexts. It is not clear how these components can be fostered for First Nations children and young people in an OOHC context, which can result in cultural disconnection,

dislocation and disruption, and wherein First Nations children may be removed from First Nations family, community and Country. This thesis seeks to provide this clarity.

The relational aspect of cultural connection was also discussed in a 2009 research project by non-Indigenous academic Terri Libesman (2011). In this research, Libesman (2011) discussed the notion of ‘cultural care’<sup>37</sup> with First Nations and non-Indigenous focus group participants who worked at ACCOs and non-Indigenous, non-government (mainstream) organisations throughout Australia. Cultural care was found to consist of two aspects: providing First Nations children and young people with adequate information about their personal history (including their kin, mob, community and Country), and providing First Nations children and young people with ample opportunities to engage with their communities and families (Libesman, 2011). According to Libesman (2011), cultural care can be achieved for First Nations children in OOHC through first knowing their First Nations ancestry, mob/family, community and Country, and, subsequently, having meaningful contact with family, community and Country. Libesman’s (2011) research highlighted the importance of family, community and Country, along with the need to ‘collect and record’ information about one’s kinship and ancestry, such as genograms, family trees and totems, and to provide opportunities to ‘connect or stay connected in a day to day way with their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities’ (p. 11). The project also highlighted the importance of reunification to First Nations family, stating that it is the ‘most effective and significant way to maintain cultural connection’ (Libesman, 2011, p. 53). Libesman (2011) concluded that failure to fully implement the ATSICPP is ‘the most significant and immediate barrier to cultural care’ (p. 70).

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<sup>37</sup> While the paper by Libesman (2011) uses the term ‘cultural care’ throughout, the term is interchangeable with cultural connection.

In Victoria, a project led by Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung Adjunct Professor Muriel Bamblett unpacked systemic understandings of cultural connection<sup>38</sup> by asking 23 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal child and family welfare practitioners what is meant ‘when they refer to culture’ (Bamblett et al., 2012, p. 67). Emanating from focus group discussions with practitioners, six dimensions of Aboriginal cultural connection were identified:

1. Cultural expression and events
2. Cultural values, beliefs and practices
3. History
4. Personal identity
5. Extended family, clan and community
6. Country (Bamblett et al., 2012, p. 67).

The six dimensions of cultural connection listed above suggest that cultural connection is achieved by possessing knowledge of your culture (i.e. cultural expression and events; cultural values, beliefs and practices; history; and ancestry), and being embedded—and living—in your culture (i.e. connection to cultural values, family, clan, community and Country) enables cultural connection. In Bamblett et al.’s (2012) research, knowledge of ancestry was included within the personal identity dimension, and cultural identity was also cited as a part of one’s personal identity. This was premised on the notion that knowledge of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ancestry would enable children to develop a sense of ‘who they are’, thus supporting the development of personal identity and, by extension, cultural identity. Indigenous identity may then be considered an aspect of cultural connection within Bamblett et al.’s (2012) conceptualisation of cultural connection. However, past research has found that

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<sup>38</sup> The paper by Bamblett et al. (2012) uses both terms ‘cultural connection’ and ‘cultural needs’ interchangeably throughout.

developing a sense of cultural identity is a nuanced process that may be either an aspect of cultural connection or an outcome of cultural connection itself (Carlson, 2016; Dudgeon et al., 2020; Gee et al., 2014; Kickett-Tucker, 2009). Overall, Bamblett et al.'s (2012) findings demonstrate the multifaceted nature of cultural connection, enabling insight into the various domains associated with culture for First Nations children in OOHC.

Indigenous research in Turtle Island (North America) on 'cultural permanence' also overlaps with First Nations understandings of cultural connection in Australia. This literature highlights that 'permanency' for Indigenous children in Canada extends beyond adult-child attachment relationships to also include belonging, stability and 'permanence' in culture (K. Bennett, 2014, 2015; Carriere, 2007; Carriere & Richardson, 2009; Richard, 2004; Sinclair, 2007). Cultural permanency may reflect the practice of ensuring cultural connection for Indigenous children in OOHC in settler-colonial countries such as Australia and Canada. For example, Kathleen Bennett articulates the importance of family, community, and Country for Indigenous children in care in Turtle Island, indicating that cultural connection for children in OOHC

. . . refer[s] to their family of origin, which includes their extended family and cultural community, as well as their teachings, values, traditions, language, and ceremonies.

When children reside in their communities, they are connected across all generations, unlike when they are in foster care. (K. Bennett, 2014, p. 81)

Cultural permanence is thus concerned with enabling, maintaining and strengthening Indigenous children's connections to family, community, land, sea, animals, plants and culture in the Canadian context (Carriere & Richardson, 2009), thus encompassing Indigenous notions of relationality. Relationships—underpinned by Indigenous notions of relationality—are arguably at the core of cultural permanence.

While not described as ‘cultural permanence’, similar ideas around ‘permanency’ have been articulated by First Nations peoples in Australia. In 2019, eight roundtable discussions (or ‘forums’) were undertaken across Australia to gain a better understanding of permanency from First Nations perspectives. It was found that ‘the most consistent theme raised throughout the consultations was that genuine permanence is grounded in the stability of children’s identity and relationships in connection with family, community and culture, and is often incompatible with legal permanent care orders’ (i.e. legal permanency) (SNAICC, 2020, p. 5). This finding reflects critiques of legal permanency planning in the North American context, whereby Western and Indigenous worldviews about cultural permanency are at odds (K. Bennett, 2015; Carriere & Richardson, 2009; Richard, 2007). This tension between different forms of permanency—legal, relational and cultural—begins to reach the heart of the complexity that defines First Nations peoples’ encounters with child protection and OOHC systems—on the one hand, the need for legal permanency to have positive effects on a child or young person’s development (including SEWB) and, on the other hand, the need for cultural permanency for First Nations children and young people to ameliorate the negative impacts of disconnection from kin and Country.

However, when children are removed from their First Nations families, communities and cultures—and placed into non-Indigenous care—exposure to First Nations families, communities and cultures can be reduced. This presents a challenge for Australian OOHC systems: how to foster cultural connection in a context in which First Nations children enter care earlier, stay longer and are less likely to be reunified with family, as highlighted in the previous chapter. With all of these complexities, fostering—and protecting—connection to culture is difficult. Consequently, it is

important to build on earlier work by conceptualising cultural connection differently within an OOHC context.

#### **4.6 Situating this Research**

If cultural connection is, as Megan Davis (2019) words it, ‘gained from social experience . . . [and] refers to interdependent and reciprocal relationships with Indigenous peoples, communities and Country’ (p. 320), it is important to interrogate how this can be fostered for First Nations children and young people within an OOHC context. Further, it is important to ascertain if Bamblett et al.’s (2012) and M. Davis’s (2019) definitions of cultural connection are consistent with community understandings of cultural connection, while exploring understandings of cultural connection with a broader range of First Nations peoples in Australia, including those with lived experience of OOHC, as this thesis will do.

Drawing on the literature reviewed, cultural connection can be conceptualised as first involving learning one’s First Nations culture at the Cultural Interface, which includes learning within the broader Australian settler-colonial context. An added layer of complexity is then overlaid on top of these processes of developing cultural connection when First Nations children enter OOHC contexts (as highlighted in this chapter), in which factors such as living with non-Indigenous carers who do not share one’s cultural background further threaten cultural connection.

From a Western perspective, culture may be learned through enculturation or transformed through acculturation, while First Nations perspectives highlight the importance of immersion in culture. However, when children grow up in OOHC contexts—not necessarily enculturated or immersed in culture—it is unclear how processes of learning culture are affected. What is specifically learned about culture, and how culture is learned for First Nations children in OOHC in Australia, or how

cultural identity development is distinguished from cultural connection in OOHC, is unclear in the extant literature. Further, it is unclear how being in OOHC affects what is learned about culture and how it is learned, as well as what is important for First Nations children to know about their culture when they grow up in OOHC. This also raises questions about the application of enculturation and acculturation theories to an OOHC context. There is also a lack of attention to how cultural connection can be tangibly evidenced for First Nations children and young people living in OOHC, particularly given the complexities encountered at the Cultural Interface. In short, the meaning of cultural connection, and what connection to culture tangibly entails, is not well understood.

What this synthesis, and my interpretation, of the literature does suggest, however, is that there are domains of cultural connection. These include learning certain *knowledges* of one's culture, via a range of *mechanisms*, which may then be evidenced via certain *feelings* or *actions*. My conceptualisation of these domains of cultural connection—knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions—is discussed further in the next chapter as an organising framework to collect and unpack participants' understandings of cultural connection. Currently, a conceptual understanding of cultural connection, grounded in the perspectives of First Nations peoples in Australia, is lacking from the research literature. This thesis seeks to provide this clarity. It is at this intersection that the importance of this research is located.

## **4.7 Conclusion**

The connection element of the ATSI CPP highlights the importance of culture for First Nations children growing up in OOHC. However, cultural connection is often measured via compliance with the ATSI CPP placement hierarchy, or via the completion of CSPs (AIHW, 2020b), as highlighted in the previous chapter. These bureaucratic

mechanisms do not in themselves directly measure cultural connection, nor do they reflect any conceptualisation of what cultural connection is, or what it might mean to First Nations peoples, including children and young people. This provides limited opportunity for practitioners working with First Nations children in OOHC to truly assess how connected children feel to their culture, or, more importantly, to understand what cultural connection means for individual children. One can imagine, for example, a child on a 'Return to Country' who might feel like an outsider on it: unfamiliar, uncomfortable, unrecognised. What is missing from our understanding of cultural connection in OOHC is how it is experienced by First Nations children and young people, over time, and how First Nations children and young people respond to the challenges of navigating culture, identity and cultural connection in a colonial, OOHC environment. This thesis seeks to address this issue by exploring these challenges with First Nations young people who have lived in OOHC.

While many of the policies and practices designed to ensure cultural connection are well intentioned, there are implementation issues and competing needs that minimise the attention given to cultural connection for First Nations children in OOHC. For First Nations children, who are more likely to enter OOHC, experience longer placement length, and be placed with non-Indigenous carers (who may nonetheless be part of their family), fostering cultural connection matters. It matters because First Nations children in OOHC must be supported to gain an understanding of who they are in relation to their First Nations families and communities, by being embedded in their cultures, to prevent a repetition of harms encountered by First Nations peoples during the Stolen Generations. However, the implications of these realities for First Nations children in OOHC in terms of being immersed in culture are unclear, which raises

questions about how First Nations children learn their cultures in an OOHC context in which they might never have been exposed to their First Nations cultures.

Cultural connection matters for First Nations children whose families and communities have been disrupted, disconnected and dislocated from traditional customs as a result of ongoing colonisation. In the OOHC system, in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are at greater risk of having their connections to First Nations family, community and Country disrupted, cultural connection matters for the development of their own identities, which reflect an interface that encompasses dynamic interactions between the traditional and colonial contexts of Indigenous life. In OOHC policy, this need for connection has been identified as valuable and important for the wellbeing of First Nations children and young people in OOHC, but it remains that we understand very little about what cultural connection encompasses. This thesis is an effort to better understand how First Nations cultural connection is understood and experienced in OOHC contexts in Victoria. In the next chapter, the methodology and research methods used to enable this deeper level of insight are explained.

## Chapter 5: Methodology

### 5.1 Aims of the Research

The previous chapters have highlighted the significance of cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and communities, as well as the detrimental impact of colonial policies that forcibly removed First Nations children from their families, communities and cultures. Given the importance of cultural connection to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and the overrepresentation of First Nations children and young people in Australian OOHC systems, the aim of this research is to develop a greater understanding of cultural connection for First Nations children and young people in OOHC contexts.

While the gaps in the cultural connection literature discussed in the previous chapter informed the aims of this research, the research questions were developed through an iterative process with an Aboriginal Expert Advisory Group<sup>39</sup> (herein referred to as the ‘Advisory Group’). I formed the Advisory Group, consisting of interchanging members, including Aboriginal Elders, Aboriginal OOHC professionals, Aboriginal researchers and Aboriginal social workers, to both ensure cultural support for me throughout the research, and increase the involvement of First Nations peoples in this research. Interchanging membership was necessary for a range of reasons, including member’s availability over the duration of my doctoral candidature; changing employment commitments of members; and, the need for specific expertise (i.e. academic expertise, OOHC expertise) at different points throughout my doctoral

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<sup>39</sup> Ideally, I would have liked to have paid Advisory Group members for their time and expertise in supporting both the research, and myself, throughout candidature. However, limited funding attached to this research meant that this was not possible. It is with gratitude to each of the Advisory Group members that I extend my sincere appreciation for your support.

journey. Advisory Group members were selected based on their expertise and their existing relationships with me.<sup>40</sup> The extant literature, coupled with conversations between myself and members of the Advisory Group, resulted in the following research question: *'How is cultural connection understood and experienced by First Nations peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, Australia?'* The scope was refined to Victoria because of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia across urban, rural and remote communities.

The research also sought to answer four sub-questions:<sup>41</sup>

1. What is important for First Nations children to know to develop cultural connection?
2. What do First Nations children learn about their culture in OOHC?
3. How do/can First Nations children develop cultural connection?
4. How can you tell if a person is connected to their First Nations culture?

Specific hypotheses were not developed and tested. However, a range of expectations were developed:

- Cultural connection will be complex, and will be influenced by individual experiences of a range of factors, including mob group, First Nations family history, experiences of (intergenerational) separation from First Nations family and community, and exposure to First Nations culture.
- Cultural connection will be understood by First Nations peoples in various ways, and a range of divergent experiences of cultural connection (and its development) will be encountered and described by First Nations peoples based on several factors, including their own experiences of Indigeneity, and

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<sup>40</sup> Utilising my personal networks and existing relationships with Advisory Group members was necessary due to the unpaid nature of the Advisory Group commitment.

<sup>41</sup> These questions were generated through discussion between the Advisory Group, myself and doctoral supervisors.

experiences of growing up with First Nations family and community who are strong and knowledgeable in their culture.

- First Nations family will be important to cultural connection for a range of reasons, including imparting knowledges of mob/ancestry to First Nations children, child-rearing in accordance with Indigenous relationality, and enabling feelings of connection and belonging to First Nations family.
- In the absence of growing up with First Nations family, community and ACCOs will play key roles in supporting connection to culture for First Nations children and young people living in OOHC.

## **5.2 Research Design**

Underpinned by Indigenous Standpoint Theory,<sup>42</sup> this research employed a mixed-methods research design. It was an exploratory, sequential mixed-methods project with two distinct phases: phase one (a mixed-methods survey) and phase two (semi-structured interviews). The research design is visually depicted below in Figure 1.

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<sup>42</sup> Discussed in Chapter 1, this dissertation has been underpinned by Indigenous Standpoint Theory throughout all facets, including research design, data collection and analysis. Consideration of other Indigenous and Western methodological approaches to research also informed my thinking around the research design, as detailed in Appendix A.

**Figure 1**

*Research design: Workflow diagram*

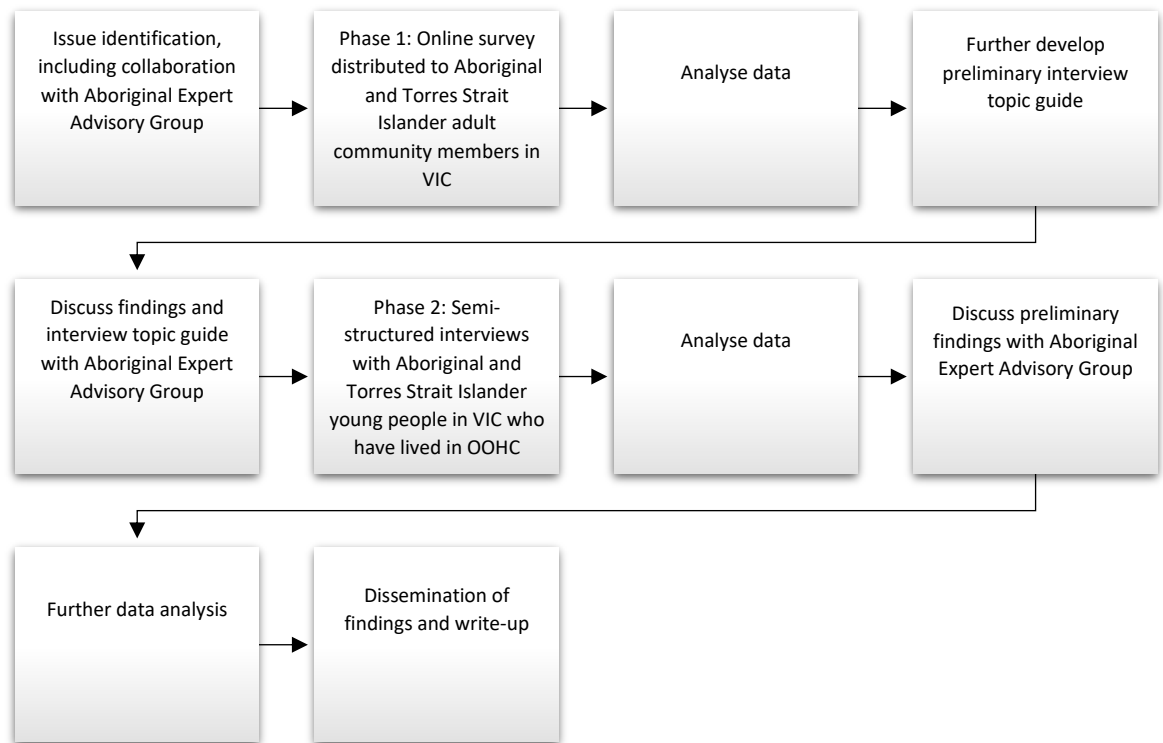


Figure 1 (above) shows that the sample were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult community members living in Victoria, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people living in Victoria who had a lived experience of OOHC. The research methods used were quantitative and qualitative, specifically a quantitative/qualitative survey coupled with qualitative semi-structured interviews. Engagement with the Advisory Group features as a key component throughout the research, whereby the Advisory Group supported issue identification, provided advice on the research tools (including the survey content and the interview schedule), and provided feedback on the interpretation of data. This research design also combatted specific ethical considerations concerning research with Indigenous peoples, as discussed below.

### **5.2.1 Principles for Ethical Indigenous Research: Privileging Indigenous People's Voices and Participation**

Ethics approval was obtained for this research from The University of Melbourne Behavioural and Social Sciences Human Ethics Sub-committee and The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (ethics identification number 1750324.1). The research design was informed by the *AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies*<sup>43</sup> (AIATSIS, 2012), and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines concerning *Ethical Conduct in Research With Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities* (NHMRC, 2018), whereby the principles of 'spirit and integrity, respect, reciprocity, responsibility, equity and cultural continuity' (p. 3) are paramount. These principles have been developed in response to a tumultuous history, and strained relationship with research, for Indigenous peoples worldwide (L. T. Smith, 2012). Specifically, Indigenous peoples worldwide have been the 'objects' of problematic research that has rendered Indigenous peoples, and their cultures, as inferior, and at times sub-human (L. T. Smith, 2012). To ensure that research was not conducted 'on' First Nations peoples, but rather 'with' First Nations peoples in a participatory way, this research was designed to privilege the voices of First Nations peoples throughout the research process, in a non-exploitative way, while also privileging my own cultural knowledge as a Noongar woman with strong kinship ties and a strong cultural identity.

Specifically, the research design included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the sole participant group to privilege the voices of First Nations peoples in the production of research knowledge, ongoing discussion and collaboration with the Advisory Group throughout the research, and support in participant recruitment and

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<sup>43</sup> This has now been superseded by the *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* (AIATSIS, 2020).

dissemination of findings from several ACCOs in Victoria. As depicted in Figure 1, phase two also privileged the perspectives of First Nations young people who have (or had) lived experiences of OOHC. This was important to enable youth perspectives on OOHC research in an area that tends to be dominated by adult-centric decision-making (Connolly, 2017).

In reflecting on Indigenous methodologies, as well as the principles of participatory research (see Appendix A: Approaching the Research—Philosophical and Methodological Considerations), the participatory level *consulted and informed* was the level of participation chosen as it was best suited to my focus area and the constraints attached to this research (i.e. budget and time). Participation was actioned through the support of the Advisory Group, who enabled some participatory decision-making at different times throughout the research. The research design featured an Advisory Group who were both Indigenous and experts in the research topic, and included multiple instances of engagement with the Advisory Group (i.e. before/after issue identification, data collection and data analysis). After finalising the research design with the Advisory Group, the instruments—a survey and interview schedule—for data collection were designed, as discussed in the next section.

### **5.2.2 Mixed-Methods Research: Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methods**

Figure 1 shows that a survey method was used in phase one, while interviews were undertaken in phase two. Specifically, phase one was designed to enable Indigenous perspectives on the four domains of cultural connection (knowledges, feelings, actions and mechanisms) previously developed (see Chapter 4, section 4.6). It aimed to ascertain what knowledges and mechanisms were important to cultural connection for First Nations children, both within and outside of OOHC, and what feelings and actions may evidence cultural connection for First Nations peoples. This

was designed in response to the overarching research question, as well as research sub-questions one, three and four. By combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, the importance of items within the cultural connection domains could be rated, while open-ended questions enabled participants to provide their opinions about cultural connection. Phase one informed the development of materials for phase two.

In phase two, interviews with First Nations young people were designed to understand how cultural connection was understood and experienced, both within and outside of OOHC, by First Nations young people with lived experience of OOHC, in response to the overarching research question. Phase two was also designed to answer research sub-questions one, two and three, with particular emphasis on research sub-question two ('What do First Nations children learn about their culture in OOHC?'). Interviews provided space for First Nations young people to describe their stories and experiences of cultural connection, and learning culture, over time (both within and outside of OOHC), and to reflect on their experiences retrospectively.

Mixed methods were important to enable both diversity in participant perspectives, and richness and nuance in individual stories. For example, the number of interviews possible given the time constraints of a full-time doctoral candidature (i.e. 10 interviews) would likely exclude many First Nations perspectives from the research. Thus, a survey was used to include a diverse range of First Nations perspectives in the research, such as Elders, OOHC employees and carers, people with lived experiences of OOHC, and other members of the First Nations community in Victoria with an interest in the research.

### **5.3 Brief Overview of Phases One and Two**

There were two participant groups for phase one (survey) and phase two (interview) of the research. The specific tasks for participants in this research depended

on the phase of research they took part in. Phase one participants were involved in completing an online or hard copy paper survey, with an estimated completion time of 20 minutes. Phase two participants were involved in completing one semi-structured interview with myself, with an estimated completion time of 45–60 minutes.

Recruitment was undertaken in two phases, commencing with survey recruitment. To enable informed consent from participants, plain language statements were developed for each phase of the research (see Appendix B). Consent processes for phases one and two are explained in further detail later in this chapter.

After survey data collection and analysis had been completed, the interview schedule was developed, and subsequently, recruitment of interview participants commenced. As with recruitment, data collection occurred in two phases, beginning with the survey and finishing with interviews. These are discussed in detail in the subsequent sections. Similarly, data analysis occurred in two distinct phases. Analysis of the survey data was completed first, followed by analysis of the interview data. All statistical analysis was undertaken in consultation with a statistician from the Melbourne Statistical Consulting Centre, while qualitative analysis was undertaken by myself, with support from my doctoral advisors. Finally, reciprocity is a key component in the conduct of ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (NHMRC, 2018). Gift cards were used to enable reciprocity in this research. Funding constraints restricted the gift card allowance to A\$800 in total. This was divided into a survey gift card allowance of A\$300 (with a lottery used to distribute gift cards to selected survey participants) and a A\$500 allowance to reimburse all interview participants for their time. The chapter now describes phase one and phase two in further detail.

## **5.4 Phase One: Survey**

### **5.4.1 Survey Participants**

Phase one participants (respondents) were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults, aged over 18 years, living throughout Victoria. Non-Indigenous Australians, children and young people aged under 18 years, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples not living in Victoria, were ineligible for participation.

Eligibility criteria were included at the beginning of the survey as screening questions, asking respondents who completed the survey to self-identify with the eligibility criteria (i.e. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, over the age of 18 years, and living in Victoria). Comprehensive data screening was undertaken prior to data analysis.

### **5.4.2 Participant Tasks: Survey Design**

As highlighted in the previous chapters, First Nations cultural connection is not a well-defined construct. Thus, the first aspect of survey development involved conceptualising how cultural knowledge is transmitted in childhood for First Nations peoples in Victoria. This included critically reflecting on the literature (such as Bamblett et al., 2012; Libesman, 2011; Martin, 2017; SNAICC, 2011, 2012) and my own personal, experiential understandings of First Nations cultural connection as a Noongar woman with strong kinship ties and social work practice experience in the OOHC sector, specifically within an ACCO. Extensive conversations with the Advisory Group and doctoral supervisors also informed the development of the survey content.

In devising the survey content, several dimensions of First Nations cultures—such as beliefs, customs, traditions, values, norms and behaviours—were initially identified. In a chapter on psychological tests and measurement scales, Coolican (2014) suggests compiling a list of ‘a large number’ of statements (ranging from 40 to 100),

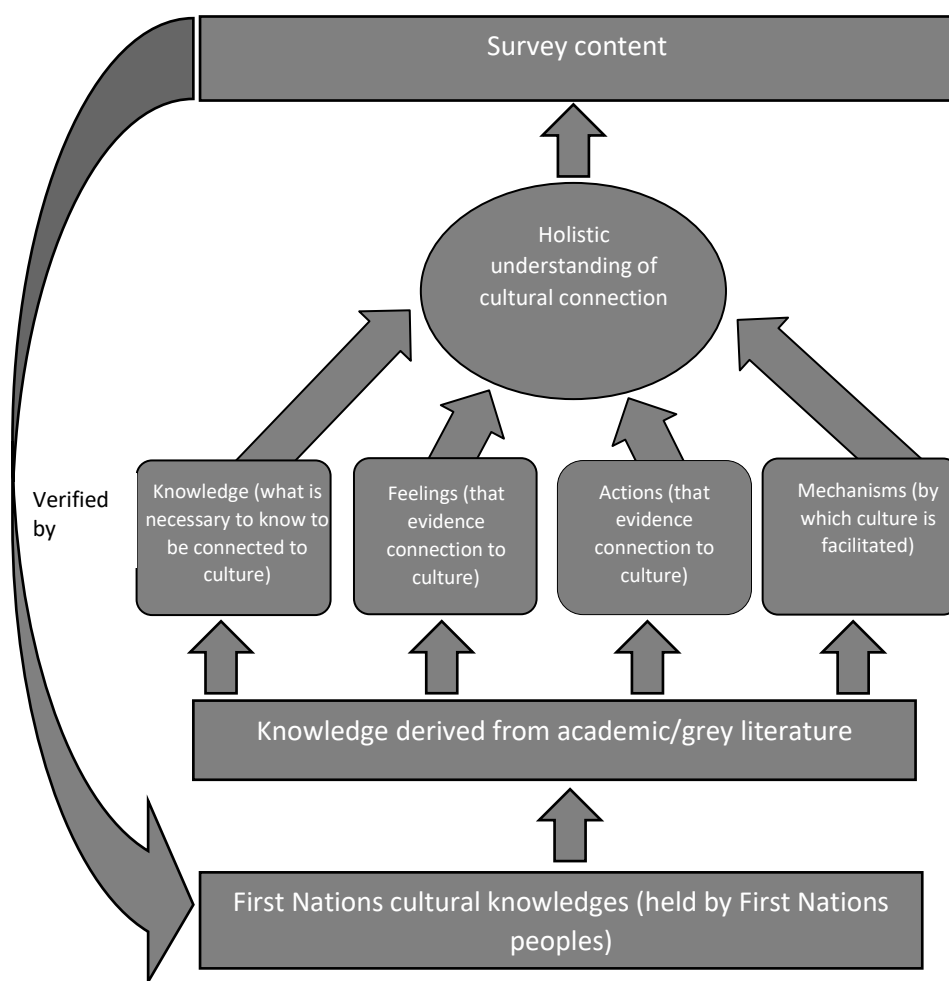
both positive and negative, about the construct being investigated (p. 200). Thus, a preliminary draft of the survey included approximately 50 open and closed questions and statements about First Nations cultural connection and the importance of various aspects of First Nations cultures, inclusive of identity, family, language, tradition, lore/law, art/artefacts, spirituality, land/Country, community, history and other. Likert-type scale questionnaire items were included, which asked responders to indicate their agreement with items, such as ‘Identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander is an important part of my culture’ and ‘Knowing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander history is an important part of my culture’. For attainment of survey depth and richness, the Likert-type scale items were supplemented by open-ended questions that enabled respondents to provide further insight into their understanding of cultural connection and disconnection. Some of these open-ended questions included ‘What is the most important way people show they are connected to their Indigenous culture?’ (question 12) and ‘How do you think children are affected by being disconnected from their culture?’ (question 18). A variety of open questions and closed questions (inclusive of Likert-type scale questionnaire items) enabled the survey to be used as a tool to gather expert opinion on First Nations cultural connection.

Through an iterative process between myself, my Advisory Group and supervisors, the survey was revised multiple times until it was comprehensive, yet manageable. As part of the process, questions were checked for misunderstanding, ambiguity or poor wording, and the conceptualisation of Indigenous cultural connection was also challenged and strengthened (Coolican, 2014). Some original questions were deleted, replaced or reworded, and the final version of the survey contained 26 questions instead of the initial list of approximately 50 questions. The final survey also included a conceptualisation of First Nations cultural connection as comprising four

domains (knowledge, feelings, actions and mechanisms) that facilitate or evidence connection to culture, with a set of items under each domain of cultural connection, and a range of open-ended questions to add richness and depth to responses. The convergence, or iterative survey design, process is depicted below in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Iterative process of survey design, incorporating First Nations cultural knowledges and literature*



The final survey contained three screening questions to ensure participants were in scope, 10 demographic questions (plus four sub-questions under three of the demographic questions), 10 questions about cultural connection and disconnection, and three questions relating to follow-up.

- Section One: Screening—questions 1–3, multiple choice and text questions
- Section Two: Demographic—questions 4–8, multiple choice and text questions
- Section Three: Cultural connection—questions 9–18, Likert-scale items, multiple choice and open-ended, text response questions
- Section Four: Demographic—questions 19–23, multiple choice and text questions
- Section Five: Follow-up—questions 24–26, multiple choice and text questions.

Two demographic sections were included to conclude the survey with ‘easy to answer’, closed questions.

The survey did not seek to test how connected respondents were to their culture, but rather sought their expert opinions as First Nations community members about cultural connection and disconnection. One common practice in quantitative survey research, particularly in psychometric testing, is to first obtain expert opinions before piloting a survey designed to test or measure a construct (Coolican, 2014). In this research, First Nations cultural connection was the topic of interest; however, there was no intent to measure or test respondents’ sense of connection to their culture. Rather, the aim was to better conceptualise First Nations cultural connection as a construct because, as previously mentioned, it is not well defined. The full survey is attached as Appendix D: Survey.

### **5.4.3 Survey Recruitment**

Survey recruitment involved purposive sampling (a form of non-probability or non-random sampling) as an informant selection tool. Snowball sampling (also a non-probability technique) followed purposive sampling; that is, informants were asked to tell other First Nations adults in their network about the survey, thereby recruiting, or encouraging, other eligible people to take part in the research. The target number for

this sample was 250 individuals, sufficient to enable robust descriptive statistical and basic inferential statistical analysis, but without the aim of being representative of the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population living in Victoria.

Both online and face-to-face recruitment took place. Respondents were recruited through social media (predominately Facebook, but also through Twitter), word-of-mouth (snowballing), ACCOs who supported the recruitment element of the research, my networks, and the community connections of key members of the Advisory Group. The online survey platform was Qualtrics, which is compatible with mobile phone devices, tablets and computers.

Four waves of recruitment for survey respondents took place. Initially, in the first wave of recruitment, recruitment was undertaken online via social media (predominately Facebook), with advertisements placed in Facebook groups (i.e. 'Aboriginal' closed group), as well as via my Facebook and Twitter pages. Paid online advertisements through Facebook were also used to reach eligible respondents, and advertisements were able to be customised to target Facebook user's listed interests (i.e. 'pages' that they liked), demographic characteristics (i.e. age, gender identity, city of residence) and friendship networks. A Facebook page, entitled 'Keeping kids connected', was also created to advertise the research, and later disseminate the findings to respondents and the broader Indigenous community in Victoria.

During the second wave of recruitment, email advertisements were sent out through researcher networks and ACCOs who were supporting recruitment to advertise the survey. Executive approval or managerial support for the research was sought and obtained from six ACCOs in Victoria: VACCA, Bendigo & District Aboriginal Co-operative (BDAC), Ngwala Willumbong (including Winja Ulupna and Galliamble), Mallee Districts Aboriginal Services (MDAS), Yappera, and Bubup Wilam. Email

advertisements with the survey attached (via link and/or PDF) were distributed throughout these six ACCOs to enable improved survey reach. Email advertisements asked the recipient to forward the advertisement through their own networks and other interested parties (i.e. snowballing recruitment strategy). Eligibility criteria were also included in the email advertisements.

The third wave of recruitment involved face-to-face recruitment through researcher networks and two ACCOs, namely Ngwala Wilumbong and Yappera. An Elder in the Victorian Aboriginal community and a member of the Advisory group—my Dad, Phil Krakouer—worked with me to lead face-to-face recruitment through his networks.<sup>44</sup> Many of the community members who were contacted face-to-face had not seen the survey advertised online and agreed to completing the survey face-to-face.

Four waves of recruitment were necessary because of the slow pace of survey return. Consequently, the final wave of recruitment involved re-advertising the survey through the previous channels (social media, email, organisations and reminders to networks). In total, the survey was re-advertised through existing channels in three separate time blocks, one at the end of February 2018, again in May 2018 and a final time in June 2018. The survey was closed at the beginning of July 2018, and thus in total, the survey remained open for 5 months. Soft copies, distributed through email and social media, were advertised widely, while approximately 100 hard copy surveys were distributed either in post or in person to ACCOs or informants.

The final number of survey completions was 199. However, because of the electronic distribution of surveys and the survey link being accessible to (potential) respondents, it was impossible to keep track of who received, or viewed, ads for the

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<sup>44</sup> It is with thanks I extend my appreciation, and respect, to my Dad, who is well known and respected in the Victorian Aboriginal community. Without my Dad's pre-existing relationships of trust and mutual respect, and his positive standing in the community, this face-to-face recruitment might not have been possible.

survey online, let alone who viewed ads or emails and was also eligible for participation. Thus, the response rate for the survey could not be calculated.

#### **5.4.4 Survey Data Collection**

The survey was created using the survey tool Qualtrics Research Core and was distributed both electronically and in person between March and June 2018. Informed consent was obtained by all survey respondents; the plain language statements (Appendix B) and consent forms (Appendix C) were in-built into the online survey at the beginning, while in-person survey respondents read and completed these forms in person, prior to administering the survey.

Electronic copies of the survey were distributed via social media, text message and email. Social media and phone distribution of the survey contained the Qualtrics Uniform Resource Locator (URL), or web address, link for respondents to access the survey online by clicking on the URL link. The survey was also exported to a PDF version. Email distribution of the survey contained both the PDF soft copy attached to the email and the URL link embedded in the text of the email.

PDF copies of the survey were printed and sent by mail (with reply paid envelope included) for respondents who requested a hard copy of the survey. Respondents were able to post surveys back to me at their leisure. However, more respondents completed hard copy surveys with me in a face-to-face environment, either independently or with me aiding completion by asking survey questions and recording responses. For the respondents who completed hard copies of the surveys with me via face-to-face delivery, the response time ranged from 5 to 40 minutes.

Recorded response time for online survey completions varied from 15 minutes to 2 days. The wide range in survey response time is most likely due to the Qualtrics<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Qualtrics also recorded every occasion that a person accessed the URL link, inclusive of the date and time in which the URL was accessed and the IP address of the URL access. It was an anonymous

platform enabling survey responses to be completed either in one sitting or by starting, and then recommencing the survey, at the respondent's leisure. It may also be a consequence of respondents leaving the survey open on their browser for an extended period of time.

To facilitate reciprocity, survey respondents were able to elect to go into the draw to win one of three A\$100 gift cards (total prize pool of A\$300). Three names were drawn, via random number generation, from the prize pool in July 2018 (2 weeks after the survey closed in June 2018). They were contacted via phone or email, and later emailed electronic gift cards of their choice (Coles, Woolworths, Big W, Target, Kmart, EB games and JB Hi-Fi) to the value of A\$100 each.

A debriefing statement (Appendix F: Survey Debriefing Statement) was included electronically at the end of online surveys, and a paper copy distributed in person to participants who completed the survey face-to-face.

#### **5.4.5 Survey Data Analysis**

The survey contained a mixture of questions producing quantitative and qualitative data. Of central interest to the research questions were the four domains of Indigenous cultural connection—Domain One: Knowledges (question 9); Domains Two and Three: Feelings and Actions (question 11); and Domain Four: Mechanisms (question 13). A 6-point Likert scale was used to ascertain the importance of each item, falling under one of the four domains, to Indigenous cultural connection. Some of the items listed under each domain of First Nations cultural connection are displayed below in Table 1.

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platform, however, so respondent names and other identifying information were not recorded (unless participants chose to enter their phone numbers for follow-up). Qualtrics also recorded survey response progress for each response, measured via percentage completion.

**Table 1**

Extract from survey showing some items under the four domains of First Nations

*cultural connection*

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**Domain 1: Knowledges**


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*These next few questions are about the knowledge or understandings children need to be connected to Indigenous culture. The focus is on what Indigenous children in Victoria **need to know** about their culture to be connected.*

Thinking about **the knowledge or understandings Indigenous children need** to be connected to culture, please indicate how important the following aspects are from 1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *extremely important*.

To be connected to culture, Indigenous children **need to know**...

	Not at all important (1)	Slightly important (2)	Moderately important (3)	Very important (4)	Extremely important (5)	Don't know (6)
...about their mob/ancestry (e.g. their personal history and where they come from) (1)						
...about Indigenous spirituality (e.g. spirits, ancestors, dreamtime/creation stories, connection to land) (3)						
...about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history (5)						

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**Domains 2 and 3: Feelings and Actions**


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*These next few questions are about **feeling connected** to Indigenous culture. The focus is on what Indigenous children in Victoria **need to feel** to be connected to their culture.*

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following, where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.

A person **feels connected** to their Indigenous culture if they...

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Don't know (6)
...identify as an Indigenous person (1)						
...feel they belong to their Indigenous family (2)						
...feel proud of their Indigenous culture/heritage (9)						

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**Domain 4: Mechanisms**

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*These next few questions are about **how** children develop a sense of connection to their culture. The focus is on how Indigenous children in Victoria **learn** about their culture, and **how they develop connection** to culture.*

Q13 Thinking about **how Indigenous children** develop a sense of connection to their culture, please indicate how important the following aspects are from 1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *extremely important*.

For Indigenous children to develop a sense of connection to culture, it is important for them to...

	Not at all important (1)	Slightly important (2)	Moderately important (3)	Very important (4)	Extremely important (5)	Don't know (6)
...grow up/be raised by their Indigenous family (1)						
...have a relationship with an Indigenous Elder (5)						
...spend time in their local Indigenous community (6)						

Prior to data analysis, data cleaning was undertaken. Data cleaning involved excluding responses with a completion rate below 40% (responses in which only demographic information was obtained, i.e. responses not progressing beyond question 9) because of limited engagement with the survey, and standardising text responses to demographic questions (i.e. age and mob) for analysis.

Once data cleaning had been undertaken, data analysis was conducted. As both closed and open questions were asked in the survey, data analysis was undertaken in two separate phases (a quantitative phase and a qualitative phase). Reflexivity was undertaken throughout the analysis and was important to ensure that Indigenous perspectives were not homogenised and oversimplified throughout the analysis, particularly within the qualitative data analysis.

Quantitative data analysis included descriptive statistical analysis (i.e. producing frequencies and means), as well as basic inferential statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to gain insight into demographic information about participants,

including the proportion of participants who had OOHC involvement. Missing data, and ‘don’t know’ and ‘prefer not to say responses’, were excluded from analysis to ensure that they did not affect descriptive analysis.

In addition to analysing demographic information, quantitative analysis also focused on the four domains of cultural connection—knowledges, feelings, actions and mechanisms—since they were linked to the research sub-questions.<sup>46</sup> The research sub-questions were concerned with what knowledges are important for cultural connection, what feelings and actions evidence cultural connection, and what mechanisms enable cultural connection. Thus, descriptive statistics were produced for each of the items in the four cultural connection domains—knowledges, feelings, actions and mechanisms (Likert scale items on questions 9, 11 and 13)—to ascertain which knowledges, feelings, actions and mechanisms were considered more important by participants to cultural connection.

Given the importance of understanding how cultural connection is understood in OOHC contexts, as articulated by the research question ‘*How is cultural connection understood and experienced by First Nations peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, Australia?*’, demographic information was used to split participants into groups related to their involvement in OOHC. Basic inferential statistical analysis was undertaken to compare the importance placed on items in the four domains of cultural connection (Likert scale items on questions 9, 11 and 13) across groups, which included using a Fischer’s exact test to compare means across groups, disaggregated by responder characteristics. This enabled insight into how cultural connection was understood by respondents within OOHC contexts, thus linking well with the overall research question

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<sup>46</sup> These research sub-questions were as follows: ‘What is important for First Nations children to know to develop cultural connection?’ (knowledges), ‘How do/can First Nations children develop cultural connection?’ (mechanisms), and ‘How can you tell if a person is connected to their First Nations culture?’ (feelings and actions).

*(‘How is cultural connection understood and experienced by First Nations peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, Australia?’).*

Qualitative data collected from the survey emanated from open-ended questions asked in section three (cultural connection) of the survey. These questions were designed to elicit respondents’ opinions about, and insights on, the cultural connection variables ‘Knowledges’, ‘Feelings’, ‘Actions’ and ‘Mechanisms’, their opinions about cultural connection or disconnection in OOHC contexts, and how cultural connection is learned and developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Qualitative data about cultural connection and disconnection, from section three of the survey, were analysed according to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic technique used to undertake an in-depth analysis of texts and narratives. One of the benefits of thematic analysis is that it can be used as a method in its own right, as argued by psychology researchers Braun and Clarke (2006), as opposed to an analytic technique that is used as part of a broader method or theoretical framework, such as grounded theory or interpretive phenomenological analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) developed a thematic analysis framework for use in psychology which can be applied to survey research in the social sciences. Their framework is not locked into a certain epistemological or ontological tradition, such as constructionist epistemology, and therefore gives the researcher flexibility to analyse qualitative data from within their own epistemological positioning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework, whereby my standpoint was used critically to analyse and interpret the data in conjunction with the overarching conceptual framework described in the preceding section.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework specifies six key phases to thematic analysis:

- 'Step One: Familiarising yourself with the data
- Step Two: Generating initial codes
- Step Three: Searching for themes
- Step Four: Reviewing themes
- Step Five: Defining and naming themes
- Step Six: Producing the report.' (p. 87)

In my thematic analysis of the responses emanating from the open-ended cultural connection questions in the survey data set, I began by reading the text responses to the cultural connection section of the survey multiple times to familiarise myself with the data set. I took notes manually regarding my initial thoughts upon reading the data, in which I commented upon some of the patterns I observed in the data.

Undertaken manually using Microsoft Word, an inductive, semantic approach to thematic analysis of the qualitative survey data was used, meaning that I used the words articulated by First Nations peoples who shared their knowledge with me (my respondents) to generate the initial codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that a semantic approach to the generation of codes and themes possesses some similarity to grounded theory as a methodological framework in that the generation of codes is borne out of respondents' words—and knowledge—and not slotted into a category previously defined by the researcher or the literature. An inductive, semantic approach enabled me to stay true to the words articulated—and the knowledge shared—by my respondents, thus avoiding some of the pitfalls of past (and sometimes present) culturally inappropriate research wherein Indigenous people's meaning, knowledge and words are

misinterpreted by researchers on the basis of their own (often Western) standpoint and biases (L. T. Smith, 2012).

After generating initial codes, I searched for themes in the data set by condensing my initial list of codes and critically reflecting on my standpoint while doing so. I was acutely aware that my standpoint could bias my search for themes in the data, particularly in thinking about what I value and believe is necessary for cultural connection. My standpoint had the potential to bias my search for themes, yet conversely, it also gave me a vantage point from which to view the data because I am privy to cultural nuances in language that a non-Indigenous researcher would not have picked up on. For example, one of my respondent's responses to the question 'What else do Indigenous children need to know to be connected to their culture?' was 'who they are'. My first iteration of codes from my data set included taking this response and placing it under the following codes: 'family/kin connections', 'family history/ancestry', 'land/Country', 'identity' and 'belonging'. My standpoint as a Noongar woman enabled me to see that knowledge of who you are, as an Indigenous child, is relational and based on relationships with ancestors, people, Country and the self. It is possible that a non-Indigenous standpoint would see the response 'who they are' as simply a component of identity and not as something that is fundamentally embedded in relationality. Thus, while my standpoint could be interpreted as biasing my analysis, I question whether any research is ever truly objective and value-free since the way in which we see ourselves, and the world, inevitably affect our reading and interpretation of data. Being critically aware of my standpoint instead enabled me to scrutinise my interpretation for bias.

I reflected on my standpoint by reflecting on, and identifying, my assumptions relating to cultural connection, and interrogating whether these assumptions may hold

true for survey respondents. This is suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019) when conducting reflexive thematic analysis. For example, one of the assumptions that I held about cultural connection, based on my own experiences and standpoint, was that Indigenous family would be the most important mechanism to enable cultural connection. I was cognisant, however, that for Indigenous peoples who come from Indigenous families in which there has been intergenerational cultural disconnection, family may not be as important as I assumed it would be. To ensure reflexivity, as I analysed qualitative responses, I highlighted all sections of the analysis that related to Indigenous family in the ‘mechanisms’ open-ended responses and re-read my initial codes and refined themes several times, across different days, in an effort to ensure that my assumptions were not biasing my interpretation of the data. While ‘assumptions and positionings are always part of qualitative research’ (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 595), this reflexive approach enabled me to interrogate what my assumptions were, and whether they could hold for my respondents. Critical reflexivity on my standpoint, biases and assumptions enabled me to reflect on other ways of understanding the data.

Following the fourth and fifth steps of thematic analysis articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), I then reviewed, defined and named my themes. This was a cyclical process in which I went back and forth between reading respondents’ verbatim responses, checking their alignment with my themes, refining my themes, and then again reviewing my themes. The description and analysis of my themes are discussed in detail in my Findings and Discussion chapters of this dissertation.

After completing the analysis of the qualitative components of the survey data, I then looked at the survey data set as a whole, combining both quantitative and qualitative findings to enable a richer picture of the data set. This was an important step because it combined the benefits of both quantitative and qualitative research and

provided a thick, yet nuanced, understanding of how First Nations cultural connection is understood by First Nations adult community members in Victoria who completed the survey.

## **5.5 Phase Two: Interviews**

### **5.5.1 Interview Participants**

Interview participants were First Nations young people living in Victoria, between the ages of 15 and 25, who had previously lived in OOHC. Young people were care leavers (i.e. over 18 years old and ‘aged out’ of the OOHC system), were under the age of 18 and living in permanent care with either a kinship or non-kinship carer, or had exited the OOHC system via reunification to their parent(s).

In Victoria under the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, permanent care is a legal arrangement in which custody and guardianship of a child or young person, under the age of 18, is granted to a person who is not the child’s parent (*Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic)). Thus, young people aged under 18 years who took part in this research were not under the legal guardianship of the state since permanent care legally transfers guardianship from the state to an individual or individuals.

Non-Indigenous young people, Indigenous young people aged under 15 years, those not living in Victoria, those still living in OOHC under the custody or guardianship of the state, and those who had never lived in OOHC were ineligible for participation in this research.

### **5.5.2 Participant Tasks: Interview Topic Guide**

As reflected in Figure 1 (Research design: Workflow diagram), the interview topic guide was devised after the collection and interim analysis of the survey data. The interview topic guide was developed to ensure that interview questions reflected the purpose for the interviews. Namely, the purpose of interviews was to understand how

Indigenous young people, who had previously lived in OOHC, experienced cultural connection over time, both within and outside of OOHC. The purpose was linked to the research sub-questions: ‘What is important for First Nations children to know to develop cultural connection?’, ‘What do First Nations children learn about their culture in OOHC?’, ‘How do/can First Nations children develop cultural connection?’ and ‘How can you tell if a person is connected to their First Nations culture?’

The interviews were semi-structured, thus leaving room for young people to explore issues that they wanted to discuss, while also providing a structure that would enable consistency across the interviews. The final interview topic guide related to the young persons’ feelings towards their culture, their definition and understanding of cultural connection, how they learnt about their culture while living in care, what is important for cultural connection, their understanding and experiences of cultural disconnection, and what they feel the system could do to improve young people’s sense of connection to culture while in care. The full interview topic guide is attached as Appendix E: Interview Topic Guide.

### **5.5.3 Interview Recruitment**

Ten young people were recruited for participation in interviews, including four young people who took part in interviews after being identified via the survey. At the end of the survey, young people were able to leave their phone number and indicate if they would like to be contacted by phone for an interview at a later stage. In August and September 2018, these six young people were contacted by phone (text message and phone call) to ascertain if they were still interested in completing an interview. Four responded and consented to participation in an interview. Two young people did not respond to my contact attempts. Thus, interviews proceeded with four of the young people from the survey who were aged 19–25 years.

Another six young people were recruited via the permanent care program of a partner ACCO—VACCA. At the time, this was the only permanent care program available in the state of Victoria. A senior permanent care caseworker from this program facilitated contact with the carers of young people who were still in the program and aged over 15 years. Thus, young people eligible for participation were identified by a senior caseworker from the permanent care team.

Permanent carers were first contacted by the senior caseworker to discuss the research and request their consent to be contacted by the researcher. The senior caseworker sent emails with both young people and guardian plain language statements attached so that carers and young people could make an informed decision before agreeing to be contacted by the researcher. The plain language statements are attached as Appendix B. Carers were also asked to speak to the young person or persons in their care and ask if they consented to be contacted by the researcher. Upon giving consent, contact details for carers and young people were then forwarded to me by the senior caseworker.

An initial list of contact details for 10 young people and their carers was provided to me, all of whom had given their consent to be contacted by myself as the researcher. If the phone numbers for young people were provided, the young person was contacted in the first instance; otherwise, carers were contacted as a pathway to speak to the young person about the research. Six interviews were organised with six different young people, while out of the remaining four young people on the list, three did not respond, and one carer arranged a time for the researcher to meet with the young person but then did not respond to contact attempts on the day.

All interviews were undertaken at a location of the young person's choosing, either at a local café or in their home. Four young people lived in rural Victoria at the

time of interviewing, while the remaining six young people were living in metropolitan Melbourne. If young people were aged under 18, carers' written consent was obtained (via completion of a consent form, see Appendix C) in addition to the written consent obtained from all young people (Appendix C). Copies of the signed consent forms were emailed to young people (and where applicable, their carers), along with electronic copies of the plain language statements (and where applicable, their carers), debriefing statement and support services sheet (attached as Appendix G: Interview Distress Protocol, Debriefing Statement and Support Services Sheet). To enable reciprocity, all young people who took part in an interview were provided with a A\$50 gift card of their choice (choices included Coles, Woolworths, Big W, Target, Kmart, EB games and JB Hi-Fi).

#### **5.5.4 Interview Data Collection**

All interviews were conducted between August and September 2018, and ranged in time from 60 minutes to 120 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded for data analysis purposes, and the young person (and their carers where applicable) provided written consent to do so prior to the recording being made. Given the sensitive nature of the interview topics, a distress protocol (see Appendix G: Interview Distress Protocol, Debriefing Statement and Support Services Sheet) was created, and young people were advised that they could stop the interview—and audio recorder—at any time.

While an interview topic guide was created (see Appendix E: Interview Topic Guide), and the broad themes were covered in the interview (making the interview approach semi-structured in nature), the topic guide enabled enough flexibility during the interviews to support the use of a culturally appropriate conversational technique known as 'yarning'. This technique was specifically chosen so that the interviews could be both culturally safe and non-threatening for the First Nations young people involved.

While it is rather difficult to define because of cultural differences across nation groups, broadly speaking, yarning is an Indigenous approach to interviewing that employs cultural nuances in language use and conversational style. In their article about yarning as a research method, Bardi/Indjarbardi scholar Dawn Besserab and her Botswanan colleague Bridget Ng'andu (2010) articulate that

yarning in a semi-structured interview is an informal and relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and participant journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study. Yarning is a process that requires the researcher to develop and build a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research. (p. 38)

Relatively limited literature exists about yarning as a research method or technique, in which some international scholars discuss 'story-telling' as an oral data collection technique as well (Besserab & Ng'andu, 2010; Geia et al., 2013; Lekoko, 2007). Importantly however, Besserab and Ng'andu (2010) distinguish between a social yarn and a research yarn, stating that a research yarn often begins with a social yarn whereby rapport and accountability between the researcher and the participant is established. They describe the research yarn as a 'conversation with a purpose' containing a mixture of formality and informality, which minimises power dynamics and enables the researcher and participant to speak 'person to person' (Besserab & Ng'andu, 2010).

While Besserab and Ng'andu (2010) describe yarning as a method, for my own research, I utilised yarning as a culturally appropriate interviewing technique to uphold cultural nuances in language to enable rapport, trust and accountability to be established between myself and participants, as well as an in-depth exploration of young people's time in care and their experiences of their culture both in care and outside of care. For example, in my research, interviews often began with a social yarn, engaging in topics

of interest with young people (such as hobbies or educational interests) or asking about each other's mob group(s) to locate one another, to establish rapport. At times, these conversations occurred before audio recording commenced, and at other times, they were conducted after audio recording commenced to help young people feel comfortable in yarnning while the audio recorder was on. During the research yarn, I used yarnning to respond, or ask questions, using culturally appropriate language (e.g. using the word 'mob' to refer to family); to pause after questions to enable time for reflection; and to give space for responses to questions to be told in a story-like manner, whereby young people, or myself, would return to the story in a cyclical manner. While story-telling in a wandering fashion can appear as 'transgression' away from the interview topic, Besserab and Ng'andu (2010) highlight that yarnning respects that cultural nuances in language can involve stories being told in 'a meandering route' (p. 41). This was important in my research with young people, wherein stories about cultural connection involved meandering from their biological families, to time in OOHC, to stories about lessons in schools, to their contact with their Indigenous families. By giving young people space to tell their stories, without forcibly redirecting the interview back to the interview topic guide, young people were able to tell their stories in ways that were comfortable for them, which might have helped them to 'open up' in the interview.

Given that many young people did discuss sensitive topics, such as their removal from their families and placement in OOHC, experiences of mental ill-health, suicide attempts, and bullying, debriefing occurred at the end of all interviews, and all young people were contacted soon after the interview to check in. All young people were also provided with a list of support services (see Appendix G: Interview Distress Protocol, Debriefing Statement and Support Services Sheet) at the end of the interview as well.

### 5.5.5 Interview Data Analysis

As was the case with qualitative data analysis from the survey, all interview data were analysed qualitatively in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. To reiterate Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, analysis began by gaining familiarity with the data (step 1). Transcription of interviews was outsourced to a professional transcriber,<sup>47</sup> and consequently, the first step involved checking the transcripts for accuracy and (re)reading transcripts in full. Initial coding of the transcripts commenced on an interview-by-interview basis (step 2). After initial codes were developed for all interviews, themes were then searched for on an interview-by-interview basis (step 3). After a preliminary list of themes for each interview transcript was generated, all the themes were then reviewed and refined across the interview data set (steps 4 and 5 of Braun and Clarke's, 2006, thematic analysis framework). To aid in the analysis of the qualitative interview data, the software package NVivo was used to store, and provide linkage to, the data linked to codes and themes. For the interview analysis, I used both a deductive and inductive approach to thematic analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2019) articulate that thematic analysis does not have to adhere to an 'either/or' approach concerning deductive versus inductive coding, but rather that thematic analysis can involve a combination of deductive and inductive coding approaches. In this research, to ensure alignment of themes with the cultural connection framework used in the survey (knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions), a deductive thematic analysis approach was initially used to organise the codes

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<sup>47</sup> Transcription of all interviews was outsourced to Cathy Cowley from Therapy Transcripts (<https://m.facebook.com/TherapyTranscripts/>), who specialises in transcription of interviews that contain psychology content. Therapy Transcripts is a transcription service based in the United Kingdom, which ensures professional and confidential treatment of audio recordings and transcripts. Secure Dropbox folders were used to store, and share, files between myself and Cathy Cowley.

using NVivo. Thus, codes and themes were organised according to the survey framework (knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions), but where data did not ‘fit’ within the framework, new codes outside of the survey framework were created. The creation of new codes outside of the survey framework sat within an inductive, semantic approach to thematic analysis, in which codes and themes were generated from young people’s words.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach and methods used to conceptualise, design, undertake and analyse this research. It has highlighted that combining quantitative and qualitative research methods can strengthen the overall research approach. I have articulated the imperativeness for this research to privilege Indigenous voices, and better understand the lived experiences of Indigenous young people who have experienced OOHC. At all stages, I engaged in processes of critical reflection and reflexivity. As previously articulated, this included identifying and interrogating my assumptions, and critically reflecting on whether these assumptions held true for Indigenous adults and young people in this research (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This enabled critical reflection on my assumptions and biases, as well as critical interpretation of the data and the generation of themes that acknowledged diverse influences and impacts on young people’s stories, including the influence of OOHC. The next chapters discuss the findings from this project and what insights they offer into how Indigenous peoples in this research understand and experience cultural connection, both within and outside of OOHC contexts.

## Chapter 6: Survey Findings

This chapter discusses the survey findings, which aimed to ascertain how cultural connection is understood by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult community members<sup>48</sup> living in Victoria, as it relates to OOHC. Guided by the overarching research question, *‘How is cultural connection understood and experienced by First Nations peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, Australia?’*, a series of sub-questions were used to elicit further insight into cultural connection. These sub-questions were devised on the basis of my conceptual understanding of cultural connection as involving four domains—knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions—that enable, and evidence, cultural connection for First Nations children. These sub-questions were as follows:

- ‘What is important for First Nations children to know to develop cultural connection?’ (knowledges)
- ‘How do/can First Nations children develop cultural connection?’ (mechanisms)
- ‘How can you tell if a person is connected to their First Nations culture?’ (feelings and actions)

The chapter begins by providing an overview of community member demographics, highlighting the heterogeneity of the First Nations adult community members living in Victoria who responded to the survey. The findings are then structured according to the four domains of cultural connection that I conceptualised, and included, in the survey: knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions. The survey captured quantitative and qualitative data. Knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions were measured using Likert-scale, closed questions. Open-ended items were

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<sup>48</sup> Survey participants are referred to as ‘community members’ throughout this chapter to re-centre their positionality, not merely as participants in this research but as Indigenous peoples with subjectivities, cultural knowledges and expertise vital to enhanced understandings of cultural connection.

included to provide community members the opportunity to record additional knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions. The findings evidence the personal, subjective and unique nature of cultural connection, as well as supporting the idea included in my conceptual framework that cultural connection is developed over time. Importantly, the findings also speak back against the notion of judging an Indigenous person's sense of connection to culture against a set of actions and instead reinforces the idea that connection to culture is deeply individual and dependent on Indigenous peoples' subjectivities. The chapter concludes with a discussion of cultural connection as a construct from the perspectives of First Nations community members who completed the survey.

## **6.1 Community Member Demographics**

In total, 199 survey responses were received, with 179 responses included in the analysis,<sup>49</sup> while 20 responses in which only demographic information was recorded were excluded. After initial examination of the responses in the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 25.0 (v25), responses up until question 9 (which only recorded demographic information) were excluded. Any community members' responses not progressing beyond question 9 were deemed not to have fully engaged with the survey, having only provided limited demographic information, and thus, their responses were not included for analysis.

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<sup>49</sup> This falls short of the target survey responses desired ( $n = 250$ ), as stated in Chapter 5 (methodology). However, the number of responses received, and analysed, was sufficient to enable robust analysis.

Table 2 (below) provides an overview of community members' demographics, including Indigenous status,<sup>50</sup> age, Elder status,<sup>51</sup> gender identity, lived experience of OOHC, and highest level of educational attainment.

**Table 2**

*Community member demographics*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Per cent</b>
<i>Indigenous status</i>	Aboriginal only	174	97.2
	Torres Strait Islander only	1	0.6
	Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	4	2.2
	Total	179	100.0
<i>Age</i>	18–24	28	15.6
	25–34	44	24.6
	35–44	45	25.1
	45–54	31	17.3
	55–64	20	11.2
	65+	7	3.9
	Not stated	4	2.2
Total	179	100.0	
<i>Elder status</i>	Yes	53	29.6
	No	119	66.5
	Not stated	7	3.9
	Total	179	100
<i>Gender identity</i>	Female	121	67.6
	Male	30	16.8
	Non-binary	2	1.1
	Not stated	26	14.5
	Total	179	100
<i>Previously lived in OOHC</i>	Yes	23	12.8
	No	127	70.9
	Not stated	29	16.2
	Total	179	100.0
<i>Currently work/volunteer involvement with OOHC</i>	Yes	59	33.0
	No	85	47.5
	Not stated	35	19.6
	Total	179	100.0

<sup>50</sup> Indigenous status was determined through self-identification in response to the closed question 'Are you Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?'

<sup>51</sup> Elder status was determined by self-identification using a closed question with 'yes' and 'no' response options. Community members were asked to indicate whether they were an Elder by answering the question 'Are you an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Elder and recognised by your community as such?' In Australia, there is no national consensus on who can be determined as an Elder. Instead, Elder status is determined by the respective Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community that a person belongs to. Elders who are recognised by their community typically possess 'cultural authority on behalf of [their] nation' group (AIATSIS, 2020, p. 17).

<i>Highest level of educational attainment</i>	Year 11 and below	21	11.7
	Year 12 or equivalent	16	8.9
	Further education—TAFE	67	37.4
	Further education—Tertiary, undergraduate	20	11.2
	Further education—Tertiary, postgraduate	27	15.1
	Not stated	28	15.6
	Total	179	100.0

As highlighted in Table 2 (above), the sample was skewed towards younger community members; 40.2% of community members were aged between 18 and 34. Community members also possessed higher rates of formal educational qualifications; 72.6% of community members possessed year 12 (or equivalent) qualifications or above. Few Torres Strait Islander community members completed the survey.

There was also an overrepresentation of female community members in this survey; 79.1% ( $n = 121$ ) of community members identified as female (out of the 153 community members who indicated a gender identity).

Interpretation of the Elder demographic variable needs to be treated with caution. While 53 (29.4%) community members identified as Elders, 12 of the community members who identified as Elders were aged between 19 and 31 years. While Elder status is not restricted by age, it is typically conferred on older persons who possess seniority within their community (McConchie, 2003). It is possible that the question was misread and therefore answered incorrectly.

Other demographic information collected from community members included their postcode (to ascertain geographically where they were residing in Victoria), parent/guardian status to a child aged under 18 within their household,<sup>52</sup> and personal

<sup>52</sup> This demographic variable was excluded from analysis because the wording ('Are you the parent or guardian of any dependent children, under the age of 18, currently living in your household?') reflected household composition, rather than parenting status (see Appendix D: Survey). This wording excluded parents of non-resident dependent children and adults.

income. Community members resided in a range of metropolitan and regional areas in Victoria, from central Melbourne to Moe, Swan Hill and Bendigo. Income levels ranged; 35.6% of community members ( $n = 54$ ) had a weekly personal income of A\$1,000 or more.<sup>53</sup>

### 6.1.1 Indigenous Diversity, Mob and Community Groups

Indigenous diversity was evident through the various communities and/or mob groups that community members identified with. Community members stated that they belonged to at least 47 different communities and/or mob groups throughout Australia, which is reflective of the interstate migration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to Victoria, as noted in the 2016 Census (ABS, 2016). Just under half (42.4%) of community members identified with a mob or community group with Country ties outside of the state of Victoria. The first stated community/mob group with the largest number of community members was Yorta Yorta ( $n = 30$ , 16.8%), followed by Gunditjmara ( $n = 14$ , 7.8%). Both Yorta Yorta and Gunditjmara communities are based in Victoria, in the Shepparton/Goulbourn Murray regions and Gippsland regions, respectively. Nineteen community members either did not know, or did not state, which mob group they belonged to ( $n = 19$ , 10.6%). The first community or mob community members identified with is detailed below in Table 3, displayed by frequency and percentage, in alphabetical order of community members' stated communities/mob groups.

**Table 3**

*First stated community and/or mob group community members identified with*

<b>Community and/or mob group</b>	<b>State/Territory location of mob group</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Per cent</b>
Alyawarr	NT	3	1.7
Arrernte	NT	1	0.6

<sup>53</sup> See Appendix D: Survey for information on the other income bands included in the survey.

Awabakal	NSW	1	0.6
Badu Island	QLD	1	0.6
Bangerang	VIC	4	2.2
Barapa Barapa	VIC/NSW	2	1.1
Barkindji	NSW	4	2.2
Biripi	NSW	1	0.6
Bundjalung	NSW	2	1.1
Dharug	NSW	2	1.1
Dja Dja Wurrung	VIC	2	1.1
Djungan	QLD	1	0.6
Gourrnjanyuk	VIC/NSW	1	0.6
Gunai <sup>54</sup>	VIC	6	3.4
Gunditjmarra	VIC	14	7.8
Illawarra <sup>55</sup>	NSW	1	0.6
Jingli	NT	1	0.6
Juru	QLD	1	0.6
Kaantju	QLD	1	0.6
Kamilaroi	NSW/QLD	6	3.4
Koori <sup>56</sup>	VIC/NSW	2	1.1
Kurnai <sup>57</sup>	VIC	1	0.6
Latji Latji	VIC	1	0.6
Murri <sup>58</sup>	QLD	2	1.1
Mutti Mutti	NSW	2	1.1
Ngamba	NSW	2	1.1
Ngarrindjeri	SA	3	1.7
Noongar <sup>59</sup>	WA	9	5.0
palawa <sup>60</sup>	TAS	7	3.9
Quandamooka	QLD	1	0.6
Ramindjeri	SA	1	0.6
Taungurung	VIC	3	1.7
Thungutti	NSW	1	0.6

<sup>54</sup> The nation Gunai is often accompanied with ‘Kurnai’ (i.e. Gunai/Kurnai, Gunaikurnai) since both names refer to the same nation (Gunai/Kurnai nation) of south-eastern Australia, whose territory occupies most of Gippsland and the southern slopes of the Victorian Alps (VACCA, n.d.; VACL, 2020). However, Gunai and Kurnai are listed separately here because some community members identified solely as ‘Gunai’ (without mentioning Kurnai), while other community members identified solely as ‘Kurnai’ (without reference to Gunai).

<sup>55</sup> Illawarra is a region in New South Wales. It is not a recognised First Nations mob or community group in Australia.

<sup>56</sup> The word ‘Koori’ does not refer to a specific mob group, but instead refers to a pan-Aboriginal community that consists of Aboriginal peoples from nations throughout the states of Victoria and New South Wales.

<sup>57</sup> See above in footnote number 52.

<sup>58</sup> The word ‘Murri’ does not refer to a specific mob group, but instead refers to a pan-Aboriginal community that consists of Aboriginal peoples from nations throughout the state of Queensland.

<sup>59</sup> Noongar is a nation group consisting of Noongar/Nyungar peoples from several regions throughout south Western Australia, such as Ballardong, Whadjuk, Yued and Wagyl Kaip southern region (South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, n.d.).

<sup>60</sup> The palawa language, palawa kani, does not use capital letters. For more information, see Harman (2018).

Tjapakai	QLD	1	0.6
Wadawurrung	VIC	1	0.6
Walpiri	NT	1	0.6
Wathaurung	VIC	1	0.6
Watti Watti	VIC/NSW	2	1.1
Wemba Wemba	VIC/NSW	9	5.0
Wiradjuri	NSW	11	6.1
Worimi	NSW	1	0.6
Wotjobaluk	VIC	1	0.6
Wurundjeri	VIC	5	2.8
Yamatji	WA	4	2.2
Yidinji	QLD	1	0.6
Yorta Yorta	VIC	30	16.8
Yuin	NSW	2	1.1
Don't know/Not stated	N/A	19	10.6
Total		179	100.0

While most community members ( $n = 110$ , 61.5%) identified with a single community or mob group, 36 community members (20.1%) identified with two communities or mob groups, while 14 community members identified with three or more communities or mob groups (7.8%). Most community members ( $n = 139$ , 69.8%) did not currently live in their community of origin, and only 18.1% ( $n = 36$ ) of community members currently lived in their community of origin.

### **6.1.2 Professional or Voluntary Involvement with the Out-of-Home-Care Sector**

Of the 144 community members who provided responses, 59 (41.0%) were working or volunteering in roles that involved the OOHC sector. Demographic information for community members currently working or volunteering in roles involving OOHC, compared to those not currently working or volunteering in roles involving OOHC, is displayed below in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Demographic information for community members who currently work/volunteer, and do not currently work/volunteer, in OOHC*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Group A: Works/volunteers in OOHC</b>		<b>Group B: Does not work/volunteer in OOHC</b>	
		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
<i>Indigenous status</i>	Aboriginal only	57	96.6	83	97.6
	Torres Strait Islander only	0	0	1	1.2
	Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	2	3.4	1	1.2
	Total	59	100	85	100
<i>Age</i>	18–24	3	5.1	19	22.4
	25–34	16	27.2	19	22.4
	35–44	19	32.3	18	21.3
	45–54	11	18.7	15	16.7
	55–64	7	11.9	9	10.7
	65+	1	1.7	5	6.0
	Not stated	2	3.4	0	0
	Total	59	100	85	100
<i>Elder status</i>	Yes	21	35.6	27	31.8
	No	38	64.4	55	64.7
	Not stated	0	0	3	3.5
	Total	59	100	85	100
<i>Gender identity</i>	Female	50	84.7	62	72.9
	Male	9	15.3	21	24.7
	Non-binary	0	0	2	2.4
	Not stated	0	0	0	0
	Total	59	100	85	100
<i>Previously lived in OOHC</i>	Yes	11	18.6	11	12.9
	No	48	81.4	74	87.1
	Not stated	0	0	0	0
	Total	59	100	85	100
<i>Highest level of educational attainment</i>	Year 11 and below	7	11.9	13	15.4
	Year 12 or equivalent	5	8.5	10	11.8
	Further education—TAFE	29	49.1	35	41.2
	Further education—Tertiary, undergraduate	9	15.3	10	11.8
	Further education—Tertiary, postgraduate	8	13.6	17	20.0
	Not stated	1	1.7	0	0
	Total	59	100	85	100

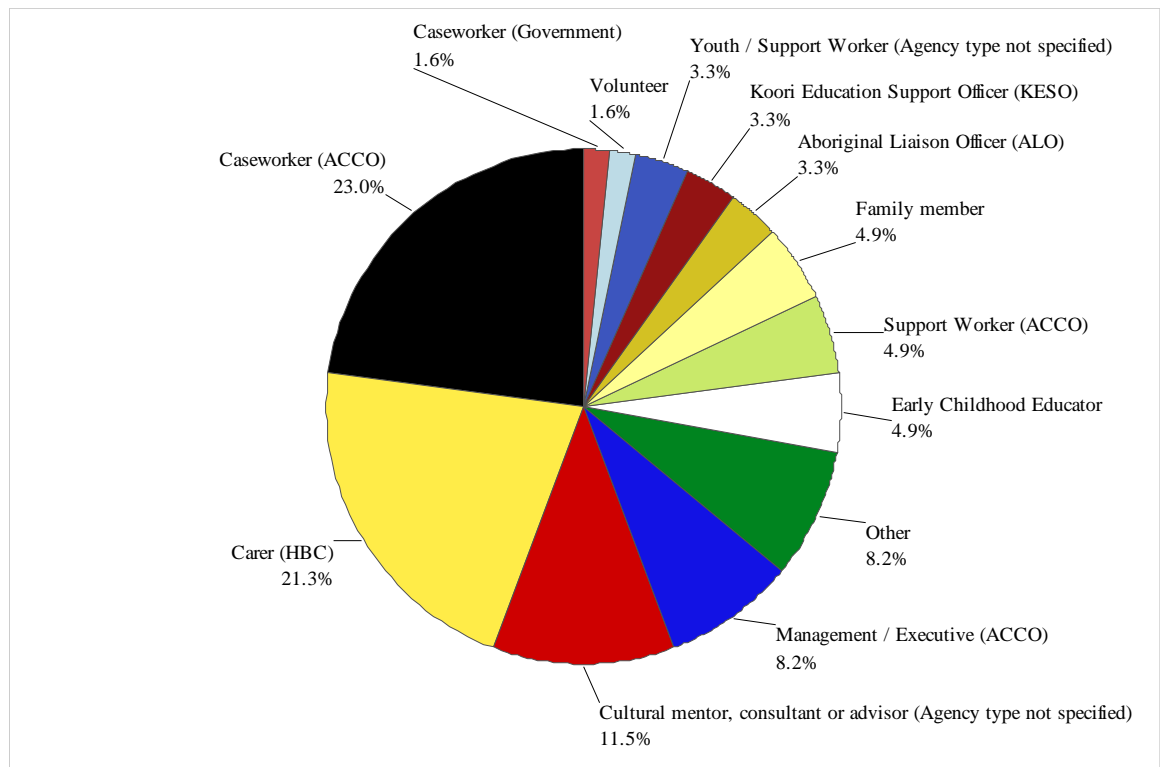
Community members were also asked what type of involvement they currently had with the OOHC sector. Professional or voluntary roles in the OOHC sector varied; the largest category of community members who had professional or voluntary involvement with the OOHC sector ( $n = 22$ , 36.1%) worked at an ACCO. Roles at ACCOs varied from administrators, support workers and caseworkers to team leaders, executives, chairpersons and board members. Only one community member (1.6%) stated that they were a caseworker at a government agency. Two community members worked as youth support workers (3.3%). Role in OOHC, and organisation type, were unknown for five community members (8.2%).

Other roles included being a carer, and 13 community members indicated that they were carers (21.3%). Most were kinship carers ( $n = 12$ , 19.7%). Another three community members did not have custody of children living in OOHC, but were family members (i.e. grandmothers, Elders and cousins) to Indigenous children or young people living in OOHC ( $n = 3$ , 4.9%). Seven community members (11.5%) were cultural consultants, advisors or mentors. One community member (1.6%) stated that they volunteered in OOHC.

Some community members worked in children's services and hospitals, and indicated that they interacted with Indigenous children within child protection and OOHC systems. Five community members (8.2%) worked in education, in roles including Koori education support workers, Koori playgroup workers and early childhood educators in Indigenous or non-Indigenous specific roles. Further roles ( $n = 9$ , 14.8%) included youth workers, support workers, Aboriginal liaison officers and undefined roles at non-descript organisations. This information is displayed visually below in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Community members' professional or voluntary involvement with the OOHC sector*



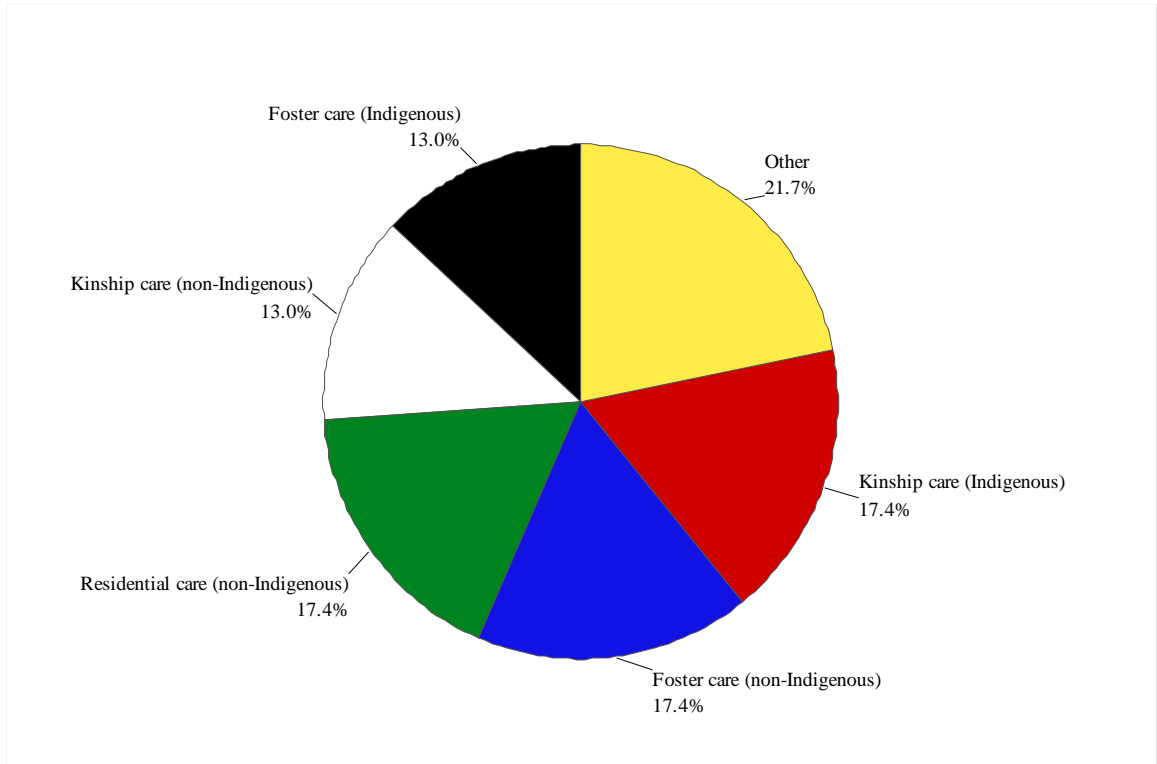
### 6.1.3 Lived Experiences of Out-of-Home-Care

While most community members ( $n = 127, 70.9\%$ ) had never lived in OOHC, 23 community members (12.8%) had lived experience of OOHC, in kinship and kith (friends) care, foster care and residential care settings. To account for people who experienced more than one placement type, community members had the option to select multiple placement types in the survey. One community member indicated that they had experienced kinship care, foster care and residential care. Of the 23 community members who had previously lived in OOHC, 21.7% ( $n = 5$ ) had experienced other placement types, such as boarding schools, hostels and religious institutions (Catholic). Inspection of descriptive statistics showed that the ages of community members who had experienced 'other' placement types were between 44 and 62 years. Thus, it is possible that these five community members were members of the Stolen Generations.

Information about the placement types experienced by community members who had lived in OOHC is depicted visually below in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*Placement types experienced by community members with lived experiences of OOHC*



Of the 23 community members who had a lived experience of OOHC, seven were young people between the ages of 20 and 25, who were eligible for follow-up interviews<sup>61</sup> (see Chapter 5, Methodology, for further information about recruitment). All young people with a lived experience of OOHC had previously lived in either kinship or foster care, with either Indigenous or non-Indigenous carers.

#### **6.1.4 Summary of Community Member Demographics**

Community members represented a subset of the Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, from at least 47 diverse mob groups and Countries

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<sup>61</sup> At the end of the survey, six of these young people provided their phone numbers and consented to being contacted for an interview.

throughout Australia. The sample was skewed to younger community members (aged 18–34) and female community members. One-third of community members possessed professional or voluntary experience with the OOHC sector.

## **6.2 Conceptualising Cultural Connection: Knowledges, Mechanisms, Feelings and Actions**

The next sections present the survey findings about cultural connection. This conceptualisation posits that cultural connection consists of *knowledges* that are important to cultural connection, *mechanisms* that facilitate the development of cultural connection, *feelings* held by an individual, and *actions* undertaken by that individual that may evidence their connection to their First Nations culture. What follows is a presentation of quantitative and qualitative survey findings in relation to knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions.

## **6.3 Knowledges That are Important to Cultural Connection**

This section reports total mean scores for nine knowledges items, and group comparisons of nine knowledges items between sub-groups with and without professional or voluntary experience of OOHC. This section is not specific to OOHC contexts, but instead reports findings whereby community members were asked to answer questions relating to the importance of certain knowledge forms to cultural connection for Indigenous children *in general*.

Based on the research sub-question ‘What is important for First Nations children to know to develop cultural connection?’, community members were asked to indicate how important nine pre-determined knowledges (mob/ancestry, history, land/Country, spirituality, totem, traditions, music, food and language) were to cultural connection on a 5-point Likert scale wherein 1 = *not at all important* and 5 = *extremely important* (see

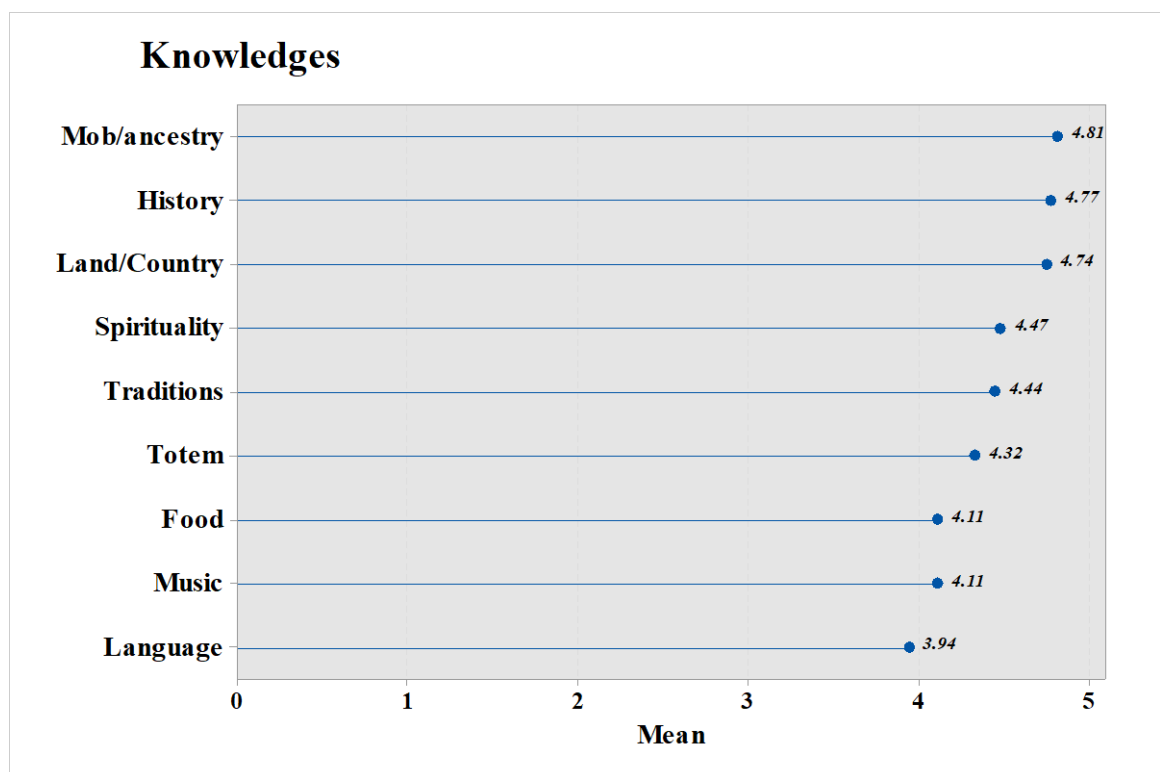
question 9, Appendix D: Survey). Community members also had the option to enter open-ended text in the ‘other’ category.

### 6.3.1 Likert Scale Analysed as Interval Data

The mean response for each of the nine knowledges included in the survey is displayed below in Figure 5; 179 valid responses were received and analysed.

**Figure 5**

*Mean responses for the nine knowledges in survey*



As evident in Figure 5 (above), responses for most knowledges were skewed to the important/very important end of the scale (i.e. a rating of either 4 or 5).

‘Mob/ancestry’ had the highest mean response ( $\bar{x} = 4.81$ ), followed by ‘history’ ( $\bar{x} = 4.77$ ) and ‘land/Country’ ( $\bar{x} = 4.74$ ). Interestingly, ‘language’ was least rated by community members as extremely important to cultural connection. Open-ended text responses in the ‘other’ category ( $n = 89$ ) described additional knowledge forms that may be important to cultural connection. As indicated by more than one community

member, responses included cultural norms and values, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander politics, community, relationality (including lore), cultural artefacts and expressions, and ‘cultural strengths’. The importance of knowing one’s mob and ancestry was also reiterated in open-text responses (e.g. ‘Family, kinship relationships’ and ‘Knowing the value and importance of family, extended family and kinship networks and being able to identify who these people are’).

### **6.3.2 Group Comparison of Community Members With and Without Current Professional or Voluntary Experience of Out-of-Home-Care**

To compare groups on the nine knowledges items, responses to the Likert scale were recoded into binary variables (0 = not rated as extremely important and 1 = rated as extremely important) to better showcase statistical discrimination. The proportion of community members who indicated that each knowledge was ‘extremely important’ was calculated in percentage terms. Community member groups included those with and without current professional or voluntary experiences of OOHC to enable insight into how cultural connection is understood for Indigenous children in OOHC contexts. This was undertaken to provide better insight into the research question ‘*How is cultural connection understood and experienced by First Nations peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, Australia?*’, namely, how cultural connection is understood in OOHC contexts in Victoria versus how it is understood outside of these contexts. This was important given that the survey questions relating to knowledges were worded to reflect the importance of certain knowledges *in general*, rather than specifically in OOHC contexts. The number of community members with current professional or voluntary experience in OOHC ( $n = 59$ ) met statistical requirements for comparison against those without current professional or voluntary experience in OOHC ( $n = 85$ ).

Comparisons between groups—using the percentage proportions calculated for the recoded binary variables—were then undertaken via Fischer’s exact tests (Champion, 1981), using Minitab version 19, to determine if differences between those community members who currently work or volunteer in OOHC, and those who currently do not, were statistically significant for the nine knowledges. The Fischer’s exact test was chosen over a *t*-test as it compares proportions (whereas *t*-tests compare averages) (Champion, 1981), and thus, it was more appropriate for the type of data (skewed) I had. Table 5 (below) shows that those who rated knowledges as ‘extremely important’, expressed as group percentages, were higher for current OOHC professionals/volunteers across all knowledge forms.

Those who had current professional or voluntary experiences in the OOHC sector were more inclined to rate certain knowledges as more important compared with those without current professional or volunteer experiences in OOHC, with statistically significant differences evident for spirituality ( $p \leq .01$ ), traditions ( $p \leq .05$ ), totem ( $p \leq .05$ ) and food ( $p \leq .01$ ).

**Table 5**

*Differences between community members who currently work/volunteer, and do not currently work/volunteer, in OOHC for knowledges, displaying results of Fischer’s exact test*

Knowledges category	Currently works/volunteers (total = 59) in OOHC and does not (total = 85) comparison		Difference			
	<i>n</i>	%	Estimate	95% CI	<i>p</i> -value	
Mob/ancestry	Works/volunteers in OOHC	53	89.8	9.8	-1.7, 21.3	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	68	80.0			
Language	Works/volunteers in OOHC	28	47.5	9.8	-6.6, 26.2	>.05

	Does not work/volunteer	32	37.6			
Spirituality	Works/volunteers in OOHC	44	74.6	21.6	6.3, 37.0	**
	Does not work/volunteer	45	52.9			
Traditions	Works/volunteers in OOHC	41	69.5	17.7	1.9, 33.6	*
	Does not work/volunteer	44	51.8			
History	Works/volunteers in OOHC	52	88.1	8.1	-3.7, 20.0	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	68	80.0			
Land/Country	Works/volunteers in OOHC	48	81.4	1.4	-11.7, 14.4	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	68	80.0			
Totem	Works/volunteers in OOHC	42	71.2	18.2	2.6, 33.9	*
	Does not work/volunteer	45	52.9			
Music	Works/volunteers in OOHC	34	57.6	15.3	-1.1, 31.7	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	36	42.4			
Food	Works/volunteers in OOHC	35	59.3	21.7	5.5, 37.9	**
	Does not work/volunteer	32	37.6			

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

What follows is a presentation of the qualitative findings for the knowledges domain of cultural connection.

### 6.3.3 Kinship and Ancestry Knowledges

Despite the wide array of knowledges considered important to cultural connection, the importance of knowing one's kinship and ancestry ties was highlighted in the open-ended question 'What is the most important thing children need to know in order to be connected to culture?' Thematic analysis identified that most community members spoke about the need for children to know their kinship lines (their family, extended family, Elders, and mob) and their personal ancestry (i.e. their family's

history) to be connected to culture. The dominance of the 'kinship and ancestry' theme supports the quantitative findings from Figure 5 and is indicative of the importance of Indigenous children knowing their family, kinship and ancestry to be connected to culture.

Responses highlighted the importance of Indigenous children knowing their family connections: 'Who their extended family is, and be able to connect with them and belong' (Community member #80);<sup>62</sup> 'Family connections' (Community member #70); 'Knowing the value and importance of family, extended family and kinship networks and being able to identify who these people are' (Community member #146).

Others highlighted the need to be involved with family to possess knowledge of family, demonstrating the overlap between some knowledges and mechanisms that can foster cultural connection: 'Family, kinship, relationships . . . knowledge comes through practicing these . . . so they have to actually be involved in their community/family to be connected to culture' (Community member #8).

Indeed, many concepts are represented in community members' responses concerning the importance of kinship and ancestry knowledges in open-ended responses to the question 'What is the most important thing Indigenous children need to know in order to be connected to culture?': 'Their family history, family connections, where they fit in. They need to know enough of their family tree as possible' (Community member #4); 'Where they come from, the name of their tribe/mob, their totem, their families, their community and their ancestral lands' (Community member #36); 'Their mob, their connection to their country, and their kinship and kinship structures. Being known to your mob and knowing your mob provides a strong sense of belonging and a strong

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<sup>62</sup> To protect community members' privacy, mob groups and all other identifying information are redacted to safeguard against the risk of identification of community members.

proud identity’ (Community member #75); ‘About their mob and it’s ancestors and their family history and traditions’ (Community member #53).

Some community members also highlighted the ways in which lack of knowledge about family can fracture a person’s sense of identity, belonging, and connection to culture in the future: ‘In general though, an Indigenous person who is disconnected from culture usually feels a great sense of loss and lack of belonging, they often do not know their mob, and often do not know many if any family. They are insecure in their identity and do not feel confident in talking about anything culturally’ (Community member #9).

As part of knowledge of kinship and ancestry, community members also emphasised the importance of identity, that is, for Indigenous children to know ‘who they are’, ‘where they come from’ and ‘who they belong to’. Interestingly, the importance of knowing your kinship, mob and Country ties concurrently speak to identity, connection and relationality, evidencing the murkiness of cultural connection as a construct. Knowledge of identity was interrelated with ‘family/kinship, mob/community & Country ties’, and community members emphasised the importance of Indigenous children knowing who they are, where they come from, and who they belong to: ‘Who they are and where they are from—from this, everything else can flow/follow’ (Community member #8); ‘Where they come from and the characteristics of belonging to that place letting them know that place and mob is theirs’ (Community member #14); ‘Who they are. What mob they are connected to and who their family are’ (Community member #38); ‘Where they come from, who they belong to and have a strong sense of self identity’ (Community member #54).

### **6.3.4 Summary of Knowledges That are Important to Cultural Connection**

Community members indicated that a range of knowledges are important—or indeed, extremely important—to cultural connection. Both the quantitative and qualitative results highlighted the pertinence of relational knowledges—such as knowledge of kinship, mob and ancestry—to cultural connection. A lack of conceptual distinction between some knowledges (i.e. family, kinship) and mechanisms (i.e. relationships, being involved in their community/family) was also evident in community members' responses, and overlap was found between the constructs 'kinship', 'ancestry' and 'relationships'. From an Indigenous standpoint, these relational kinship and ancestry knowledges provide Indigenous peoples with an understanding of 'who they are', 'where they belong' and 'how to be' in relation to Indigenous peoples, family, mob, community, Country, ancestors, spirits, animals and totems (Graham, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2017). Community members with current professional or voluntary experiences of OOHC considered all nine knowledges included in the survey (i.e. mob/ancestry, history, land/Country, spirituality, totem, traditions, music, food, and language) to be of greater importance for Indigenous children than those community members without current professional or voluntary experiences of OOHC. How these knowledges are best learned or acquired by children, in general, is the focus of the next section.

### **6.4 Mechanisms to Develop Cultural Connection**

This section reports total mean scores for 14 mechanisms items, and group comparisons of 14 mechanisms items between sub-groups with and without professional or voluntary experience of OOHC. The mechanisms aspect of the survey operated on the understanding, derived from previous literature (see Chapter 4), that culture is learned via a range of mechanisms, namely, via enculturation and immersion

in culture (i.e. living/growing up within the culture) (Berry, 2014; Kruger & Tomasello, 1996; Pitman et al., 1989). It was expected that while Indigenous children can develop connection through a range of mechanisms, mechanisms relating to socialisation with Indigenous peoples—such as growing up with Indigenous family, relationships with Elders or mentors, and spending time with community—would best enable the development of cultural connection for Indigenous children. This section is not specific to OOHC contexts, but instead reports findings whereby community members were asked to answer questions relating to the importance of certain mechanisms to cultural connection for Indigenous children *in general*.

In answer to the research sub-question ‘How do/can First Nations children develop cultural connection?’, community members indicated how important 14 pre-determined mechanisms were to cultural connection on a 5-point Likert scale wherein 1 = *not at all important* and 5 = *extremely important*. These 14 pre-determined mechanisms were:

- growing up with Indigenous family (i.e. being raised by Indigenous parent(s) or family)
- living on Country (i.e. the Country where your kinship and ancestry ties come from)
- spending time in community of origin (i.e. in the community where your kinship and ancestry ties come from)
- spending time in local community (i.e. the community where you live, as distinct from the community where your kinship and ancestry ties come from)
- spending time on Country (i.e. the Country where your kinship and ancestry ties come from)
- having a relationship with an Elder

- having an Indigenous mentor or role model
- having Indigenous friends who are also family
- having Indigenous friends who are not related
- using ACCOs
- participating in traditional practices
- participating in cultural celebrations/events
- watching Indigenous television (TV) or films
- listening to and/or playing Indigenous music or instruments.

Community members also had the option to enter open-ended text in the ‘other’ category.

#### **6.4.1 Likert Scale Analysed as Interval Data**

The mean response for each of the 14 mechanisms included in the survey is displayed below in Figure 6; 157 valid responses were received and analysed. Figure 6 (below) shows that community members rated a range of mechanisms as important or extremely important to cultural connection for Indigenous children; eight mechanisms (out of 14) had a mean rating between ‘important’ (i.e. a rating of 4) and ‘extremely important’ (i.e. a rating of 5).

**Figure 6**

*Mean responses for the 14 mechanisms in survey*

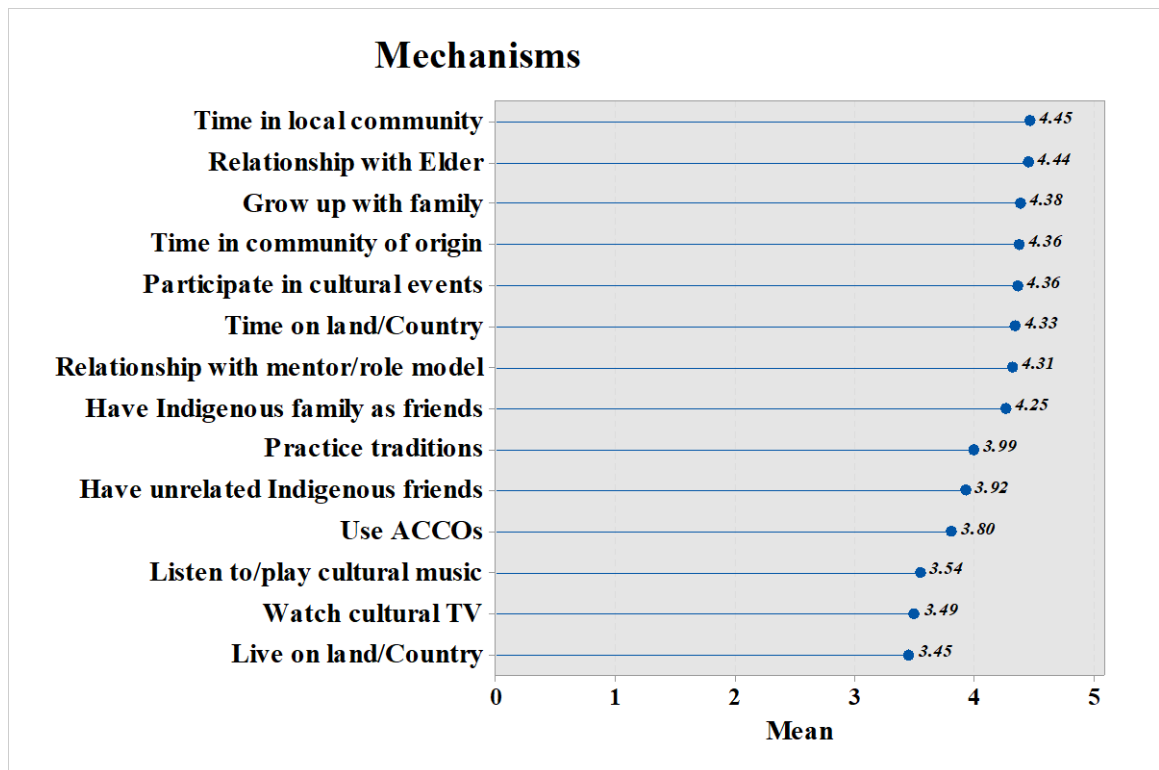


Figure 6 (above) indicates that community members were more likely to rate relational mechanisms<sup>63</sup>—whereby Indigenous children have the opportunity develop cultural connection through relationships with Indigenous peoples (i.e. time in community [local and/or community of origin], relationship with an Elder, and growing up with Indigenous family)—as more important in comparison to those mechanisms that do not involve a direct relationship with an Indigenous person (i.e. watching cultural TV, listen to/play cultural music). Interestingly, while ‘time on Country’ had a mean rating of 4.33 (i.e. between ‘important’ and ‘extremely important’), ‘living on

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<sup>63</sup> While some mechanisms may appear to involve relationships with Indigenous peoples, such as ‘time on land/Country’ or ‘practise traditions’, theoretically, these activities can occur in isolation from other Indigenous peoples, detached from their cultural context (e.g. practising traditions in a setting with non-Indigenous people, such as a school). Caution has been applied in interpreting which mechanisms include relational practices (i.e. relationship with Elder, Indigenous friends, time in community), and thus, some mechanisms that may include relational practices have not been defined herein as exclusively relational mechanisms.

Country' ( $\bar{x} = 3.45$ ) was considered the least important mechanism. This may evidence community members' awareness of urbanisation, migration and dispossession from traditional Country, particularly given that 42.4% of community members identified with a mob or community group with Country ties outside of the state of Victoria.

Open-ended text responses in the 'other' category ( $n = 58$ ) described additional mechanisms that may be important to cultural connection. As indicated by more than one community member, these included relationships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people; learning culture by being shown and nurtured; being involved, accepted and included in community; formal learning; and positive representations of culture.

#### **6.4.2 Group Comparison of Community Members With and Without Current Professional or Voluntary Experience of Out-of-Home-Care**

As with the 'knowledges' domain findings, since most of the mean responses for mechanisms were also skewed to the 'important' and 'extremely important' upper end of the Likert scale, the 14 mechanisms were recoded into binary variables (where 0 = not rated as extremely important and 1 = rated as extremely important) to better showcase statistical discrimination. The proportion of community members who indicated that each mechanism was 'extremely important' was calculated in percentage terms. Community member groups included those with and without current professional or voluntary experiences of OOHC to enable insight into how cultural connection is understood for Indigenous children in OOHC contexts.

Fischer's exact tests were used to determine whether differences between those community members who currently work or volunteer in OOHC, and those who do not, were statistically significant for the 14 mechanisms. Table 6 (below) shows that those who had current professional or voluntary experiences in the OOHC sector were more

inclined to rate certain mechanisms as more important compared with those without current professional or volunteer experiences in OOHC, with statistically significant differences evident for the mechanisms ‘grow up with Indigenous family’ ( $p \leq .01$ ), ‘have unrelated Indigenous friends’ ( $p \leq .01$ ), ‘live on Country’ ( $p \leq .05$ ), ‘watch cultural TV’ ( $p \leq .01$ ), ‘listen to/play cultural music’ ( $p \leq .01$ ) and ‘use ACCOs’ ( $p \leq .05$ ).

**Table 6**

*Differences between community members who currently work/volunteer, and do not currently work/volunteer, in OOHC for mechanisms, displaying results of Fischer’s exact test*

Mechanisms category	Currently works/volunteers (total = 59) in OOHC and does not (total = 85) comparison		Difference			
		<i>n</i>	%	Estimate	95% CI	<i>p</i> -value
Grow up with Indigenous family	Works/volunteers in OOHC	42	71.2	21.8	6.1, 37.5	**
	Does not work/volunteer	42	49.4			
Have Indigenous family as friends	Works/volunteers in OOHC	37	62.7	15.7	-0.6, 31.9	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	40	47.1			
Have unrelated Indigenous friends	Works/volunteers in OOHC	27	45.8	23.4	7.9, 38.9	**
	Does not work/volunteer	19	22.4			
Relationship with mentor/role model	Works/volunteers in OOHC	35	59.3	8.7	-7.7, 25.2	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	43	50.6			
Relationship with Elder	Works/volunteers in OOHC	41	69.5	11.8	-3.9, 27.6	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	49	57.6			
Time in local community	Works/volunteers in OOHC	40	67.8	5.4	-10.3, 21.2	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	53	62.4			

Time in community of origin	Works/volunteers in OOHC	41	69.5	16.6	0.7, 32.4	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	45	52.9			
Time on Country	Works/volunteers in OOHC	38	64.4	13.8	-2.4, 30.0	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	43	50.6			
Live on Country	Works/volunteers in OOHC	17	28.8	15.9	2.3, 29.5	*
	Does not work/volunteer	11	12.9			
Practise traditions	Works/volunteers in OOHC	28	47.5	16.9	0.8, 32.9	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	26	30.6			
Watch cultural TV	Works/volunteers in OOHC	22	37.3	25.5	11.4, 39.6	***
	Does not work/volunteer	10	11.8			
Listen to/play cultural music	Works/volunteers in OOHC	21	35.6	22.7	8.5, 36.8	**
	Does not work/volunteer	11	12.9			
Participate in cultural events	Works/volunteers in OOHC	37	62.7	9.8	-6.5, 26.0	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	45	52.9			
Use ACCOs	Works/volunteers in OOHC	29	49.2	20.9	5.0, 36.9	*
	Does not work/volunteer	24	28.2			

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Similar to the trend found for ‘knowledges’ in Table 5, Table 6 (above) shows that a higher proportion of community members with current OOHC professional or voluntary experience rated all 14 mechanisms as ‘extremely important’ compared with community members without OOHC professional or voluntary experience. Notably, more community members with professional/volunteer experience in OOHC considered Indigenous family (‘growing up with Indigenous family’,  $p \leq .01$ ) and Indigenous friends (‘having unrelated Indigenous friends’,  $p \leq .01$ ) to be extremely important to cultural connection for Indigenous children, perhaps demonstrating an awareness of

how these relationships can be threatened, or fractured, via placement in OOHC. It was also notable that while ‘living on Country’ had the lowest mean score ( $\bar{x} = 3.45$ ) across all community members, OOHC professionals/volunteers were more likely to consider this to be extremely important to cultural connection for Indigenous children ( $p \leq .05$ ). The qualitative findings for the mechanisms domain of cultural connection are presented next.

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data from the open-ended text responses to the question ‘What is the best way Indigenous children can develop a sense of connection to their culture? The best way Indigenous children can develop a sense of connection to their culture is by . . .’ found that ‘immersion in culture’ and ‘relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’ were the dominant mechanisms considered central to cultural connection for Indigenous children.

### **6.4.3 Immersion in Culture**

Open-ended text responses highlighted the importance of immersion in culture to the development of cultural connection: ‘Immerse them in culture, family and community’ (Community member #137); ‘Having culture surround them’ (Community member #33).

This concept of immersion in culture related to Indigenous children having their ‘culture surround them’ for some community members, while other community members spoke of immersion in culture as ‘living it [their culture]’: ‘Living through culture daily’ (Community member #148); ‘Living it with their own mob/people’ (Community member #10).

Community members articulated how this immersion in culture occurs via ‘natural connections’ to culture: ‘It comes from natural connections to culture in their normal life’ (Community member #88).

Other community members also spoke about the importance of being immersed in culture from a young age as a key mechanism for the development of cultural connection: ‘Being immersed in it from a young age’ (Community member #91); ‘Learning their culture at a young age and keep their identity strong’ (Community member #139); ‘Getting the children to learn as much about their culture from the beginning so they know the fundamentals of what our culture is and what it means to be Indigenous’ (Community member #94).

Importantly, community members reinforced that culture needs to be a part of an Indigenous child’s everyday life to achieve cultural connection: ‘Having their culture and family in their everyday lives’ (Community member #40); ‘Being amongst culture and taught daily’ (Community member #106); ‘Practicing their culture little bit by little bit every day, being consistent’ (Community member #138).

#### **6.4.4 Relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People**

Community members also spoke about the importance of relationships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander family, mob, community, Elders, and people. For some community members, relationships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander family, community, and mob were intertwined with immersion in culture, whereby cultural connection required Indigenous children to be surrounded by family and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people: ‘Being surrounded by their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander family, raised knowing who their mob is, knowing the history of our culture and being taught their culture, traditions, totems, being involved in ceremonies and acknowledging they are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander’ (Community member #30); ‘Being surrounded by friends and family who can teach them their culture’ (Community member #6); ‘Is being surrounded by positive Indigenous community members’ (Community member #24).

Some community members also articulated the importance of being raised by strong Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander family: ‘Being raised in their Indigenous family with their practices, relationships and beliefs’ (Community member #12); ‘Being brought up in a strong Aboriginal family’ (Community member #90).

However, within an OOHC context, children typically live away from their parents and may not be placed with Indigenous carers. In lieu of family members to ‘grow up’ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children in culture, community members spoke about the importance of learning from, and remaining in contact with, parents and extended family: ‘Learning from their family and extended kin networks’ (Community member #8); ‘Spending as much time as possible with family learning and listening to stories from Elders. . . . spending time with aunties, uncles, cousins, and other family members’ (Community member #9).

Other community members spoke about how parents and grandparents enabled the ‘best way to learn’ culture: ‘Best way to learn is from parents and grandparents’ (Community member #136); ‘Being taught by their parents, Elders and community’ (Community member #5).

In addition to learning culture, some community members described how connection to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents was important to belonging to prevent Indigenous children from feeling ‘lost’: ‘Through their Indigenous parent. When a child does not have this the connection can appear lost’ (Community member #140).

Intertwined with family was evidence of Indigenous people’s conception of kinship, including Elders, extended family and community, in which community members highlighted the importance of relationships with Elders and community members to develop a sense of cultural connection: ‘Developing and maintaining a

strong and healthy relationship with an Elder’ (Community member #17); ‘Being a part of the Aboriginal community from a young age, learning from Elders, relatives and other Aboriginal people as they grow into young adults’ (Community member #36).

This broad notion of kinship was important for Indigenous children to experience daily connection with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people: ‘Being connected to family, community each and every day’ (Community member #149).

This spoke to the ways in which community members described cultural connection as fundamentally relational, encompassing Indigenous notions of relationality that include family, community, ancestors, Elders and Country: ‘Their experience is connected to a much larger experience. Collective trauma and that connection to culture is healing’ (Community member #58); ‘Relationship comes before pride, when confidence is built on knowing Culture, knowing Family and feeling loved by the Ancestors, Elders, and the Community in general’ (Community member #137); ‘They are comfortable as an Aboriginal person. . . . They are proud of their ancestors. They are connected to country and require some time with their feet on mother earth’ (Community member #74).

#### **6.4.5 Summary of Mechanisms That are Important to Cultural Connection**

The data demonstrate that cultural connection develops through daily interactions with Aboriginal family, Elders, friends and community members, highlighting that cultural connection is best learned via relational mechanisms. Many community members highlighted the ways in which connection to culture is fundamentally relational, inclusive of connection to Indigenous peoples—within family and community—and Country. Immersion in culture and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—including with family and community—were found

to be overarching themes in the qualitative survey data, while the quantitative data highlighted the importance of spending time in community, relationships with an Elder, and growing up with Indigenous family. Thematic analysis of survey responses also highlighted that perspectives on mechanisms centred on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family, community, and Elders, thus evidencing the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the development of cultural connection.

## **6.5 Evidencing Cultural Connection: Feelings**

This section reports total mean scores for four feelings items, and group comparisons of four feelings items between sub-groups with and without professional or voluntary experience of OOHHC. This aspect of the survey was premised on my conceptualisation of cultural connection (see Chapter 5 and the end of Chapter 4) as including feelings that may evidence connection to culture. It was designed to answer the research sub-question ‘How can you tell if a person is connected to their First Nations culture?’ by using several feelings that First Nations peoples experience conceptualised as potentially evidencing cultural connection.

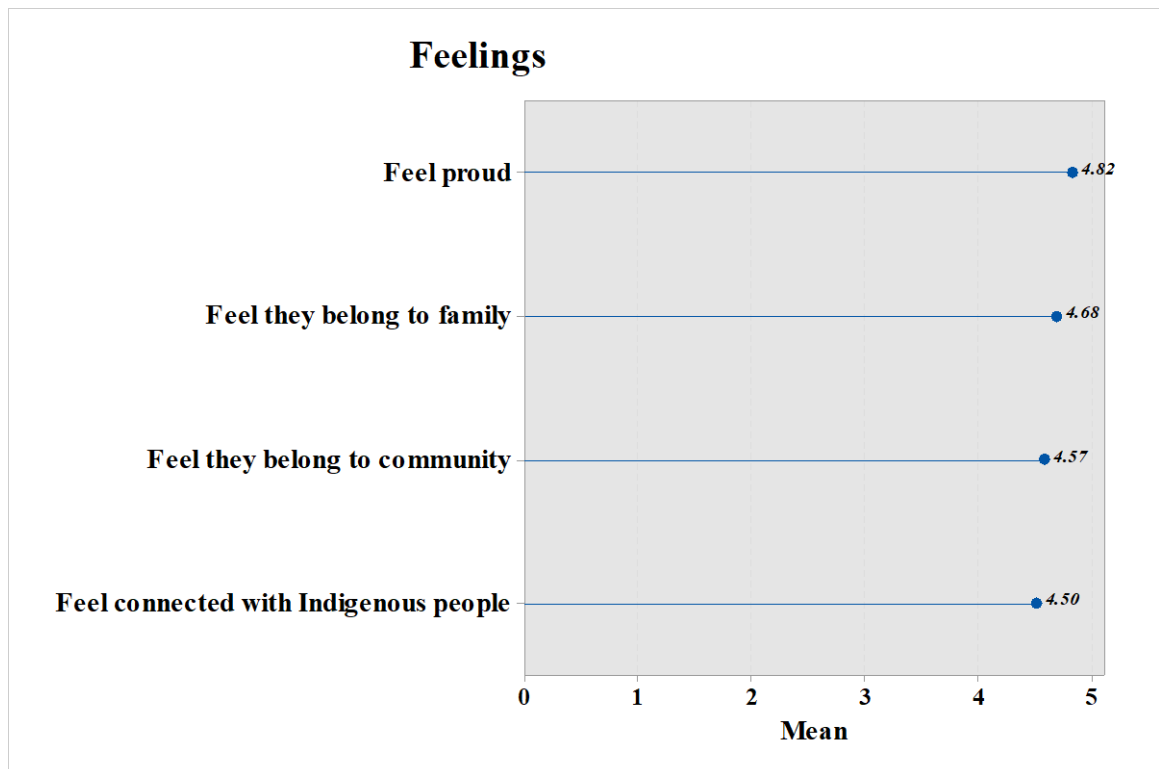
Community members were asked to indicate their agreement about whether four feelings (feeling proud, feeling belonging to family, feeling belonging to community, and feeling connected to Indigenous people) indicated cultural connection on a 5-point Likert scale, in which 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*, in response to the question ‘A person feels connected to their Indigenous culture if they . . .’ Community members also had the option to enter open-ended text in the ‘other’ category. This question was not specific to Indigenous children, but rather asked about feelings that may evidence cultural connection for Indigenous people in general. It was not specific to OOHHC contexts either.

### 6.5.1 Likert Scale Analysed as Interval Data

The mean response for each of the four feelings included in the survey is displayed below in Figure 7; 167 valid responses were received and analysed. Figure 7 (below) shows that community members rated all feelings as indicative of cultural connection for Indigenous people; all feelings had a mean rating between ‘agree’ (i.e. 4) and ‘strongly agree’ (i.e. 5).

**Figure 7**

*Mean responses for the four feelings in survey*



Open-ended text responses in the ‘other’ category ( $n = 67$ ) described additional feelings that may evidence connection to culture. As indicated by more than one community member, these included feeling strong in identity; feeling belonging; feeling comfortable (with mob, in community, in your own skin); and feeling connection.

### **6.5.2 Group Comparison of Community Members With and Without Current Professional or Voluntary Experience of Out-of-Home-Care**

As with the previous ‘knowledges’ and ‘mechanisms’ findings, most of the mean responses for feelings were skewed to the ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ upper end of the Likert scale. Consequently, the four feelings were recoded into binary variables (where 0 = not rated as strongly agree and 1 = rated as strongly agree) to better showcase statistical discrimination. The proportion of community members who ‘strongly agreed’ that each feeling demonstrated cultural connection was calculated in percentage terms. Community member groups included those with and without current professional or voluntary experiences of OOHC to enable insight into how cultural connection is understood for Indigenous children in OOHC contexts.

Fischer’s exact tests were used to determine whether differences between those community members who currently work or volunteer in OOHC, and those who do not, were statistically significant for the four feelings. Table 7 (below) shows that those who had current professional or voluntary experiences in the OOHC sector were more inclined to rate most feelings as more important compared with those without current professional or volunteer experiences in OOHC; however, these did not achieve statistical significance at  $p < .05$ .

**Table 7**

*Differences between community members who currently work/volunteer, and do not currently work/volunteer, in OOHC for feelings, displaying results of Fischer's exact test*

Feelings category	Currently works/volunteers (total = 59) in OOHC and does not (total = 85) comparison		Difference			
		<i>n</i>	%	Estimate	95% CI	<i>p</i> -value
Feel they belong to family	Works/volunteers in OOHC	48	81.4	6.1	-7.5, 19.6	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	64	75.3			
Feel they belong to community	Works/volunteers in OOHC	38	64.4	-5.0	-20.7, 10.7	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	59	69.4			
Feel connected with Indigenous people	Works/volunteers in OOHC	39	66.1	2.6	-13.3, 18.4	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	54	63.5			
Feel proud	Works/volunteers in OOHC	55	93.2	10.1	-0.2, 20.4	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	69	83.1			

What follows is a presentation of the qualitative findings for the 'feelings' domain of cultural connection, wherein thematic analysis of responses to the question 'What is the most important way people show they are connected to their Indigenous culture? Please complete the sentence—You know an Indigenous person is connected to their culture when . . .' reiterated the importance of feeling proud.

### **6.5.3 Feeling Proud**

Pride was the dominant theme around demonstrating a connection to culture, revealed by responses including words and phrases, such as 'pride', 'proud to be Aboriginal', 'proud to identify', 'proudly talk about their culture', 'they are proud of

who they are’, ‘shows pride’, ‘they have a sense of pride’, ‘carry pride’, and ‘pride in their Aboriginality’. Other community members elaborated on this idea: ‘They’re proud of who they are and where they’re from’ (Community member #80); ‘Being proud of who they are’ (Community member #172); ‘A connected Aboriginal person walks with pride, they hold a generous amount of knowledge they are willing to share and will never let anyone deny their identity’ (Community member #169).

Some community members’ understandings of cultural connection demonstrated overlap with notions of being strong in identity and culture. Similarly, some community members also articulated how feeling proud to be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander could evidence connection to culture, thus also evidencing an overlap between pride and identity: ‘They are proud to be Aboriginal’ (Community member #23); ‘They proudly tell you they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander’ (Community member #43).

Other community members highlighted the importance of Indigenous people feeling proud of their culture, their family and their ancestors to evidence their connection to culture: ‘They are proud to acknowledge their culture and family’ (Community member #34); ‘They are proud of their ancestors’ (Community member #74).

This pride could also extend to actions, or how one demonstrates feeling pride, such as representing community or sharing culture with others: ‘Standing proud to represent our people no matter who or where it is’ (Community member #135); ‘They are proud to share their culture with others’ (Community member #65).

#### **6.5.4 Feeling Comfortable**

Feeling comfortable was also identified as a dominant theme that could evidence cultural connection, with community members highlighting how being an Aboriginal

and/or Torres Strait Islander person who is connected to culture involved feeling comfortable: ‘They feel comfortable being Aboriginal and not needing to prove they are’ (Community member #18); ‘They are comfortable as an Aboriginal person’ (Community member #74).

Others spoke about the need to feel comfortable around other Indigenous people: ‘They are comfortable in community’ (Community member #14).

One community member articulated a distinction between ‘being’ within community versus ‘identifying’ outside of community: ‘When they are confident . . . to identify within and outside of their communities’ (Community member #2).

For some community members, feelings of being comfortable involved possessing confidence in one’s identity as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander: ‘They are confident in their identity are socially, physically, emotionally and/or spiritually strong and connected to themselves and their culture’ (Community member #9).

This was also articulated by community members who equated feeling comfortable as Indigenous with feeling strong in your identity: ‘It is a sense of “self”’ (Community member #142); ‘They know who they are’ (Community member #144); ‘They let no one tell them otherwise. They know who they are’ (Community member #148).

### **6.5.5 Feeling Belonging**

Other community members highlighted the importance of feeling belonging as evidence of cultural connection. Community members highlighted how belonging related to a general sense of feeling belonging: ‘. . . has a strong sense of belonging’ (Community member #54); ‘They know who they are and where they belong’

(Community member #144); ‘They feel a sense of belonging’ (Community member #154).

For some community members, belonging involved feeling connection with other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people: ‘They feel connection with other Kooris’ (Community member #35); ‘. . . feel connected or make connection to other Indigenous people for whatever mobs you come from’ (Community member #117).

This also translated into how Indigenous people are able to connect with one another, thus crossing over from ‘feeling belonging’ to ‘action’: ‘They are able to connect with other Aboriginal people’ (Community member #67); ‘. . . how they connect with mob’ (Community member #128).

#### **6.5.6 Summary of Feelings That Indicate Cultural Connection**

While community members identified that various feelings—such as feeling belonging, feeling proud and feeling comfortable—could evidence cultural connection, cultural connection itself can be experienced as a feeling, thus giving support to the conceptualisation of cultural connection presented at the end of Chapter 4 (and in Chapter 5), whereby connection is demonstrated by *feeling* connected. As one community member articulated, ‘They [Indigenous people] don’t need a reason, they can just say they feel connection in their heart’. However, the survey findings also highlighted the ways in which feelings can overlap with one another. For example, feeling belonging can contribute to, or be a reason for, feeling connected. At this juncture, expressions of ‘being’ Indigenous with mob included feelings of comfort, belonging and connection. Thus, feeling connected to culture may also be dependent on your sense of belonging—and connection—to other Indigenous people, in line with Indigenous notions of relationality. Interestingly, the overlap between culture and identity is apparent when describing feelings that may evidence connection, noting the

importance of feeling pride, and comfort, in culture and identity. This overlap between culture and identity adds to the complexity, and variability, of individual experiences of cultural connection.

## **6.6 Evidencing Cultural Connection: Actions**

This section reports total mean scores for 11 actions items, and group comparisons of 11 actions items between sub-groups with and without professional or voluntary experience of OOHC. This aspect of the survey was premised on my conceptualisation of cultural connection as including actions that may also evidence connection to culture. It was designed to answer the research sub-question ‘How can you tell if a person is connected to their First Nations culture?’ by using several actions that Indigenous people undertake conceptualised as potentially evidencing cultural connection.

Community members were asked to indicate their agreement about whether 11 actions indicated a person’s connection to their Indigenous culture on a 5-point Likert scale, in which 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. Community members also had the option to enter open-ended text in the ‘other’ category. These actions were as follows:

- participate in cultural events
- identify
- speak language
- eat traditional foods
- uphold cultural values
- connect with land/Country
- adopt traditions
- are spiritual

- listen to/play cultural music
- watch cultural TV
- want to grow up kids as Indigenous.

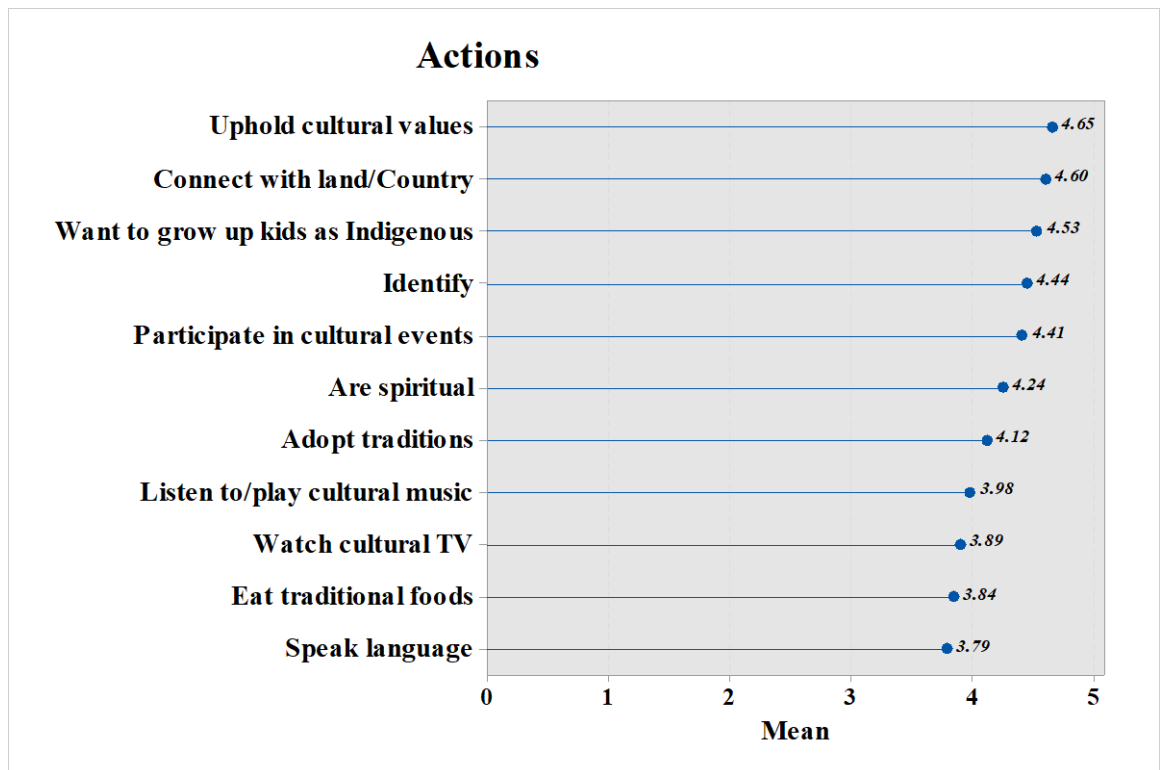
As with the ‘feelings’ domain, the question community members responded to (‘A person feels connected to their Indigenous culture if they . . .’) was not specific to Indigenous children, but rather asked about actions that may evidence cultural connection for Indigenous people in general. It was not specific to OOHC contexts either.

### **6.6.1 Likert Scale Analysed as Interval Data**

The mean response for each of the 11 actions included in the survey is displayed below in Figure 8; 167 valid responses were received and analysed. Figure 8 (below) shows variability in actions endorsed by community as demonstrating cultural connection for Indigenous people; some actions had a mean rating above ‘agree’ (i.e. >4), and some actions had a mean rating below ‘agree’ (i.e. <4).

**Figure 8**

*Mean responses for the 11 actions in survey*



Compared with the ‘feelings’ domain, Figure 8 (above) shows that actions, as a whole, were less likely to be endorsed by community members as demonstrating cultural connection, revealed by four actions having a mean rating below 4 (i.e. ‘agree’). The pattern of endorsement shown in Figure 8 also suggests more variability in opinions held by community members about those actions that may demonstrate cultural connection, with most actions ( $n = 8$ ) having a mean rating below 4.5.

Open-ended text responses in the ‘other’ category ( $n = 67$ ) described additional actions that may demonstrate connection to culture. As indicated by more than one community member, these included sharing culture with others; practising culture; being involved in community; representing community (i.e. activism); living life in

accordance with cultural values and protocols (e.g. respect, reciprocity, ‘giving back’); and forging strong relationships with community.<sup>64</sup>

### 6.6.2 Group Comparison of Community Members With and Without Current Professional or Voluntary Experience of Out-of-Home-Care

Comparisons between groups—using the percentage proportions calculated for the recoded binary variables—were undertaken using Fischer’s exact tests to determine whether differences between those community members who currently work or volunteer in OOHC, and those who do not, were statistically significant for the 11 actions. Table 8 (below) shows that those who had current professional or voluntary experiences in the OOHC sector were more inclined to rate certain actions as more clearly demonstrating cultural connection compared with those without current professional or volunteer experiences in OOHC, with statistically significant differences evident for four actions: ‘speak language’ ( $p \leq .05$ ), ‘are spiritual’ ( $p \leq .05$ ), ‘listen to/play cultural music’ ( $p \leq .05$ ) and ‘watch cultural TV’ ( $p \leq .05$ ).

**Table 8**

*Differences between community members who currently work/volunteer, and do not currently work/volunteer, in OOHC for actions, displaying results of Fischer’s exact test*

Actions category	Currently works/volunteers (total = 59) in OOHC and does not (total = 85) comparison		Difference			
	<i>n</i>	%	Estimate	95% CI	<i>p</i> -value	
Identify	Works/volunteers in OOHC	42	71.2	8.8	-6.6, 24.3	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	53	62.4			
Speak language	Works/volunteers in OOHC	22	37.3	17.3	2.3, 32.3	*

<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, sharing culture and representing community were also evident in some community members’ responses to qualitative questions in the feelings section (see section 6.5).

	Does not work/volunteer	17	20.0			
Are spiritual	Works/volunteers in OOHC	32	55.2	19.9	3.5, 36.2	*
	Does not work/volunteer	30	35.3			
Uphold cultural values	Works/volunteers in OOHC	45	76.3	6.0	-8.6, 20.6	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	59	70.2			
Connect with land/Country	Works/volunteers in OOHC	42	71.2	8.8	-6.6, 24.3	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	53	62.4			
Want to grow up kids as Indigenous	Works/volunteers in OOHC	42	71.2	3.3	-11.9, 18.6	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	57	67.9			
Adopt traditions	Works/volunteers in OOHC	30	51.7	16.4	0.0, 32.8	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	30	35.3			
Listen to/play cultural music <sup>a</sup>	Works/volunteers in OOHC	24	40.7	19.5	4.3, 34.8	*
	Does not work/volunteer	18	21.2			
Eat traditional foods <sup>a</sup>	Works/volunteers in OOHC	20	33.9	11.5	-3.4, 26.5	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	19	22.4			
Watch cultural TV <sup>a</sup>	Works/volunteers in OOHC	22	37.3	19.6	4.9, 34.4	*
	Does not work/volunteer	15	17.6			
Participate in cultural events <sup>a</sup>	Works/volunteers in OOHC	35	59.3	9.3	-7.2, 25.8	>.05
	Does not work/volunteer	42	50.0			

*Note.* Although not displayed in Table 8 (above), the action ‘adopting traditions’ was approaching significance ( $p = 0.59$ ).

<sup>a</sup> These actions were also listed under ‘mechanisms’ since they can serve both functions. \* $p < .05$ .

It was also interesting that the difference between the two groups of community members (those with and without current professional or voluntary experience of OOHC) for the item ‘watching cultural TV’ was statistically significant because

community members were least likely to ‘strongly agree’ that ‘watching cultural TV’ demonstrates cultural connection. For those with current professional or voluntary experience of OOHC, it may indicate that exposure to accessible forms of culture such as watching TV (possible in any household, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) can demonstrate cultural connection. A statistically significant difference was also found for the action ‘listening to/or playing cultural music’, which can also be accessible in any household with internet access. The presentation of qualitative findings for the actions domain, analysed using thematic analysis, now follows.

Qualitative findings indicated that a wide array of actions may demonstrate cultural connection, highlighting that there is no ‘one way’ for an Indigenous person to demonstrate their connection to culture. Some community members even questioned the need for Indigenous people to ‘demonstrate connection’, highlighting that cultural connection is a unique, individual experience that varies for all people: ‘Sorry, silly question. Grandfather was very connected and told us the stories taught us our history. Uncle is an activist but not that interested in traditional lifestyle despite preaching the virtues of it. Everyone connects in different ways. We don’t all have to have one path’ (Community member #76); ‘It’s different for each person it’s something they feel not what you want them to feel or be’ (Community member #39); ‘There’s no one way for everyone. It varies’ (Community member #41); ‘The only way to measure this is by speaking to individual people, to get an understanding of how they connect to their country and people’ (Community member #46).

However, despite the diversity of ways in which Indigenous people demonstrate connection to their cultures, among the most articulated was the importance of identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

### 6.6.3 Identifying

Given the way that the question was worded in the survey ('How can you tell if an Indigenous person is connected to culture?'), the dominant theme reflected by community members in open-ended responses was identifying as Indigenous. Some participants articulated that cultural connection can equate to an Indigenous person simply telling you that they are Indigenous: 'They say they are' (Community member #27); 'When they identify as being an Aboriginal' (Community member #28); 'They identify as an Indigenous person and are aware where they come from' (Community member #42).

Others spoke about the importance of identifying—with their Indigeneity or with their culture—*with pride*: 'They proudly tell you they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander' (Community member #43); 'They identify with Indigenous practices with pride' (Community member #9); 'Being proud to identify as Indigenous and promote the culture' (Community member #52); 'Are proud to be Aboriginal and identify at all times with pride and dignity and respect for their culture' (Community member #11).

Some community members spoke about the importance of identifying as Indigenous, and being accepted by community, to demonstrate connection to culture: 'They identify as Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander and proud of it and accepted in the community they live in not just the community they come from' (Community member #153).

However, other community members articulated that connection to culture was about not needing to prove one's Indigeneity: 'They feel comfortable being Aboriginal and not needing to prove they are' (Community member #18).

The importance of identifying, as reflected in community members' words, is expected for two reasons. First, you know an Indigenous person is Indigenous when they say they are, and second, identifying as Indigenous is one of the 'measures' used for Indigenous identity in the official three-pronged government definition of Indigeneity (Carlson, 2016). However, it is important to note that identification as Indigenous is contested and political, influenced by individual subjectivity, colonial history and experiences at the Cultural Interface.

#### **6.6.4 Summary of Actions That Demonstrate Cultural Connection**

The diversity of themes identified suggests that a wide array of actions may demonstrate cultural connection, yet simultaneously, there is no 'one way' for an Indigenous person to demonstrate their connection to culture. Some community members even questioned the need for Indigenous people to 'demonstrate connection', highlighting that connection is a unique, individual experience that varies for all people. Although community members did endorse a range of actions as being able to 'tell if an Indigenous person is connected to culture' within the quantitative data, it is important to interrogate the open-ended responses in the qualitative data that provide opportunity to ascribe meaning to community members' responses. Within these qualitative data, the notion of Indigenous people undertaking certain actions to 'prove' or demonstrate cultural connection was not supported by all community members. Rather, a delineation between expressions of 'being' Indigenous (feeling comfort, belonging) *with mob* and expressions of 'identifying' as Indigenous (and responding to others' willingness to identify or not) *beyond your known mob* was evident, across both the 'feelings' and the 'actions' domains. In this way, cultural connection is itself a choice—and an act of individual self-determination—whereby expressions of 'being' and 'identifying', coupled with individual agency, are paramount. As stated by one community member,

‘Cultural connection is not taught, it’s instilled in us from the day we are born. It’s up to individuals to decide on how strong their cultural connection is throughout their lives’.

At this juncture, we must recognise, and respect, Indigenous people’s self-determination to choose how they enact their Indigeneity, noting that subjectivity at the Cultural Interface will invariably produce considerable variability and diversity across, and among, all Indigenous people, including children and young people.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

The survey responses highlight the ways in which individuals prescribe meaning to cultural connection. Insight into how cultural connection is understood in OOHC contexts was enabled through the comparison of community members with and without current professional or voluntary experience of OOHC. While the survey was not specific to OOHC contexts, an understanding of how four domains of cultural connection—knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions—were understood by community members with current professional or voluntary experience of OOHC was illuminated. Specifically, there was an apparent trend in the data that highlighted clear differences in what Indigenous children need to know to be culturally connected, and how they acquire this knowledge, between sub-groups with and without professional or voluntary experience of OOHC. Differences in how Indigenous children or peoples show, or demonstrate, their connection to culture were less pronounced. More broadly, survey responses highlighted how certain knowledges and mechanisms foster cultural connection for Indigenous children. A range of feelings that evidence connection to culture were also highlighted. Actions were not found to be a good ‘measure’ of connection to culture, revealed by community members highlighting the subjective nature of cultural connection and the diverse ways that Indigenous people experience cultural connection. While knowledge of kinship and ancestry knowledges have been

found to be important knowledges to foster the development of cultural connection, the data also show that mechanisms to foster cultural connection vary. This may be due to the ways in which Indigenous children may not experience *organic* mechanisms, such as immersion in culture, particularly when living in OOHC. Indeed, immersion in culture and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were highlighted by community members as being fundamentally important to cultural connection, thus evidencing the *relational* nature of cultural connection.

Ultimately however, the survey findings have enabled a glimpse into how cultural connection is a unique, individual experience that varies for each person. As the next chapter will show, these individual experiences are influenced by *subjectivity* at the Cultural Interface, as well as Indigenous young people's experiences of OOHC. Just as feelings of pride and belonging are not necessarily static, Indigenous children's experiences of feeling connected to culture are not static either. The next chapter discusses the interview findings that illuminate 10 Aboriginal young people's experiences of their culture—and cultural connection—over time, both while living in OOHC and post-care.

## Chapter 7: Interview Findings

This chapter reports the findings from data collected via interviews with Indigenous young people who had a lived experience of OOHC. In presenting the results from these data, this chapter seeks to understand how Indigenous young people understand and experience cultural connection over time, both within and outside of OOHC.<sup>65</sup> As will be shown throughout this chapter, the findings demonstrate the ways in which cultural connection was experienced as both a process of identity formation and a process of practising culture over time for Indigenous young people in this research. Their agency in choosing to connect was found to be central to this process, as were a range of barriers and enablers, which are illuminated in this chapter.

### 7.1 About the Young People in This Research

Ten young people, between the ages of 15 and 25 years, were interviewed as part of this research. All young people were assigned a pseudonym<sup>66</sup> to protect their privacy. Six young people identified as female, while the remaining four young people identified as male. They had all experienced living in OOHC across a range of placement types, including kinship care (where placement is typically with a blood-related family member or someone deemed to be ‘of kinship’) and residential care (where placement is in a residential facility, typically with 2–4 other children or young people, staffed by paid care workers). Nine out of the 10 young people interviewed

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<sup>65</sup> Young people’s stories were told over the course of their lives, and many young people were unable to remember their time in OOHC (because of young ages of removal). Consequently, interviews focused on journeys of cultural connection over time for Aboriginal young people who had been separated from Aboriginal family (to varying degrees), or raised by non-Indigenous caregivers (either in OOHC or after exit from OOHC), as a result of child protection intervention. This chapter thus reports on young people’s entire journeys of (and towards) cultural connection, not just their time in OOHC.

<sup>66</sup> Pseudonyms for young people were generated using the website ‘BabyNameVoyager’ (<https://www.babynamewizard.com>). ‘BabyNameVoyager’ generates popular names for newborns in any given historical year. Popular names for male and female gender identities can also be selected. Beginning with the first letter of their real name, the most popular ‘male’ or ‘female’ name (generated by ‘BabyNameVoyager’) in the young person’s birth year was chosen to assign a pseudonym to young people in this research.

lived with non-Indigenous carers in OOHC, including five young people living with non-Indigenous kin (who were blood-related) in OOHC. Most young people ( $n = 9$ ) experienced one OOHC placement, while one young person experienced more than two OOHC placements (which may be reflective of the recruitment strategy that targeted young people who had exited OOHC via permanent care). Similarly, most young people ( $n = 9$ ) experienced one OOHC admission, with one young person experiencing more than two OOHC admissions. Length of time in OOHC varied, as did age of first entry into OOHC; seven young people entered OOHC at, or before, the age of 5. Five young people were co-placed in OOHC with their siblings. Two sibling groups of two who were co-placed in OOHC were interviewed. For all young people, exit from OOHC occurred either via reunification (with parents) or via permanent care (that is, a legal permanent care order [PCO], which transfers guardianship of a child from the state to an individual). Three young people were subject to a PCO at the time of interview.

All young people self-identified as Aboriginal.<sup>67</sup> Seven young people identified a mob group<sup>68</sup> that they belonged to; another two identified the state or territory that their mob group belonged to (but did not know their mob group), and one young person did not know their mob group or its state location. Mob groups were diverse, revealed by young people identifying with 13 different mobs located within four different states and territories. One young person lived on their Country of origin while growing up in care. One young person lived with multiple disabilities. One young person was, at the time of interviewing, a statutory kinship carer to her siblings, while another young person was employed in a role that involved Indigenous children in child protection and

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<sup>67</sup> No young people identified as Torres Strait Islander in this phase of the research. For this reason, the chapter herein predominantly refers solely to 'Aboriginal' people, identity and culture.

<sup>68</sup> To protect young people's privacy, mob groups are not reported. The state or territory location of young people's mob groups is reported instead.

OOHC settings. Table 9 (below) displays additional demographic information about the young people who participated in interviews.

**Table 9***Demographic information about young people who were interviewed*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age at time of interview</b>	<b>Gender identity</b>	<b>Location of mob group(s)</b>	<b>Lived on Country while in OOHC</b>	<b>OOHC placement type</b>	<b>Number of OOHC placements</b>	<b>Age at entry to OOHC</b>	<b>Length of time in OOHC</b>	<b>Exit from care</b>	<b>Sibling interviewed</b>
Aaliyah	15	Female	NSW Victoria	No	Non-Indigenous foster care	1	2–3 years	Unknown	Permanent care	Yes
Cade	18	Male	Victoria	No	Non-Indigenous foster care	1	<5 years	2–3 years	Permanent care	Yes
Caitlyn	25	Female	NT	No	Indigenous kith care	1	12–13 years	>1 year	Reunified with parents	No
Cecilia	16	Female	Victoria	No	Non-Indigenous kinship care	1	4 years	2–3 years	Permanent care	N/A
Dalton	24	Male	NSW	Yes	Non-Indigenous residential care	1	7 years	5–6 years	Reunified with parents	No
Faith	21	Female	Unknown	Unknown	Multiple unknown care types (inc. non-Indigenous)	>2	8 years	1–5 years	Reunified with parents (multiple times)	No

					foster and non-Indigenous residential care)					
Jace	15	Male	QLD	No	Non-Indigenous kinship care	1	0 months	Unknown	Permanent care	Yes
Sabrina	18	Female	QLD NSW	No	Non-Indigenous kinship care	1	4–6 months	2–3 years	Permanent care	Yes
Tabitha	21	Female	Victoria	No	Non-Indigenous kinship care	1	3 years	3 years	Reunified with parent	N/A
Lamar	16	Male	Victoria	No	Non-Indigenous kinship care	1	4–5 years	Unknown	Permanent care	N/A

*Note.* QLD = Queensland; NSW = New South Wales; NT = Northern Territory.

## **7.2 Young People's Experiences of Cultural Connection**

Young people were asked about their experiences of culture, cultural connection and cultural disconnection over time, including their memories of growing up in OOHC. Definitions and understandings of culture were not imposed on young people in this research, instead giving space for young people to voice what culture and cultural connection meant to them. The diversity of young people's individual experiences of cultural connection was apparent, with young people's experiences of cultural connection including processes of identity formation coupled with the practice of culture over time.

### **7.2.1 Theme One: Cultural Connection as a Process of Navigating Aboriginal Identity**

Young people in this research encountered cultural connection as a process of navigating Aboriginal identity, illuminated through their experiences of identity formation over time. Their knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage varied from not knowing, or knowing very little, about their Aboriginal heritage, to always knowing about their Aboriginal kin and mob. For most young people, negotiating Aboriginal identity involved interactions with other Aboriginal people, through either activities or events, but could also lead to feeling 'out of place'. Most young people in this research ( $n = 7$ ) were rarely around Aboriginal people on a regular basis (except for Aboriginal siblings that they lived with). All young people who had irregular, and infrequent, contact with Aboriginal people were placed with non-Indigenous carers. Table 10 (below) shows the sub-themes for theme one.

**Table 10**

*Theme one and sub-themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Theme one. Cultural connection as a process of navigating Aboriginal identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Varying degrees of knowledge of Aboriginal heritage and mob</li><li>• Identity conflict</li></ul>

**7.2.1.1 Varying Degrees of Knowledge of Aboriginal Heritage and Mob**

For young people, knowledge of mob and family—or lack thereof—contributed to diverse experiences of negotiating, and forming, their Aboriginal identities over time.

One young person spoke about not knowing that he was Aboriginal while living in OOHC,<sup>69</sup> instead discovering his Aboriginal heritage in adolescence upon exiting OOHC: ‘Well I didn’t know anything until I was 15. We didn’t even know we were Indigenous. Coz I’m pretty fair-skinned, I didn’t have a clue’ (Dalton, male, aged 24).

Prior to her early 20s, while aware that she was Aboriginal, Faith experienced difficulties navigating her Aboriginal identity due to not knowing about her mob, and knowing very little about her Aboriginal heritage:

I never got taught anything . . . I just wish I knew more about everything, about who I am, where I come from, where my dad comes from. . . . Because nobody believed me and whenever someone was like ‘oh, yeah? What tribe are you from then?’ I couldn’t answer. I didn’t have anything to say. (Faith, female, aged 21)

Despite initially growing up with her Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents prior to entering OOHC, Cecilia also recounted knowing very little about her Aboriginal

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<sup>69</sup> Dalton stated that he had never been told that he was Aboriginal by his Aboriginal mother, and that his mother told him about his Aboriginality after his exit from OOHC. However, it was also not clear if child protection asked Dalton’s mother about her Aboriginal status at the point of Dalton’s removal from her care.

heritage while navigating her identity as Aboriginal: ‘All I know is I’m a Koorie. That’s about it. I don’t know much about my culture’ (Cecilia, female, aged 16).

Other young people, such as Aaliyah, Cade, Jace and Sabrina, always knew they were Aboriginal, but found out about their mob groups and kinship lines in their mid to late teenage years after they had exited OOHC. For example, despite having exited OOHC more than 10 years previously, siblings Aaliyah and Cade received a family tree a few weeks before our interview, only then learning about their mob group. Cade reflected his surprise in finding out that he did not belong to the local mob group where he lived: ‘I thought we would be in [local Victorian mob group] because we’re mostly from [this area]. I didn’t realise that we were in [another Victorian mob group]’ (Cade, male, aged 18).

After exit from OOHC during her adolescent years, Sabrina sought out knowledge of her culture and identity by contacting her Aboriginal family via social media, who lived on Country interstate, thus highlighting the importance of knowledge about heritage for identity formation:

Interviewer: Have you always known what mob you’re from?

Sabrina: No. I had to ask my father’s sister about . . . it was only two years ago, not even. We haven’t always known. I went on Messenger on Facebook and I’m like ‘do you know where I’m from?’ She was like, ‘of course’ and she told me . . . it was that easy. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

Possessing knowledge of her mob and ancestry was important for Sabrina for cultural connection and navigating her identity as Aboriginal. She felt a need to be able to identify herself, in relation to others, by stating where she was from and to which mob group she belonged.

Two young people, Tabitha and Lamar, spoke about always knowing that they were Aboriginal, and possessing more knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage and mob.

Tabitha grew up with her Aboriginal family prior to entering OOHC, but remembers obtaining more information about her Aboriginality while living in OOHC. During this time in OOHC, Tabitha lived with her non-Indigenous grandmother who married into her Aboriginal side of the family, thus maintaining regular contact with her Aboriginal family, including her great-grandmother:

. . . My mum's dad's mum . . . she's an Aboriginal Elder and she's really involved in the community and that kind of thing. . . . I remember spending lots of time with her when I was younger. She would always talk about our culture. (Tabitha, female, aged 21)

Lamar grew up with his Aboriginal family, entering OOHC around the age of 6. While he was placed in kinship care on his non-Indigenous side of the family, Lamar recounted having frequent contact with his Aboriginal family during the school holidays:

I visit every holidays. . . . For, usually, at least a week. So it's really good. And I see, usually I see my Nan a lot. I pretty much I'll stay at my Grandma's for half the time and then [my] Aunty's for half the time. (Lamar, male, aged 16)

Tabitha and Lamar's experiences were in contrast to other young people, such as Caitlyn, Dalton and Faith, who also grew up with their Aboriginal families prior to entering care. As previously mentioned, despite living with his Aboriginal family until entering OOHC at approximately 7 years old, Dalton did not know he was Aboriginal until he was 15 years old. Faith predominately lived with her non-Indigenous mum, and at times, her Aboriginal dad, throughout her life, but at the time of interview, did not know which mob group she belonged to. For Caitlyn, being removed from her Aboriginal family around 12–13 years old—and living in OOHC for almost 12 months—she was always aware that she was Aboriginal, and that her Aboriginal heritage came from her maternal and paternal lines. However, living off-Country,

separated from her extended Aboriginal kinship groups, Caitlyn did not have a lot to do with her Aboriginal family:

When I was little I went up there twice. I don't remember most of it. But not much involvement really. . . . Dad's [mob is from the Northern Territory], but we don't really see his people, like his mob, much. We know our grandpa and stuff like that, but we don't have much contact.

For several young people in this research, such as Dalton, Cecilia and Faith, growing up with Aboriginal family did not automatically equate to knowledge of Aboriginal heritage, let alone knowledge of one's mob group(s) and kinship lines. Yet, knowledge of Aboriginal heritage and mob was important to cultural connection, as reflected by some young people when asked what cultural connection means to them:

Cultural connection means to me . . . just being connected with your culture. Like, you know where you're from, maybe. Might know your language. You just know a bit about yourself and, maybe, you want to learn more. (Aaliyah, female, aged 15)

It [cultural connection] means to me, obviously, I can tell my part of the story, where I'm from and all that, Dreamtime story and all that. . . . And who I am, as a person. (Cade, male, aged 18)

[For cultural connection to develop] You yourself have to have an idea of where you're from and I think that starts with a personal thing. You have to recognise who you are. Then, after that, you can start going trying to find where you're from and connecting with other people. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

I've never really thought about it. 'What does connection to culture mean to me' . . . it's nice to know your history of your family and . . . I would say it's nice to know more about who you are as a person. (Jace, male, aged 15)

Young people in this research needed to understand who they were and where they came from to navigate their identity as Aboriginal. However, despite possessing

knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage, and having contact with Aboriginal family and mob, several young people grappled with identity conflict.

### ***7.2.1.2 Identity Conflict***

Lamar and Tabitha encountered identity conflict in their adolescent years. For example, Lamar spoke about his level of cultural connection and how it changed over time:

I haven't really been connected to culture that much. Like when I was younger, when I moved to [the country] and stuff and my Aunty [on the Aboriginal side of the family] was with [her] boyfriend and he was Indigenous as well, so we did lots of Indigenous stuff. . . . But I haven't really been connected to culture. (Lamar, male, aged 16)

Other young people experienced ambivalence towards their Aboriginal heritage and culture, whereby negotiating Aboriginal identity was experienced as a 'part' of the self: 'I mean I don't really ever think about the Aboriginal side of me all that much. But I would like to know what I am on the Aboriginal side' (Cecilia, female, aged 16). Cecilia's words reflect an understanding of Aboriginal identity as a binary choice between the racial categorisation of 'Indigenous' or not, where Indigeneity can be compartmentalised.

Conversely, other young people understood Aboriginal identity differently, and were strong in their identity as Aboriginal, regardless of their contact with Aboriginal people and level of knowledge of their Aboriginal ancestry and mob. Despite finding out about his Aboriginality at the age of 15, Dalton said, 'I've never questioned who I was. But learning Indigenous stuff you're always growing. I think a lot of Indigenous kids growing up—adults as well—you think you're going to become Indigenous. But you already are' (Dalton, male, aged 24).

Most of the older young people in this research spoke about grappling with identity conflict between the ages of 15 and 17. This was the case for Faith, Sabrina,

Caitlyn and Tabitha. For example, Tabitha—who was previously strong in her Aboriginal culture and identity when living with her Aboriginal family—spoke about questioning her Aboriginal identity when living off-Country with her non-Indigenous dad after exit from OOHC:

I don't know, because since I lived with my dad, and he's non-Indigenous, I was kind of like . . . I remember growing up in high school, not knowing whether to tick that box in school, if I'm Aboriginal or not. I wasn't sure what it meant. (Tabitha, female, aged 21)

Tabitha's words reflect an understanding of 'how' to identify as Aboriginal as being constrained, or consigned to 'ticking a box' that self-identifies Aboriginal status. For Tabitha, living with her non-Indigenous dad after exit from OOHC (via reunification) resulted in being separated from Aboriginal family, which created identity conflict when non-Indigenous family told her that she 'didn't have enough Aboriginal blood to count'.

Possessing knowledge of mob, kinship lines and ancestry was not enough to contribute to a strong sense of identity for all young people. Some young people spoke about oscillating between feeling connected to their culture and feeling disconnected from their culture, often influenced by different contexts (e.g. Tabitha: 'I'd go through phases of feeling connected and context dependent where I was'). For some young people, these shifts occurred in quick succession. For Tabitha, she would feel more or less connected depending on whether she was surrounded by Aboriginal people or not.

Other young people spoke about the ways in which cultural disconnection, and a lack of knowledge of their culture, mob and Aboriginality, resulted in identity confusion:

If you have anything in your life that makes you question who you are, that's a really big thing. It's as powerful as people with depression, questioning everything about themselves. Same sort of thing. These people are disconnected, they don't understand

why they feel an urge to want to learn more. So they can't figure it out and it's painful for them. . . . You have a lot of these people, they're questioning who they are later in life. They feel like they've lost something. That's why they're chasing something else. (Dalton, male, aged 24)

It [disconnection] actually made me, not depressed to a point of, it's probably still a kind of depressed, like not belonging. Like who am I kind of thing. Who am I? . . . I'm lost. . . . You feel like you're drowning and you're just not a part of anything. (Faith, female, aged 21)

### 7.2.2 Theme Two: Cultural Connection as the Practice of Culture

Young people's stories also illuminated how cultural connection entailed the practice of culture over time. Interviews evidenced the diverse understandings of Aboriginal culture that were held by young people. For young people, what was understood and constituted as the practice of culture varied from immersion in culture (inclusive of familiarity with cultural values, attitudes and nuances in aspects of culture, such as humour) to cultural activities, such as dance and art, which were—at times—detached from deeper cultural teachings, such as knowledge and values. Table 11 (below) shows the sub-themes for theme two.

**Table 11**

*Theme two and sub-themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Theme two. Cultural connection as the practice of culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negotiating cultural discontinuity and Aboriginal culture</li> <li>• Experiences with Aboriginal people and culture</li> <li>• Culture as involvement in cultural activities and events</li> <li>• Tokenism</li> <li>• Pan-Aboriginality</li> </ul>

### *7.2.2.1 Negotiating Cultural Discontinuity and Aboriginal Culture*

Prior to entering OOHC, two young people, Lamar and Tabitha, spoke about growing up with Aboriginal families who were strong and knowledgeable in their culture via a multi-household kinship/family caregiving arrangement<sup>70</sup> to support parental primary care. For Lamar, shifting between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous care upon entry into OOHC resulted in changes to cultural connection: '[I'm] not as [culturally] connected, I don't think, as I was anyway . . . I used to be a lot more' (Lamar, male, aged 16). It also enabled comparison between different parenting styles and cultural norms. However, this initial adjustment period was difficult:

It was pretty hard. That's why, I think . . . it also links back to going from the really unrestricted lifestyle to being more strict. It was really different and I was missing my other [Aboriginal] Aunty. . . . There was times where I'd just get along with my other [Aboriginal] Aunty so much better, she's a lot more relaxed. . . . I just feel like I can relate to her lifestyle and her attitude to things a lot more.

I had a few problems here [with my non-Indigenous carers] because I just couldn't relate to them. . . . they were really strict and I just . . . not being used to it and everything. I don't know. It was really difficult. It was really hard not fitting in. . . . It's just simple things like the way they talk and the way they act and stuff. It's a bit different. (Lamar, male, aged 16)

Lamar's experiences relate to negotiating tensions and complexity at the Cultural Interface, at which non-Indigenous family life can also be experienced as a site of tension.

Some young people chose to navigate cultural tensions by developing an awareness of how different cultural contexts can consist of different attitudes, values

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<sup>70</sup> Tabitha and Lamar's descriptions of this kind of caregiving arrangement indicated that they both lived across a couple of different households at times when their parents required support from other family members. In this way, the extended family provided informal 'respite' care to support parental primary care.

and behaviours. For example, Lamar reflected on how lifestyles and attitudes were different between his Indigenous and non-Indigenous family members:

What you find normal and normality is kind of different. It changes and it shifts. It's a different change. That's what I found when I moved into Melbourne, from [living with my Aboriginal family]. Like we'd go out somewhere for dinner and then we'd come back, then we'd just sit in the car and talk and stuff. And that's really different to here [with my non-Indigenous family]. Like if I sit in the car for a second too long, just like 'I need a rest' before I get out, they're like 'get out of the car!'

Sometimes [my cousin on the Aboriginal side of the family] will go inside, she'll be like 'are you guys coming?', we'll be like 'oh, yeah, we're coming in one second' and then that will turn into a two hour talk about life and stuff with my Aunty and like culture and just how she's going and things like that. And problem's with my family, they live a different lifestyle. (Lamar, male, aged 16)

Lamar's reflections relate to experiencing shifts in cultural nuances, attitudes and values; those aspects of culture that are intangible and not necessarily explicitly taught, yet fundamental to guiding our everyday behaviours.

### ***7.2.2.2 Experiences with Aboriginal People and Culture***

For some young people, such as Tabitha, Lamar and Dalton, experiences of immersion in culture enabled feelings of belonging to Aboriginal family and people, as well as learning about cultural values and aspects of culture that are learned indirectly, via enculturation,<sup>71</sup> through repeated exposure and immersion in culture, such as humour. For example, when asked about what is needed to be connected to culture, Lamar commented on the importance of being around Aboriginal people for belonging, also noting differences in humour between his Aboriginal and non-Indigenous families:

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<sup>71</sup> As highlighted in Chapter 4, enculturation refers to the process where people come to learn their culture within their own cultural group, enabled by 'an encompassing or surrounding of the individual by one's culture (Rogoff et al., 2014, p. 547).

I think you firstly need to be around your people [Aboriginal people]. Because that's the thing with not being . . . belonging, things like that. Even the humour. I like to laugh a lot and having a similar humour, that's a big thing. For me anyway. Here [with my non-Indigenous family], some of the jokes they say . . . I can't laugh at that. There's some funny ones, don't get me wrong. But, it's different the way . . . not only language and stuff, but the people around you affect you quite a lot. (Lamar, male, aged 16)

However, for most young people in this research, their experiences with Aboriginal people and culture did not occur organically via enculturation. These superficial experiences with Aboriginal culture were exemplified by intermittent contact with Aboriginal family and people. For example, when asked the question 'How much have you had to do with Aboriginal people growing up?', Cecilia responded, 'When I go down to [area that family lives in] and I see my [non-Indigenous] grandma, sometimes I go down there for NAIDOC week or something. And I go to that and my cousin is also an Aboriginal' (Cecilia, female, aged 16).

The lack of exposure to organic experiences with Aboriginal family, and Aboriginal people more broadly, resulted in some young people experiencing culture intermittently, rather than as a continuous, immersive experience. Here, culture was not understood as embodying interactions with Aboriginal people through repeated exposure and immersion (which enables learning about certain values, attitudes and beliefs), but rather as the act of engaging in cultural practices that were understood as constituting Aboriginal culture. For example, having lived with non-Indigenous family members for most of her life, Cecilia's thoughts about learning her Indigenous culture suggest that she was expecting to learn something tangible *about* her culture, in an explicit manner, when attending a Koorie kids playgroup as a young child while living in OOHC:

When I was younger, they [my foster carers] were told that they should get me to be more involved in my culture and learn more about it and stuff . . . They put me into this playgroup, a Koorie kids playgroup or something. But the thing was we never actually learnt anything. It was just more, parents just getting their kids there and you play around. We never really learnt about anything about our culture. (Cecilia, female, aged 16)

For Cecilia, being around Aboriginal people (such as an Aboriginal playgroup co-ordinator) did not equate to the practice of culture.

While living in OOHC and after exit from OOHC, being raised in a non-Indigenous home, experiencing daily contact with a non-Indigenous culture, Jace stated that his non-Indigenous grandmother, who he was raised by, encouraged him to be strong in his Aboriginal identity in order to combat racism. However, her ability to impart knowledge about Aboriginal culture was limited since she was not Aboriginal herself:

Nanna always tried to keep us to know more about it and . . . she always wanted us know what we're actually like. . . . She just always told us 'this is what you are . . . this is what people are going to say . . .'. There's always going to be that racism side to it. (Jace, male, aged 15)

### ***7.2.2.3 Culture as Involvement in Cultural Activities and Events***

Young people's stories about cultural connection often highlighted particular times in their lives when they had experienced a certain cultural event or activity, such as school excursions at significant Aboriginal cultural sites (such as Boort in Victoria) or immersion experiences in remote Aboriginal communities (such as Warralong in the Northern Territory). For example, Faith spoke about attending a cultural camp that made her feel 'connected', like she 'belonged'. Sabrina and Jace also spoke about the importance of attending cultural camps, where cultural connection was strengthened

through immersive activities and being around Aboriginal people (including Elders and other Aboriginal young people).

For most young people in this research, Aboriginal culture was practised through engagement in certain activities—such as art—that were understood to be representative of Aboriginal culture. For example, young people spoke about possessing, or engaging with, well-known signifiers of Aboriginal culture, such as dot paintings, which are often associated with ‘traditional’ forms of Aboriginal culture. This is evident in some young people’s responses around feeling connection to, or disconnection from, culture.

Interviewer: So do you feel connected to your Aboriginal culture?

Jace: Yeah. I have paintings and stuff in my room. (Jace, male, aged 15)

Interviewer: So do you feel connected to your Aboriginal culture?

Cade: Yes.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Cade: I don’t know. Because I haven’t done any cultural activities and stuff for quite a while now because I’ve been busy, obviously. But it is what it is and I believe I’m still connected to the culture, even though I haven’t been in a cultural activity for a while.

(Cade, male, aged 18)

Interviewer: Do you feel connected to your culture?

Aaliyah: I feel like I am. Yeah, I just feel like I do. I want to still learn more. Just, if there’s any more to learn. Which there probably is. . . . I want to learn how to make a coolamon. (Aaliyah, female, aged 15)

Sometimes, feelings of connection to culture were also influenced by engagement in aspects of culture, such as art. For example, Cecilia recounted experiences of practising culture via art at school: ‘I recently did an Aboriginal painting,

a dot painting. That was a thing for me to feel more connected to my culture, I guess’ (Cecilia, female, aged 16).

#### **7.2.2.4 Tokenism**

While cultural activities, such as art making, can impart important cultural knowledges, some young people engaged in these practices without an Aboriginal person from their kinship group to oversee the practice, and in some cases, without any Aboriginal person present at all. This form of exposure to culture relates to engagement with aspects of culture that are accessible to people outside of that culture, such as awareness of history, holidays, foods, art or Dreamtime stories, particularly when they are detached from mob-specific teachings. For most young people in this research, efforts to connect to culture were often characterised by engagement with accessible aspects of culture that were, at times, tokenistic.

While living outside of OOHC, Aaliyah recounted how, upon learning traditional dancing via school, her and other Indigenous students were expected to perform at a school assembly:

At school, there’s an Aboriginal co-ordinator there, and in Term 2 last year I think it was, she organised some people to come in and teach us Traditional dancing. And then we didn’t know, at the end, with all the dancing we learnt, we were going to perform it at our whole school assembly. So that was a bit confronting. . . . We’re all painted up in ochre and everything. (Aaliyah, female, aged 15)

Aaliyah also described how she was not scared to perform traditional dancing at school assembly because of her experiences of performing ‘welcome to Country’ speeches at assemblies in primary and secondary school:

I was like ‘I get this all the time’. Because in primary school I used to say ‘Welcome to Country’. So in front of 600 or more children. I was only little when I did that. . . . I think it was to spread more awareness of our culture in the school, I think. Because we

were probably wanting to learn because we're Aboriginals we wanted to learn more in school.

. . . Then in high school I did it as well. And now in Year 10, I'm an Aboriginal leader . . . an 'associate leader'. So I speak at whole school assemblies, at the start and at the end of term. (Aaliyah, female, aged 15)

Importantly, these 'welcome to Country' speeches were not given on Aaliyah's mob-specific Country.<sup>72</sup> Sabrina also encountered being involved in outward-facing reconciliation efforts at her school:

. . . We came here, 100 schools, to do the 'Fire Carrier Program', which is like reconciliation. I still think it's 100 schools. There's a group of kids who become the fire carriers and they just do reconciliation. So they do . . . You know the week where they celebrate the vote and the Mabo decision and all that, like the referendum? . . . So we dealt with all that and we do the raising of the flag at the school events—the Aboriginal flag and Torres Strait Islander flag. We did the acknowledgement and we do speeches and fundraising. So, yeah, it was just a reconciliation plan. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

Aaliyah and Sabrina described their experiences of being involved in cultural activities, such as traditional dancing and reconciliation activities, at school as positive. However, Aaliyah's and Sabrina's experiences also demonstrate how efforts to integrate culture into environments that are disconnected from traditional practice (such as schools) can also be viewed as simplistic and performative.

#### ***7.2.2.5 Pan-Aboriginality***

Some young people in this research did not experience cultural connection in ways that were specific to their own mob and family history. Instead, aspects of pan-

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<sup>72</sup> 'Welcome to Country' is a First Nations protocol for welcoming visitors onto one's own sovereign Country. It can only be given by a Traditional Owner—usually an Elder—on their Traditional (or mob-specific) Country. It is in contrast to an 'Acknowledgement of Country' which is a gesture made by a visitor on unceded, sovereign First Nations lands. An 'Acknowledgement of Country' is a sign of respect given to the Traditional Owners of various sovereign First Nations lands which can be made by anyone—Indigenous or not—regardless of their cultural status.

Aboriginality were experienced, wherein exposure to Aboriginal culture does not relate to a culturally distinct mob group, but rather to a homogeneous, collective Aboriginal culture. This is contrary to, for example, learning mob-specific language. As highlighted in Chapter 3 (in reference to ‘Aboriginality’), pan-Aboriginality initially arose as a form of political resistance in response to oppression, wherein Aboriginal people from diverse mobs and nation groups banded together against their shared oppressor.<sup>73</sup> For young people in this research, pan-Aboriginality was spoken about in terms of Aboriginal people they connect with being ‘family’, or not knowing their mob group but connecting with a broader geographical identity term, such as ‘Koori’ or ‘Murri’. For example, Sabrina spoke about how Aboriginal people can create their own non-blood-related family:

We can have people who are not related to us who are like your family. I think that distinguishes us from other people around the world. We don’t need to be blood related to be related. You can make your own family, as long as [you are] accepted. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

However, other young people did comment about not being able to learn mob-specific knowledge: ‘All you really learn is about is Boonwurrung people and we’re not really part of them’ (Jace, male, aged 15) and ‘I know more about the Northern Territory history than I do about my own history, where my own community is from, because a lot of the communities up top, they know it’ (Dalton, male, aged 24).

In terms of not learning mob-specific information, not living in their communities of origin provided an added layer of difficulty for many young people in this research. Speaking about her experiences with OOHC caseworkers, Caitlyn spoke

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<sup>73</sup> See Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2014) for a nuanced discussion of pan-Aboriginality (also referred to as pan-Indigenous in their article), which articulates ‘how varying dimensions of racism have not only been imbedded into the rhetoric of disadvantage, but also that the very constructions of a pan-Indigenous identity (simply Indigenous or not) within research has been formulated largely from the foundations of biased Eurocentric epistemologies’ (p. 785).

about a lack of understanding of the complexity of cultural connection: ‘They think it’s just easy to be thrown at some program or a camp, and they’ll be fine. They’ll be connected and they’ll figure it out. But it’s so much more than that’ (Caitlyn, female, aged 25).

While many young people experienced exposure to cultural activities, pan-Aboriginality and tokenism, young people’s agency was also evident in their stories about cultural connection over time.

### **7.2.3 Theme Three: Cultural Connection is a Choice Over Time**

Cultural connection was a choice made by young people, not necessarily explicitly, in which ambivalence, competing tensions and shifting feelings towards culture were apparent at different times over the course of their lives. Young people highlighted that cultural connection can mean different things to different people:

It’s a lot of things. It can be anything. It’s not just one thing. Just because you know who you are, doesn’t mean you’re gonna be proud and you’re gonna feel like you’re one of them. It’s lots of different things and it’s never the same thing for one person. (Caitlyn, female, aged 25)

Everyone feels different things, they might feel they have to know all the old history stories to feel that they know enough to be cool with it. (Dalton, male, aged 24)

This diversity was evident in the transcripts of interviews.

Young people’s stories also spoke to the ways in which cultural connection was developed over time, from childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, as a journey over time, as evident in Jace’s response about what cultural connection means to him:

There’s just more to it [cultural connection] that people don’t really understand. And, as you’re young, we don’t really understand it either though. When you’re older you understand more of the stories and you understand . . . There’s a meaning behind the stories, when you’re young you don’t understand the meanings [and] . . . what they

actually mean to you as a person and what they mean to our culture. (Jace, male, aged 15)

Faith's experiences of cultural connection also took place over time, and resulted in her feeling stronger in her identity as Aboriginal in her early twenties:

Interviewer: So do you feel strong in your identity as Aboriginal now?

Faith: Now, yes. Definitely not five years ago. But, now, yeah. (Faith, female, aged 21)

For all young people in this research, knowledge of culture—and, by extension, culture itself—was learned over time, in OOHC and beyond, as highlighted by Aaliyah: 'Just learned it [culture] growing up, I've learned more and more. Now I've got an understanding of it. A little history as well' (Aaliyah, female, aged 15).

Young people's agency in negotiating their experiences of cultural connection over time, within and outside of OOHC, were particularly apparent in interviews. Table 12 (below) shows the sub-themes for theme three.

**Table 12**

*Theme three and sub-themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Theme three. Cultural connection is a choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Yearning for culture</li><li>• Uncertainty and ambivalence concerning culture</li><li>• Competing needs</li><li>• Survival mode</li></ul>

### ***7.2.3.1 Yearning for Culture***

Some young people described yearning to learn more about their culture while growing up in OOHC, and beyond OOHC:

. . . It was like a necessary thing to find out all that kind of stuff [about my culture]. I had to know to cement my own identity. I wanted to know and I knew people knew, so I was like, you just ask, you'll find out. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

Faith also experienced a yearning to know her culture over time, which resulted in her feeling ‘lost’ while living OOHC, and while living in non-Indigenous care with her mum after exit from OOHC:

I grew up not knowing anything. Everyone just pushed away, nobody wanted to talk about it no matter how much I asked. It wasn’t just my mum. It was the workers, it was everyone. Nobody wanted to talk. And I don’t understand because it wasn’t like it was 20 years ago . . . I’m 21. . . . There’s so much out there that they could have given to me. They could have got me an Aboriginal worker. They could have got me someone who was there to talk to me, and they didn’t. That just makes me fucking mad. They could have done something and I wouldn’t have been as lost as I felt. (Faith, female, aged 21)

Faith spoke about wanting to learn culture to learn more about herself and who she was. Her desire to connect with her Aboriginal parent also fuelled her desire to learn culture:

There was a lot going on, but I still . . . because my dad wasn’t around a lot, that made me want to know more because he would never . . . I thought if I knew more about my culture, I’d be more connected to my dad kind of thing. And, you know, he’s my dad. I hate him, but I love him. (Faith, female, aged 21)

### ***7.2.3.2 Uncertainty and Ambivalence Concerning Culture***

Other young people, such as Jace, described ambivalence to learning about aspects of culture, such as kinship:

Interviewer: So do you know much about your Aboriginal side of the family?

Jace: [My sister] would know more than I do. She’s looked more into it. I don’t know why—I just haven’t really gotten into it yet. . . . being a 15-year-old boy, I’m just more into the sporty stuff and being myself. (Jace, male, aged 15)

For Jace, his ambivalence around *when* to start, or continue, his journey towards cultural connection was apparent, particularly in his choice of the word ‘yet’ to describe ‘getting into’ culture.

Cecilia also spoke about her reluctance to engage with her Aboriginal culture: It’s weird because Dad [foster dad] was just saying before, in the car, that they have asked me before if I wanted to know about my culture and learn about it more and for some reason I kept saying ‘no’. I don’t really know what the reason was or remember it or anything. Like I would want to learn about my culture, but I just feel like . . . I’m kind of distant, but I don’t want to know kind of thing. (Cecilia, female, aged 16)

### ***7.2.3.3 Competing Needs***

For some young people, cultural connection was not always at the forefront. For Sabrina, grappling with why she did not live with her parents, as a result of child protection intervention, caused distress, anger and shame over a long period:

I don’t feel like I ever didn’t have something. But just always that kind of thing like ‘why did that happen to me?’ I feel that’s really hard for kids to come to terms with, especially if they’ve been removed from home. Like ‘why me?’ That’s something that plagues them for the rest of their life. . . . you don’t tell people why you don’t have parents because it’s a source of shame. . . . It takes a long time to stop being angry at the world. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

### ***7.2.3.4 Survival Mode***

Being in ‘survival mode’ while living in OOHC took precedence over culture for two young people in this research who experienced OOHC during adolescence. Caitlyn spoke about safety and her basic needs, such as clothing, during her time in care:

It was an iffy experience . . . she [my carer] wouldn’t really get me anything, even when she was getting paid and stuff from DHHS [child protection], like carer’s payment and

whatnot. She'd always complain about getting me stuff with that money. So it was kind of hard to get DHHS [child protection] to get me clothes and stuff like that. Because I only had a few things when all that happened. It wasn't a very good experience even though it was with someone that we grew up knowing. I thought I would have been safe. (Caitlyn, female, aged 25)

Poverty affected Caitlyn before, during and after her time in care. Dalton similarly describes being in a state of survival while living in care:

You turn . . . I don't know if primal is the right word. But you get real defensive, real angry, real quick. Because if you're not, you get . . . it's not fun. . . . So it was pretty rough. . . . You miss a lot of things going through that, to be honest. (Dalton, male, aged 24)

However, this experience of being in 'survival mode' while in OOHC was only recounted by two young people. Most young people interviewed described having their basic needs—such as food, shelter and attachment to a primary caregiver—met while living in and outside of OOHC.

## **7.3 Enablers and Barriers to Cultural Connection**

### **7.3.1 Theme Four: Enablers to Cultural Connection**

Most young people experienced a range of enablers and barriers along their journeys towards cultural connection. These enablers and barriers were experienced both within and outside of OOHC, at different points throughout their lives. Table 13 (below) shows the sub-themes for theme four.

**Table 13**

*Theme four and sub-themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Theme four. Enablers to cultural connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Connection and feelings of belonging with Aboriginal people</li><li>• Comfortable ways of engaging that are not forced</li><li>• Obtaining knowledge of culture in accessible ways</li><li>• Supportive carers who value cultural connection</li></ul>

**7.3.1.1 Connection and Feelings of Belonging with Aboriginal People**

While a range of enablers were experienced by young people, the most predominant enabler was connection and feelings of belonging with other Aboriginal people. Lamar experienced this connection via cultural immersion with his Aboriginal family prior to entering OOHC:

We were kind of immersed in that community because I was just with my [Aboriginal] grandma. She was working so I was around Indigenous people the whole time and it was really good and I learnt a lot about culture then. (Lamar, male, aged 16)

Tabitha reflected on her time growing up around her Aboriginal family while living in OOHC and the influence this had on her experiences of cultural connection over time: ‘. . . just being with Aboriginal family, I guess, probably made the culture more prominent’ (Tabitha, female, aged 21).

Tabitha also spoke about the importance of Country and Aboriginal family to connection to culture after her exit from OOHC:

Since I live in a non-Indigenous household, connection to culture is being able to go back to Country at least two times a year. To me that’s important because if I don’t go there for long enough I start feeling guilty. . . . I’m like ‘I haven’t seen my family in ages, I haven’t been back to Country’. (Tabitha, female, aged 21)

Going back to Country and being around their Aboriginal family on a regular basis were important for Lamar and Tabitha while living in non-Indigenous care, respectively, both within and outside of OOHC. Conversely, Sabrina used social media to connect with her extended Aboriginal family after exit from OOHC:

Yeah, I just got on Facebook and connected with my Aunty. And then she got me onto my cousins. My dad even put a post on the internet and he was like ‘my little girl wants to find her people. Everyone follow her on Facebook’. It was just a matter of reaching out, I guess. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

After exit from OOHC, Faith spoke about how connection to other Aboriginal people at a cultural camp helped her to feel cultural connection:

You feel like you’re existing more when you’re connected, when you feel like you’re a part of something . . . Because I’m part of this group—it’s not just a group, there’s so many people. We’re spread out, literally, everywhere, and you’re just connected. Not just through spirits, stuff like that, you’re connected to the people, you’re connected to the land. They showed me how to be connected to my culture and connected to all these different stories and that there’s so much more than ‘yeah, you’re a Blackfulla, you get to tick a box’. (Faith, female, aged 21)

Some young people spoke about the importance of connecting to other Aboriginal people via involvement in Aboriginal community.

Culture can relate to community. . . . Having that sense of belonging with your people. (Lamar, male, aged 16)

For me it’s [cultural connection] just getting involved with people in the community . . . including the services. That way we’re able to connect with our own kind as well. Just get involved in stuff and be a part of something. Feel like you belong, instead of feeling so disconnected like something is missing. . . . For me, once I started getting involved in stuff, that’s when I started to feel like I belong[ed]. (Caitlyn, female, aged 25)

For Faith, Lamar and Caitlyn, being around Aboriginal people enabled feelings of belonging:

I didn't feel connected before, but after being with these guys [Aboriginal people at a cultural camp] I was like 'I am a person and I do belong'. . . . It's like, I belong, I am part of something. I'm not just this push-off to the side that has a shitty family and everything. I'm Aboriginal. I am something. (Faith, female, aged 21)

Sabrina spoke about how connection to Aboriginal people was important, but that connection to community did not have to be in relation to your community of origin:

I think you need to have a connection to a community. Not necessarily the community where you come from, because you can be accepted in any community on any level. . . . But I think Aboriginal identity comes from that. The fundamental thing is having a connection with other people. That's what we're all about; our aunties, our uncles, our sisters, our brothers, our mob. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

Other young people spoke about connecting to community via attendance at local events, such as NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) week marches or the 'Dreamtime at the G'/'Long Walk' march.

### ***7.3.1.2 Comfortable Ways of Engaging That are not Forced***

For most young people who did not describe stories of cultural immersion, engaging with culture had to occur in a way that felt comfortable, as highlighted by Dalton:

Because I didn't grow up with it, you want to know more about it, but you want to learn more about it in a comfortable way where it's not forced into you. If you don't want to learn it, I guess you'll never learn it. But if you want it, it's there. There's a rich history. (Dalton, male, aged 24)

For Caitlyn, art was a comfortable mechanism for her to learn about her own culture:

When I was little, growing up I always felt like something was missing. Like I just didn't belong, even among other Indigenous kids and stuff like that. . . . So, for me, when I started learning about my culture and doing my arts and really enjoying it and loving it and understanding where I came from . . . even though I wish I could speak the language and stuff like that, it was good. It felt like something kind of filled up and I knew who I was and where I was from. (Caitlyn, female, aged 25)

Other young people spoke about the importance of other mechanisms, such as attending cultural camps (such as the 'Korin Gamadji Institute'), engaging in cultural activities such as art making, having visual representations of their culture (such as artwork, tools or the Aboriginal flag) displayed in their room or house, and taking inspiration from prominent Aboriginal role models, such as athletes ('Cathy Freeman') or political figures ('Warren Mundine'). For example, Jace spoke about entering an art competition with two other Aboriginal students at school to design an Indigenous AFL jersey for the Richmond Football Club.

### ***7.3.1.3 Obtaining Knowledge of Culture in Accessible Ways***

Knowledge of Aboriginal culture and history was also important for cultural connection for young people. However, in the absence of being around their Aboriginal family or mob regularly, some young people relied on information learned from school:

In Year 10 Humanities, you get a choice between African Americans or Aboriginals. So I choose Aboriginals. Cool. More culture. Let's do this. Then you watch a film, Rabbit-Proof Fence. Yes, okay then. It's about the Stolen Generation, so you learn more about that and social justice. (Aaliyah, female, aged 15)

These accessible sources of information and knowledge about culture are important. Not all young people had the opportunity to access Aboriginal knowledge,

from Aboriginal people and community themselves, but instead received information via third-party sources, such as texts, books and teachers at school. Other people sought to teach themselves about their culture, with the internet used as a source of information:

So if you're not with where you come from, you don't know your own story or your ancestor's story, but the internet helps a lot. In New South Wales we do astrology—all the star stories and stuff like that—I've found out using [the] internet. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

#### ***7.3.1.4 Supportive Carers Who Value Cultural Connection***

Some young people had supportive non-Indigenous carers who would reinforce their Aboriginal identity. Other supportive non-Indigenous carers possessed knowledge about the young person's Aboriginal family, or enabled access to Aboriginal people or organisations to support young people's journeys towards cultural connection. Speaking about her involvement with a cultural program at a local ACCO, Aaliyah spoke about her carer's instrumental support:

She [carer] heard about it and then she asked us if we wanted to do it. I was like, 'yeah, okay then'. And then [my sister] said yes and [my oldest brother] said yes. And yeah, we've just been going to it. . . . She [carer] gives us a lot of support . . . Mum [carer] knows a lot. We learn a lot from her. If we want to know we just ask her. If she doesn't know she'll find out for us. (Aaliyah, female, aged 15)

The importance of placing Aboriginal children with carers who could support young people's journeys towards cultural connection was mentioned by a few young people. For Sabrina and Caitlyn, carers did not have to be Indigenous to support Indigenous children and young people in OOHC:

I think that maybe if that person has an understanding of culture and is able to make sure that they can get connected and they have the right connections, knowing what's

happening in their community. I think either way, just because they're Indigenous doesn't necessarily mean that they're the right choice. . . . [it] comes down to who that person is who's taking them [in], who's caring for them. And if that person's able to give them what they need. (Caitlyn, female, aged 25)

Some young people mentioned that non-Indigenous carers could support young people's journeys towards cultural connection through involvement in the Aboriginal community by 'going to community events, trying to see what ACCOs are around' (Tabitha, female, aged 21). In this way, though, non-Indigenous carers were reliant on Aboriginal organisations and community events to support young people's journeys towards cultural connection. Still, the importance of carer action—or inaction—was crucial. Tabitha asserted that carers should be made accountable for their action, or inaction, towards supporting cultural connection for Indigenous children and young people in OOHC and permanent care:

I just feel like there should be more—what's the word—like things put in place to make sure that they [carers] actually are like [accountable], like KPIs or something. I don't know, to make sure that the carers are involving them [Indigenous children in their care] in cultural things, so they can feel more connected to their culture—obviously, if the child wants to, because it's always up to them. (Tabitha, female, aged 21)

### **7.3.2 Theme Five: Barriers to Cultural Connection**

Young people experienced a range of barriers along their journeys towards cultural connection, both during their time in OOHC and beyond. None of these barriers were experienced by all young people, nor were they experienced in the same way by all young people. Further, it is important to note that some of these barriers, such as intergenerational child removals and trauma, are not directly related to young people's placement in OOHC, but rather, are evidence of the impact of colonisation on cultural

connection for First Nations peoples. Table 14 (below) shows the sub-themes for theme five.

**Table 14**

*Theme five and sub-themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Theme five. Barriers to cultural connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative experiences with Aboriginal parents</li> <li>• Feeling ‘out of place’</li> <li>• Lack of familiarity with one’s Aboriginal culture</li> <li>• Racism</li> <li>• Fear and shame</li> <li>• Intergenerational child removals and trauma</li> <li>• Reliance on an adult to facilitate access to Aboriginal culture</li> <li>• Systemic issues</li> </ul>

### ***7.3.2.1 Negative Experiences With Aboriginal Parents***

Diverse experiences of barriers along young people’s journeys towards cultural connection were evident in young people’s stories. For some young people, negative experiences with their Aboriginal parents prevented them from wanting to engage with their culture. This was particularly the case when their Aboriginal parent was the only Aboriginal adult they would have contact with. For Jace, his father was the only Aboriginal adult in his life, yet he had chosen to stop seeing his father when he was 12 years old. In speaking about his dad, Jace said:

I don’t really like my dad. At all. I wouldn’t let him back into my life if he wanted to come back into my life. If he asked . . . oh, he did ask. He asked like last summer and I was kind of like, ‘no, go away. Leave me alone’. . . . I don’t really see him as a thing that’s important to me. Yeah, just doesn’t seem important to me. I wouldn’t lose sleep over it if he disappeared off the face of the earth. (Jace, male, aged 15)

Cecilia's negative experiences with her Aboriginal father also affected her willingness to engage with culture:

I don't know what it is completely . . . what it is that stops me from not wanting to know. But I know that it is something that involves my Dad. . . . Just because he's the one that's the Aboriginal and I'm more terrified of him than I am of my Mum. (Cecilia, female, aged 16)

Some young people's feelings about their Aboriginal parents might have been partly influenced by their carers' negative opinions of their Aboriginal parents. For example, Jace stated that his non-Indigenous 'grandad and him [his father] hated each other', while Sabrina, also spoke about her grandfather's dislike of her Aboriginal father:

I think they had a lot of trouble with my grandparents, like finding that common ground between my parents. There was a lot of hate for many years because my grandparents had ended up raising their own grandchildren. It was very hard for my grandfather. He doesn't acknowledge my dad exists. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

Access visits with her Aboriginal father were also uncomfortable for Sabrina:

I hated visitation. I hated him for a long time. We once saw my cousin's cousin, on my mum's side—my white cousins—we saw him at Macca's one day with my dad and I ran away into the toilet. I was like 'don't talk to that man. He's my dad'.

He came over to our table and was like 'blah, blah, blah' and 'this and that' and he was like 'oh, I'm their dad'. We were like 'urgh' because it was so, because nana and granddad are very, obviously you saw the house, because they came from nothing they're very proud of what they have now.

Coming from my house to see my dad when he looked like a hobo and walking around with him . . . There was a lot of shame. He used to say 'I'm going to come and watch your games' like sport, and we'd go 'no, we don't want our friends to know you exist'. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

Sabrina's brother, Jace, also spoke about being embarrassed by his Aboriginal father because of 'the way he looked, the person he was . . . Being in jail and whatnot. . . He just always looked run down'.

### ***7.3.2.2 Feeling 'Out of Place'***

For some young people, such as Lamar, living with non-Indigenous carers and being separated from Aboriginal family resulted in feeling 'out of place' around Aboriginal people:

Sometimes I feel a bit out of place with events and stuff. . . . Because I'm obviously fair-skinned and you can't really tell that I'm Indigenous, but it's also because a lot of it I just haven't experienced before. At some events I haven't experienced anything like it, and now that I live here [with my non-Indigenous carers, away from Country and Aboriginal family] I don't really do any cultural, don't go to any events or things like that, unless I'm [near Country, with my Aboriginal family]. (Lamar, male, aged 16)

### ***7.3.2.3 Lack of Familiarity With One's Aboriginal Culture***

For many young people in this research, having grown up with non-Indigenous carers had resulted in a greater familiarity with their carers' cultural background than their own Aboriginal culture. This resulted in feeling uncomfortable around Aboriginal people, or unaware of Aboriginal values, including those of their own Aboriginal culture.

Despite it being common to refer to Aboriginal family members in ways that indicate their relationship to you (e.g. 'cuz', 'sis', 'bruz', 'son') across many Aboriginal cultures, Cecilia also spoke about feeling uncomfortable with her father's use of the word 'daughter' to refer to her: 'He never actually calls me by my name. He also always calls me "daughter". It's weird. I don't get it' (Cecilia, female, aged 16).

For Faith, her lack of familiarity with her Aboriginal culture resulted in her not understanding cultural values that are shared among many Aboriginal cultures, such as

respect for Elders. In speaking about her first time at a cultural camp, Faith recalled not knowing how to refer to an Elder:

I never knew how to like, what to call them. Everyone calls everyone ‘Aunty’. . . . It was really weird because I’d never been around that and the first time I went, everyone was like ‘Aunty, Aunty, Aunty’ and I’m like ‘What? Are you guys all related to her? What’s going on?’ I was the odd one of the group. (Faith, female, aged 21)

One young person spoke about children’s familiarity with their carers’ cultural background in OOHC—and a lack of familiarity with their Aboriginal culture—being akin to assimilation. In speaking about her current work, which involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC, Tabitha said:

I see a lot of Aboriginal children—obviously in non-Aboriginal families—and I feel like a lot of the time, they’re not involving the child in cultural activities. They’re—I don’t want to say that word, because it’s pretty hard core—like assimilating sort of thing. (Tabitha, female, aged 21)

#### **7.3.2.4 Racism**

Racism also posed a barrier to young people’s journeys towards cultural connection. Tabitha reflected on her own experiences with her non-Indigenous father, to whom she was reunified, when he would denigrate her Aboriginality by making racist ‘jokes’:

He [Dad] makes comments sometimes as a joke, but I get so annoyed. Just like when we’re at the petrol station or something [and he’ll say] ‘do you like the smell of petrol?’ And I’m like ‘Shut up dad’. He thinks he’s funny but it’s definitely not. (Tabitha, female, aged 21)

For Tabitha, racism—predominately from her non-Indigenous biological family—resulted in her questioning her Aboriginal identity:

I was unsure of whether I was Aboriginal or not and I felt like if I wasn't 100% sure, then maybe I wasn't [Aboriginal]. Because, obviously, being told by one side of your family that 'you are' and the other side that 'you're not, you don't have enough Aboriginal in your blood to count, so it doesn't count . . .'. (Tabitha, female, aged 21)

While not experienced as overt racism, some young people also recounted stories about their skin colour being compared to that of their non-Indigenous, white carers: 'When they [my carers] come to school I get a lot of stares, because of how tanned I am. I feel very uncomfortable' (Aaliyah, female, aged 15).

### ***7.3.2.5 Fear and Shame***

Fear and shame prevented some young people from wanting to connect to culture. Caitlyn described this in relation to her siblings, for whom she was a kinship carer:

For them [my siblings], when it comes to culture, they're disconnected. They're kind of scared. At least that's what it looks like for me. They're scared to connect. They're scared to do it because they know nothing about it and they don't want to get it wrong. They feel like they'll look stupid if they try. (Caitlyn, female, aged 25)

Aaliyah also spoke about how learning information about her culture in school caused shame at not knowing beforehand:

In primary school when we . . . learned maybe a bit about our culture in class. I'm sitting there like, this is my culture, I should know this, but I don't. So it was like new information, but then again it's basic information that I should have really known, but I don't. (Aaliyah, female, aged 15)

There was also shame experienced by some young people in feeling as though they did not know enough about their culture, heritage or Aboriginality, or in feeling 'not Aboriginal enough'. For example, when speaking about her experience of doing a dot painting, Cecilia stated that 'it made me feel more Aboriginal than I am, I guess'.

Other young people, such as Sabrina, spoke about how shame could be induced by living with non-Indigenous carers in OOHC who did not know much about Indigenous culture:

I have friends who were placed with people who had no idea about Indigenous culture and they grew up very disconnected. Now, when they're my age, they find it very hard to be around other Indigenous people because they have so much shame. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

### ***7.3.2.6 Intergenerational Child Removals and Trauma***

Several young people ( $n=6$ ) – Dalton, Sabrina, Jace, Lamar, Aaliyah and Cade – had histories of intergenerational child removal, and spoke about their parents' or grandparents' removal from their families by child protection, in some cases, as part of the Stolen Generations. Consequently, some young people were unable to find out information about their culture from their Aboriginal parents because of intergenerational trauma and disconnection from culture:

He [Dad] was the cultural one, but he never really spoke about it because he didn't know anything. His Mum walked out a young age and his Dad was never around. So he just didn't know anything about who he was, where he came from. (Faith, female, aged 21)

Dalton did not know he was Aboriginal until later in life, assuming that his mother was just 'tanned':

Mums pretty dark. I just thought she was tanned. You don't really know. But she had pretty big drinking issues, because Mum was in the Stolen Gens. So she was, still is . . . they just grew up a bit broken because all her brothers and sisters went through foster care. So they copped it a fair bit. (Dalton, male, aged 24)

For some young people, their Aboriginal parents kept some information about their culture to themselves because of their own trauma or disconnection. Caitlyn

described having to wait to learn about her mob's art-making practices until she could reach out and connect with her extended Aboriginal family:

Mum was very restrictive. She was very hard to talk to and get information out of. So it wasn't until later when I could get my own phone and get on Facebook and stuff like that, that I was able to really start learning stuff. Three or four years ago I started talking to my Uncles. To try to make sure that I was doing it [art] right and I wasn't doing anything I shouldn't. (Caitlyn, female, aged 25)

Not having Aboriginal people to learn from prevented some young people from being able to learn about their ancestry or mob entirely:

Me and Mum [who is non-Indigenous], one time I had a massive breakdown, this was a few years ago. I was like 'why can't I find out?' We weren't talking to Dad [who is Aboriginal] at this stage. Dad was out of our lives for four years. I lost it at mum because I was like 'Mum, Dad's not even around and I still don't know anything about my history. I just want to learn'. She tried to go on, I think it's ancestry.com or something, a green logo. We found nothing. (Faith, female, aged 21)

### ***7.3.2.7 Reliance on an Adult to Facilitate Access to Aboriginal Culture***

Young people's stories illuminated the dependence they had on their caregivers—and the OOHC system—to provide access to culture:

They just don't care about your culture. It's like they don't want to show you anything. They just . . . I don't know. I don't even know what it's called. It's not even not caring . . . not acknowledging? I don't even know who else I could have asked. My counsellor? Everyone was white. That's it. Only thing there ever was, was pamphlets. And I couldn't call. I was too young. What am I going to do? Steal a phone and call them? There's nothing I can do. (Faith, female, aged 21)

Some non-Indigenous carers facilitated access to knowledge about Aboriginal culture via ACCOs or cultural camps:

I reckon if we had been placed with anyone else, we would be completely disconnected. It's pretty much all been nan and granddad. They sent us to the camps and the program, like [name of camp], which was a camp. I went on that when I was in Year 9 I think. So that was the first one. And then I did [another program] . . . that's like an Indigenous leaders' program. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

However, non-Indigenous carers, whether they were kinship or foster carers, could not impart those aspects of Aboriginal cultures that are learned, often inexplicitly, via immersion in culture, such as values, attitudes and norms, despite good intentions. Those aspects of Aboriginal cultures that are accessible to those outside of the culture—such as music, food and art—could be accessed by non-Indigenous carers: 'My grandparents were really, really good like that. Like we've . . . They buy paintings, we always grew up with everything. Just amazing' (Sabrina, female, aged 18). Aboriginal people were needed to impart cultural knowledge and values that underlie outward expressions of culture to young people.

### ***7.3.2.8 Systemic Issues***

None of the young people in this research knew of having a cultural support plan, although this might have not been a legislative requirement at the time.<sup>74</sup> Two young people—siblings Aaliyah and Cade—related stories about an ancestry document—a family tree—being received a couple of weeks prior to my interviews with them (at least 12–15 years after having exited OOHC). While Aaliyah and Cade both spoke excitedly at having recently received their family tree, even then, the family tree was not up to date: 'We got a document from [OOHC organisation] maybe last week, I think it was, from our family tree. They [need to] update it because I'm not

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<sup>74</sup> In Victoria, CSPs became a requirement for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC on 1 March 2016, when it was enacted in legislation. Given the ages of young people in this research (15–25 years old in 2018), exit from OOHC likely occurred for all young people in this research prior to 2016.

there, nor [my sister] and I don't think [my younger brother] is' (Aaliyah, female, aged 15).

When asked if she had a family tree, Sabrina stated that she had only just seen it the year before. She also reflected on how, from her Aboriginal family's perspective, she had been separated from them:

I think someone from [OOHC organisation] drew my nan a family tree years and years ago and I only saw that last year just because, I don't know why. I think there was a lot of pushback from dad's [Aboriginal] side of the family to my grandparents because I got placed with my grandparents. I think they were upset with that because us being Indigenous, I think they wanted us to be with an Indigenous family. They were like 'oh, they've been placed with a white family'. That kind of stuff. I think they would have had that fear of never being able to know me. It happened in a sense, because I only reached out when I was older. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

Sabrina stated that she was not sure if her Aboriginal family interstate were considered for placement when she came into care:

I don't think they ever even looked into the option of placing with me with my other [Aboriginal] family, just because we were so disconnected. I don't think they wanted to move us over state borders or whatever. Who knows what it was. . . . They probably just looked to my grandparents because they had the most stable environment, I guess, at the time. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

In discussing practice issues, Tabitha spoke about a recent experience she had at work:

One of the cultural support plans I've seen come from a DHHS [child protection] worker, they wrote 'you are from the blue country' because you know how you look at the Aboriginal map and there's different colours? Because the area that they were from, the colour on the map was blue. So they said 'you are from the blue country'. (Tabitha, female, aged 21)

Caitlyn also discussed her frustration at recent practice issues in relation to caring for her siblings as a statutory kinship carer:

I don't trust everything they say and DHHS [child protection] has been a nightmare. They don't communicate, they don't return calls or emails. We don't have a case manager in DHHS [child protection] so we book in and see whoever is available. Whenever we talk to someone they have no clue that both of the kids are actually siblings or they're confused about their gender. They know nothing at all. It's like you have to debrief and then say what you're calling them for.

And for the last year, we just haven't been able to get anything from them. They've stopped coming to the meetings. They'll say yes to meetings and then they'll just not turn up. . . . We'll be waiting there with the kids and then they won't come and it will be after the time and then they'll be like 'oh, sorry, we can't make it', half an hour after or meant to be. It's been very, very frustrating. I feel like actually complaining or sending a letter or something. But I don't know how that works.  
(Caitlyn, female, aged 25)

Infrequent direct contact with the child was also pointed out as a systemic failing by some young people, such as Sabrina:

I feel like there's a need for them [child protection/OOHC caseworkers] to have direct contact with the child, even though I feel like, they can be very funny about talking directly to children. They talk to the parents and the caregivers but they never really talked to us. Like in my own personal case, they never really had any kind of thing to do with the actual people who were being affected by what's going on. They're so caught up in this idea of protectionism and they lose that vital thing about what the child actually needs and what they'll take with them later in life. I definitely feel they need to incorporate more of that idea of keeping that child in culture. (Sabrina, female, aged 18)

For many young people in this research, poor OOHC practices created impediments along their journeys towards cultural connection, often through a lack of

support. In this context, feelings of cultural connection were achieved by young people in this research despite the OOHC system. As Faith highlights in her message to the OOHC system, children need to be given the choice—and opportunity—to connect to their culture in meaningful ways:

They need to realise that just because we're in OOHC, doesn't mean that we don't want to learn things. Like, we're in OOHC, we're there because we're safe. Yeah, we're safe but are we connected? Do we feel like we're worth something?

I just wish they had put me in a position where I could have learnt about who I was, where I came from, what I was doing, why Aboriginals were so frowned upon. What the fuck did we do wrong?

There were services but nobody wanted to talk about it. I don't want them to force it, but I want them to show that they can do something. Put me in every day, put me in a daily culture thing . . . unless I don't want it. Give us the option instead of just putting it under the rug. (Faith, female, aged 21)

## **7.4 Conclusion**

Across the interviews conducted with Aboriginal young people who had experienced OOHC, it is evident that their experiences of cultural connection were diverse and varied. There was no universal experience of cultural connection or disconnection, nor was there one universal way in which cultural connection could be enabled. In this way, cultural connection was understood and experienced as being as heterogeneous as Aboriginality itself. That is, the experience of cultural connection for young people in this research was determined by several factors, including family background, OOHC experience and current circumstances. These findings also highlight the ways in which cultural connection did not encapsulate a single event (which results in an end state of 'connection'), but rather how cultural connection was developed through the accumulation of experiences over time. In this way, cultural

connection was experienced as a dynamic process, developed over time, by young people in this research, with barriers and enablers steering the path. Thus, cultural connection was experienced as a journey that encapsulated identity development, and the practice of culture, but was complicated by separation from Aboriginal family, including via child protection removal. Young people's stories lend themselves to a reconfiguration of cultural connection as a process over time, both within and outside of OOHC, as illuminated by the diverse subjectivities held by young people in negotiating the Cultural Interface. What I will argue in the next chapter is that this journey is a form of *culturally connecting*, rather than cultural connection, where knowledge of Aboriginal culture and immersion within a mob-specific cultural milieu is pertinent. The implications of these findings for OOHC systems, particularly regarding non-Indigenous care and exit from OOHC into permanent care, will also be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 8: Discussion

This thesis set out to understand how cultural connection for Indigenous children and young people within OOHC contexts is understood by Indigenous peoples. The research methodology used aimed to illuminate the diverse understandings held by Indigenous adult community members, and young people with a lived experience of OOHC, in Victoria. Informed by Indigenous Standpoint Theory, this chapter interprets the findings presented in the two preceding chapters (Chapters 6 and 7) to showcase how cultural connection is understood to be a complex process of *culturally connecting* that takes place over time at the Cultural Interface. Complexity is understood in this context as a ‘non-linearity between cause and effect or action and outcome’ in which ‘actions [can] generate unforeseen consequences . . . in unpredictable ways’ (Little, 2012, p. 4). As this chapter will show, Indigenous relationality highlights what participants in this research emphasise as important to journeys of culturally connecting; however, it is not uniform (and means different things to different people). Individuality and diversity are reflected in the range of experiences and expressions of cultural connection that emerges across both the qualitative and quantitative findings. While the findings identify key themes and scope for improved practice, I argue that there can be no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to creating and maintaining cultural connection in OOHC settings.

This chapter also highlights how journeys of culturally connecting are transformed through child protection removals that result in placement away from Indigenous family. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that cultural disconnection is a contemporary issue for First Nations children and young people outside of OOHC contexts. That is, child removal is one cause of cultural disconnection of many. The wider social context, within and outside of institutions, also impacts cultural

(dis)connection. However, this thesis is concerned with understanding how cultural connection as a policy objective within the OOHC system is experienced. In focusing on the research question *'How is cultural connection understood and experienced by First Nations peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, Australia?'*, within this chapter I centre the impact of child protection removals on contemporary experiences of cultural (dis)connection. As highlighted in Chapter 2, historical child removals have had a significant role in disrupting cultural transmission within First Nations families.

Through this research project, as highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3, we have been able to understand how ongoing child protection removals threaten the continuity of Indigenous family life. Using Indigenous Standpoint Theory to enable a critical framework to reflect on my position and assumptions, this chapter also presents an analysis that highlights the limitations of OOHC systems in enabling cultural connection for Indigenous children and young people in OOHC. I reflect on this tension in the practice and policy implications presented in this chapter, and emphasise the importance of reading this chapter in a way that acknowledges that all efforts to foster cultural connection within OOHC are an amelioration for the known and accepted risk of cultural disconnection facing Indigenous children and young people in OOHC. This presents a challenge for Indigenous researchers, organisations and peoples who seek solutions to the problem of cultural (dis)connection within OOHC systems, because it risks legitimising a system that perpetuates cultural disconnection by design. This thesis argues that cultural connection not only is imperative for the benefit of Indigenous children and young people, but also serves to enable the survival of Indigenous peoples as a collective group. At this juncture, I stress the importance of generating new questions for research that aim to understand how to eliminate the problem of cultural

disconnection by preventing entry into OOHC for Indigenous children and young people in the first place.

## **8.1 Limitations of this Research**

While this thesis offers new insights into cultural connection, particularly reflecting on how it is understood and experienced by Indigenous peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, the findings are not generalisable. The applicability of the findings to Indigenous peoples throughout Australia is limited by the small survey sample size ( $n = 179$ ) and the small number of young people ( $n = 10$ ) interviewed.

The applicability of the interview and survey findings to the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is further limited by the small number of Torres Strait Islander people in this research. Within the interviews, all young people identified as Aboriginal, from diverse nation groups throughout Australia. There were no Torres Strait Islander young people who were interviewed, and there were only a small number of Torres Strait Islander participants in the survey. Thus, the findings from this research—in relation to knowledges in particular—cannot be extended to Torres Strait Islander populations, who have their own unique cultures and historical experiences of colonisation, which are sometimes distinct from First Nations peoples from other parts of Australia. Indeed, the heterogeneity of participants in general means that the combined survey and interview findings cannot be generalised to specific mob groups either.

Given the diversity of First Nations cultures and experiences of colonisation throughout Victoria and Australia, and the small sample size of this study, caution is recommended in generalising from the specific insights of the study to the population as a whole. By emphasising the perspectives of a small sample of First Nations peoples living in Victoria within this research, the richness of the qualitative survey and

interview findings have greatest merit and relevance to understanding cultural connection as it has been specifically experienced in the Victorian OOHC context. Further, there are consistencies expressed within and across the survey and interview findings, while the distribution of the survey through a range of ACCOs in Victoria (including OOHC providers), coupled with the number of survey responses received by Indigenous peoples with professional experiences and knowledge of the OOHC sector, strengthens the applicability of the survey findings to Victorian OOHC contexts.

Another limitation is that none of the interview participants were interviewed while living in OOHC. Several interview participants exited OOHC when they were quite young, and consequently had limited memory of their time in OOHC. It was not possible, in this research, to provide insight into how cultural connection was experienced by young people while living in OOHC, compared with their experiences of cultural connection after exit from OOHC. The research might have been strengthened by inclusion of interview participants who were currently living in OOHC. The research is limited by the fact that only Indigenous care leavers (i.e. those who had exited OOHC, had aged out of OOHC or were living in permanent care) were targeted for recruitment. Further, the research is also limited by the fact that young people who participated in this research exited OOHC some time ago (prior to the *Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Permanent Care and Other Matters) Act 2014* (Vic)), and therefore, this research could not ascertain how changes in cultural planning processes affected young people's experiences of cultural connection in OOHC.

The decision to target young people who had exited OOHC was made because of time and funding constraints attached to my doctoral candidature. Seeking participation, and consent, from young people who are guardians of the state—and the adults who are their guardians—can be a time-intensive exercise, since approval for the

research must first be granted by the relevant government authorities, while the issue of adult guardian consent can also be a very time-intensive process. To avoid time delays, the decision to recruit young people who had exited OOHC was made, knowing that the perspectives of young people currently residing in OOHC (i.e. foster, kinship or residential care) would not be captured.

However, the strength of speaking to young people who had exited OOHC is that a retrospective outlook on their care experiences helped to articulate experiences with hindsight and reflection. Despite the lack of voice of current OOHC youth in this research project, it has nonetheless made possible a rich retrospective wisdom to be articulated by young people who have experienced living in OOHC. This also enabled valuable insight into the ways in which journeys of culturally connecting are experienced over time, throughout childhood and adolescence and into young adulthood.

## **8.2 The Cultural Interface**

In this chapter, the Cultural Interface is utilised as a critical tool to interpret the findings and make sense of young people's stories of culturally connecting over time. The Cultural Interface is a site of discursive formation at which Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing intersect with Western knowledges within settler-colonial contexts (M. Nakata, 1997, 2007a). It is used here to make sense of why Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples hold certain beliefs regarding what constitutes Indigeneity and what may indicate cultural connection. The Cultural Interface is located at:

the intersection of the Western and Indigenous domain . . . the place where we live and learn, the place that conditions our lives, the place that shapes our futures and more to the point the place where we are active agents in our own lives—where we make decisions—our lifeworld. . . . It is a place of tension that requires constant negotiation.  
(M. Nakata, 2002, p. 285)

[It is] the space of ongoing historical continuities and discontinuities as people discard and take up different ways of understanding, being and acting in a complex and changing environment. (M. Nakata, 2007a, p. 208)

Within this chapter, OOHC settings are positioned as a ‘Cultural Interface’ in and of themselves whereby OOHC is a terrain where the colonial state meets Indigenous family life. Upon that terrain, Indigenous children, young people and their families navigate this encounter. This chapter highlights that OOHC—as a site of Cultural Interface—is negotiated in different ways by Indigenous young people. This research draws attention to the diversity of experiences while also emphasising the individual agency of young people at that interface. This approach can illuminate the diversity of meanings and experiences attributed to cultural connection, as held by community members and young people with a lived experience of OOHC by centring the agency of Indigenous young people in navigating OOHC and what cultural connection comes to mean in that context. This enables an understanding of how cultural connection and disconnection, as well as identity and culture, are negotiated and experienced with tension wherein contradictions, ambiguity and confusion are present at the ‘intersection of the Western and Indigenous domain’, as well as the spaces in-between (M. Nakata, 2002, p. 285). Thus, the Cultural Interface helps to make sense of complexity, tensions and diversity with which simplistic and binary (e.g. connected/not connected, traditional/modern) negotiations of culture and identity are not possible.

An example of such an analysis is the *Politics of Identity*, in which sociologist Bronwyn Carlson (2016) highlights that the discursive formation of Aboriginal identity is a politicised endeavour, shaped by colonial conditions that have imposed and defined what constitutes Aboriginal identity. The Cultural Interface enables insight into the limits, and possibilities, of navigating Indigeneity in a settler-colonial environment in which Western and Indigenous knowledges and discourse about what ‘counts’ as

Indigenous are negotiated. Although Carlson's (2016) book strictly discusses the complexity of Aboriginal identity, it has implications for interpreting young people's experiences of culturally connecting in this thesis. Journeys of culturally connecting are constrained, and shaped, by the Western knowledges that are produced about Indigenous peoples, as well as the knowledges Indigenous peoples hold about themselves.

It is also important here to emphasise that my encounter of the Western academy, as a social scientist researcher *and* Indigenous woman, has been one of negotiating my own interface at which Western, Indigenous and other forms of knowledge have shaped my research. This interface has enabled me to interpret the voices and perspectives of Indigenous peoples in the findings, while also providing a critical framework to reflect on my position as a researcher. The research sub-questions that aimed to ascertain what knowledges and mechanisms could enable—and were important to—cultural connection, along with what feelings and actions could evidence cultural connection, were initially motivated by a desire to improve and 'fix' the application of cultural connection within the OOHC system. However, the survey and interview findings have highlighted *why* this desire to 'fix' the system is, in itself, a very difficult aim. As discussed shortly, the finding that cultural connection is a process, along with the diversity of experiences of cultural connection navigated by young people in this research, evidence why mechanisms to 'achieve' cultural connection are complex and must be understood in dynamic, rather than linear, terms. As my interpretation of the findings will show, Indigenous relationality is a central aspect of how Indigenous peoples describe *what* is important to them (including what knowledges and mechanisms are important); however, simultaneously, relationality sustains a focus on the relationships, knowledges and experiences that are disrupted—or placed at risk—

by child protection and OOHC systems. At the same time, relationality also means different things to different people and cannot be utilised in universalistic terms.

My navigation of a site of Cultural Interface within the academy over the duration of my doctoral candidature has produced a difficult but constructive tension, which has prompted critical reflection on the significance and importance of research sub-questions one and three.<sup>75</sup> The value of the research findings set out here is to better understand how Indigenous young people navigate cultural (dis)connection in OOHC contexts. With positioning of these research findings in the contexts of the earlier chapters, there emerges scope to improve practice and policy for Indigenous children within the OOHC system while also maintaining a broader critique that the system itself requires more radical change. To honour the perspectives of Indigenous peoples who participated in this research, I both present these findings with a view towards improved opportunities for cultural connection for those in OOHC, as well as sustaining a broader critique of the OOHC system itself. This perspective emphasises the complexity of cultural connection and resists one-size-fits-all policy responses. In interpreting the findings below, I grapple with the complexity inherent in cultural connection and show how research findings help us to understand *why* cultural connection is complex and how this understanding can inform more critical approaches to Indigenous OOHC policy. I ask the reader to understand that any efforts to improve cultural connection within OOHC contexts that might arise from these findings will, for me, always fall short of a greater justice: to prevent Indigenous children's cultural disconnection in the first place.

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<sup>75</sup> See Chapter 5, research sub-questions one, 'What is important for First Nations children to know to develop cultural connection?', and three, 'How do/can First Nations children develop cultural connection?'

### 8.3 Interpreting the Findings

As highlighted in Chapter 4, the literature concerning cultural connection, particularly within OOHC contexts, provides numerous definitions (Bamblett et al., 2012; M. Davis, 2019; Dudgeon et al., 2020; Gee et al., 2014; Libesman, 2011). Aiming to provide deeper insight into how cultural connection is understood, and experienced, by Indigenous peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, the findings capture some shared understandings about cultural connection, while also showing considerable variability and diversity. This section is structured according to three key insights generated by the findings, followed by a positioning of the findings in relation to the extant literature. In response to the overarching research question, which relates to how cultural connection is understood and experienced by First Nations peoples within OOHC contexts, the first key insight is that *cultural connection is a journey of culturally connecting over time*. This means that cultural connection may appear different at different time points. The second key insight is that *cultural connection is experienced primarily in terms of relationality*. Here, an appreciation of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, both as they are traditionally practised (in ways that are distinct from Western practices) and as they are practised at the interface of traditional and Western orders, is especially useful for understanding how cultural connection is experienced. Third, I provide an analysis, informed by the first two key insights, that *OOHC systems are structurally ill-equipped to enable and sustain meaningful journeys of culturally connecting for Indigenous children and young people*. Here, the importance of immersion in culture—and relating to Indigenous peoples themselves—to journeys of culturally connecting is emphasised. This close association between culturally connecting over time and relationality is in tension with a child protection system that will sometimes remove children determined to be at risk of experiencing harm (e.g. child abuse or neglect), thus

exchanging that risk for the risk of cultural disconnection. I discuss each of these insights in detail, in turn, before positioning the contributions of this thesis within the extant literature.

### **8.3.1 The Process of Culturally Connecting**

A key insight within the combined survey and interview findings was an understanding of cultural connection as a dynamic, ongoing process. The survey and interview findings highlight that cultural connection is best understood as an ongoing process of culturally *connecting* rather than as a definitive end point. This understanding of culturally connecting as a dynamic process is supported by previous research across numerous disciplines—including sociology, psychology and anthropology—wherein identity is understood to be developed over time (Carlson, 2016; Kroger, 2006; McAdams, 1988, 1993, 2001), and culture is understood to be learned, practised and experienced over time (Hall, 1976; Kruger & Tomasello, 1996; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021; Pitman et al., 1989).

Evident within the interview findings, young people's journeys of culturally connecting involved identity formation and learning culture over time, both within and outside of OOHC contexts. In terms of the central research question, how cultural connection is understood and *experienced* in OOHC contexts, the interview findings highlighted the individual variability in young people's journeys of culturally connecting, wherein young people described negotiating identity and cultural tensions in a range of ways. For young people in interviews, the process of connecting was also a process of identity formation, thus indicating conceptual alignment between the constructs of cultural connection and identity formation. In addition to negotiating culture and identity, young people also described a range of external barriers and enablers to processes of culturally connecting. From this perspective, cultural

connection can be interpreted as *both* a process as well as a diverse outcome of a non-linear or complex process, including mechanisms to support journeys of culturally connecting, and knowledges learned about one's culture and cultural identity. For young people in interviews, varying levels of their own knowledge of Indigenous ancestry and mob, exposure to and immersion with Indigenous family (and Indigenous people more broadly), and immersion in and exposure to Indigenous 'culture' shaped their journeys of culturally connecting. Indeed, some young people's lack of knowledge of their Indigenous ancestry and mob, or choice to avoid contact with their Indigenous parent, cannot be blamed solely on contemporary child protection and OOHC systems. Rather, these issues are indicative of the adversities that often accompany placement in OOHC for First Nations children—experiences of violence, trauma and histories of intergenerational child removal that may result in cultural disconnection. In interviews, several young people had histories of intergenerational child removal (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.2.6).

Research sub-questions one and three (Chapter 5, section 5.1) sought to understand what was important for Indigenous children and young people to *know* in order to develop cultural connection, and what *mechanisms* could enable that connection (both within and outside of OOHC). The survey findings highlighted a range of knowledges that were important to cultural connection, but the importance of relational knowledges of kinship and ancestry to cultural connection (research sub-question one) was given priority (i.e. see Figure 5, section 6.3.1, and qualitative findings regarding knowledges, Chapter 5, section 6.3.3). In terms of mechanisms to develop cultural connection, while a range of cultural knowledges were considered important by community members and young people—and a range of cultural practices were engaged in by young people who were interviewed—the survey findings highlighted the

importance of *relationships* with Indigenous people, particularly with community and family. The evidence shows that relationships with Indigenous people are a mechanism through which Indigenous children and young people can access their cultures, and learn knowledges of kinship and ancestry that are pertinent to cultural connection.

The survey findings clearly evidence the knowledges (i.e. knowledge of kinship and ancestry) and mechanisms (i.e. relationships with Indigenous people; immersion in culture) considered most important by community members to cultural connection. In interviews, young people's experiences of their culture—including the knowledges they learned over time—were varied and dependent on a range of factors. For example, young people in interviews came from diverse mob and family backgrounds, most belonging to mobs from interstate locations (see Chapter 7, section 7.1), with family histories involving intergenerational child removals (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.2.6). This disconnection and removal—at the hands of the state—highlights that although Indigenous identity was always known for *most* Aboriginal young people in interviews, for some young people, their cultures and family knowledges had been significantly disrupted. For example, despite living with their Indigenous parents prior to entering OOHC, Dalton, Faith and Cecilia had limited information about their Aboriginality because of their parents' own experiences of trauma and cultural disconnection arising from child removal practices (see Chapter 7, sections 7.2.1.1 and 7.3.2.6). This required time for young people to develop their identity as Aboriginal, and learn their cultures, because of cultural disconnection. While this disconnection may not be due to Dalton, Faith or Cecilia being placed in OOHC, OOHC providers did fail to enable *reconnection* for these young people while living in OOHC. This was highlighted by Faith who lamented that not enough had been done by OOHC providers to enable her to learn about her identity and culture while living in OOHC (see Chapter 7, section

7.3.2.8). This has relevance for contemporary OOHC contexts, wherein the rate of placement with non-Indigenous carers is high, which can result in separation from Indigenous family. It is within this context that the legacy of intergenerational child removals starkly shaped Indigenous young people's journeys of culturally connecting within this research, whereby identity and culture were navigated.

While knowledges of mob, ancestry and Country were important to Indigenous people across the survey and interview findings, in interviews, some young people described navigating, and beginning, their journeys of culturally connecting without these knowledges. This process was not easy: some young people, at the time of interview, were still grappling with what it meant to be an Indigenous person in relation to others and the world around them, thus experiencing identity conflict over time. This has resonance with Carlson's (2016) research, in which Aboriginal adults who had newly discovered their Aboriginal identity were negotiating what this newfound identity meant to them. Culturally connecting can thus be interpreted as a lifelong journey of navigating culture and identity, in which individuals take an active role in their own journey.

Young people's journeys of culturally connecting also encompassed grappling with dominant discourse and romanticised notions of what constitutes Aboriginality and what does not in the interview findings. This reflects the Cultural Interface, as established by M. Nakata (2007a, 2007b), in which journeys of culturally connecting are influenced by young people's *agency*, who every day negotiate tensions about what it means to be Aboriginal and the ways that meaning is contested. In OOHC and permanent care, predominately with non-Indigenous carers, young people who were interviewed demonstrated agency in negotiating, and choosing to engage in, different forms of cultural practice over others, such as participating in arts activities rather than

spending time with Indigenous family. The interview findings showed that one young person, Cecilia, did not always seek to learn culture in ways that involved connection to Indigenous peoples. Other young people—who were predominately raised in non-Indigenous environments—spoke about engaging with certain aspects of Aboriginal culture that felt comfortable (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.1.2), while also speaking about feelings of fear and ‘shame’ when being around Indigenous people (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.2.5). This suggests that journeys of culturally connecting need to afford Indigenous children and young people with space and time to continue to learn, and be immersed in, their cultures throughout their trajectory in OOHC and beyond. It also highlights the value of a diverse and broad range of opportunities for Indigenous children and young people to choose (or not choose) to engage in over time. At this juncture, responsibility rests with institutions to avoid bestowing false cultural authority on Aboriginal children by engaging them in activities that breach cultural protocol or amount to cultural appropriation.

The survey and interview findings highlighted how culturally connecting is a lifelong journey in which individuals take an active role. In the interview findings, some young people, such as Jace and Cecilia, spoke about choosing not to learn more about their Aboriginal families and/or cultures (see Chapter 7, section 7.2.3.2), while others, such as Sabrina, spoke about reaching out to her Aboriginal family via social media to learn more about her heritage (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.1.1). While a range of traditional cultural knowledges were considered important by community members and young people in the survey and interview findings—and a range of cultural practices were engaged in by young people in the interview findings—the survey and interview findings highlighted the importance of *relationships* with Aboriginal people, particularly with community and family, along with *relational knowledges*. For

example, within the interview findings, Lamar, Tabitha and Faith spoke about the importance of *being with Aboriginal family and people* (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.1.1) for culture to be prominent. At this juncture, re-centring Indigenous ways of understanding our cultures, in accordance with Indigenous relationality, is central.

### **8.3.2 Relationality is Central to Understanding Journeys of Culturally Connecting**

According to Aboriginal philosopher, Dr Aunty Mary Graham (2014), ‘Aboriginal relationality—traditionally the foundation of the Law—is an elaborate, complex and refined system of social, moral, spiritual and community obligations that provided an ordered universe for people’ (p. 17). It has several attributes that guide *being* Aboriginal, including (1) empathy and ethics that enable relational ‘human and spirit agency’, whereby the importance of Land is central; (2) identity, belonging and place as fundamentally connected to ‘family, clan and community’; and (3) autonomy and (4) balance, underpinned respectively by sovereignty and social cohesion (Graham, 2014, p. 18). In this research, community members and young people in the survey and interviews emphasised the importance of family and community as enabling mechanisms of cultural connection in ways that reflect Graham’s (2014) expression of Indigenous culture-as-relation to kin (including non-human kin) and Country.

In the survey findings, while a range of knowledges were considered important to cultural connection by community members, knowledges that enabled, and fostered, relationality—such as knowledge of mob, ancestry, family, history and Country—were among the most important. As will be explored further below, for First Nations peoples, knowledge of mob advises a First Nations child or young person not only of their family genealogy, but also of Country and place. By extension, when this genealogy and geography meet, the possibility for knowledge of language, songlines, totems, dreaming and other cultural knowledges emerges. While a range of diverse mechanisms for

connecting to culture were indicated within the quantitative survey findings, it is important to highlight that this segment of the survey asked community members about specific mechanisms in isolation. Conversely, the qualitative survey findings indicated shared understandings of mechanisms, which included the importance of immersion in culture to learn Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, in line with Graham's (2014) account of relationality, which explains how diverse and various mechanisms are a product of the interconnectedness, and relationality, of Indigenous cultures. To varying degrees, the importance of mechanisms that enabled interaction and immersion with First Nations family, community and Country was highlighted in the survey findings. This also tied into the importance of belonging as a central aim in the process of 'culturally connecting', particularly concerning identity knowledges (i.e. who I am, where I come from, who I belong to) and feelings (of belonging, i.e. belonging to Indigenous family). For Graham (2014), relationality is intertwined with belonging, articulating that 'there is no Aboriginal equivalent to the Cartesian notion of "I think therefore I am" but, if there were, it would be—I am located therefore I am' (p. 18).

In the interview findings, relationality also featured prominently in the stories of young people who grappled with identity conflict and finding belonging to their Indigenous families and communities. However, the interview findings concerning young people's journeys of culturally connecting highlighted that processes of culturally connecting commenced for some young people without them first possessing knowledge of their Aboriginal mob, Country and ancestry. These knowledges—understood to be foundational to relationality—were not present for all young people. For some young people, such as Faith and Cecilia, this lack of knowledge created feelings of loss and cultural disconnection, while for others, such as Dalton, not knowing about his Aboriginality until he was 15 years old did not affect him in the

same way. Young people navigated their journeys of culturally connecting at the Cultural Interface, where journeys were influenced by factors, such as intergenerational disconnection and trauma, that determine the ‘start’ of one’s journey of culturally connecting. These factors exist in a broader context beyond OOHC systems, yet retain linkages with settler-colonialism wherein Indigenous child protection removals have remained prominent over time, as highlighted in Chapter 2.

However, within the survey findings, community members highlighted the pertinence of relational knowledges—such as knowledge of kinship, mob and ancestry—to cultural connection. Community members with professional or voluntary experiences of OOHC also considered that these knowledges were of higher importance for Indigenous children in OOHC. These knowledges are pertinent to identity development and formation for Indigenous children and young people, particularly within OOHC contexts.

For some young people however, such as Dalton, journeys of culturally connecting began from a point of not knowing about one’s Aboriginality, or—as was the case for Faith—trying to find ways to connect while knowing limited information about their mob and ancestry linkages, thus indicating the complexity (i.e. non-linear, unpredictable nature) of cultural connection. This resulted in some young people who were interviewed experiencing identity conflict and grappling with belonging and place, while the foundations for cultural reconnection were not established by OOHC providers during young people’s time in OOHC. For example, despite living in OOHC for 2-3 years (see Chapter 7, Table 9)—wherein court-ordered access visits with her Aboriginal father took place—Sabrina did not know her Aboriginal mob group until she reached out to her Aboriginal extended family on social media, several years after exit from OOHC (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.1.1). For others, such as Lamar and Tabitha,

journeys of culturally connecting centred on Aboriginal family, values and mob-specific knowledge, but did not always occur organically when living with non-Indigenous carers as a consequence of OOHC involvement. Identity conflict was experienced by some young people, such as Tabitha, who possessed knowledge of their Aboriginal ancestry and mob, particularly when living with their non-Indigenous family members.

M. Nakata's (2007a) Indigenous Standpoint Theory, in which Indigenous people encounter tensions at the Cultural Interface, and navigate these tensions with creativity and agency, highlights how Indigenous peoples respond to Western and Indigenous knowledge systems that have produced certain discourses concerning what constitutes Indigeneity (or Aboriginality). In regard to Indigenous relationality, Graham (2014) argues that there is respect, and room, for multiple perspectives, truths and places among individuals, families and mobs, yet it is underpinned by a balance and respect for relations and obligations. While my research questions and design have set out in pursuit of an answer on how to fix the problem of cultural (dis)connection, the findings—and my own learning journey at the interface of the Western academy—have resulted in the need to focus on understanding the agency of my research participants, and to fully explore the diversity and variability of their experiences, not just the consistencies within the data. While navigating journeys of culturally connecting, it is pertinent for Indigenous children and young people to be guided by their relationships with Indigenous family, community and mob, whereby 'confidence emerges in one's own social, spiritual and cultural life and this comes out of relationships, rather than positions' (Graham, 2014, p. 19). Consistency, and predictability, in sustaining relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family, mob and community are key, but so is respect and room to navigate the Cultural Interface of OOHC with agency, which includes diverse enactments of Indigenous relationality. That is, while some

young people expressed discomfort or disinterest in connection with family relations, that does not—in the context of the other research participants’ responses and the extant literature presented—mean that relationality and cultural immersion are not important. Rather, those who choose not to engage with family relations are navigating a Cultural Interface—one that is not of their making or design—that may seek to have them reject their Indigeneity or relations with kin. However, since journeys of culturally connecting take place over time, it is important that space is held for children and young people to change their mind, and for children and young people to have ongoing opportunities for relational connection and knowledge. Within OOHC contexts, responsibility rests with the state to support journeys of connecting by enabling reconnection with First Nations family, mob and culture.

It is possible to identify enablers to cultural connection that might be expected to support Indigenous children and young people in OOHC. First, Indigenous family are best placed to impart relational knowledges (particularly via cultural immersion), such as knowledge of family and mob-specific ancestry, which were deemed to be of most importance within the survey findings. Indigenous family and kinship structures are a significant component of many Indigenous cultures (Bourke, 1993; Fejo-King, 2013; Lester, 2001; Morgan et al., 2007; Walker, 1993). These include a holistic understanding of family and kinship that extends beyond the nuclear family, to include extended family (such as aunties, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and cousin’s cousins) who play an important role in child-rearing (E. Bourke, 1993). For example, Bourke (1993) states that ‘children are the responsibility of the entire family in many cases, rather than just the biological parents alone’; Walker (1993) articulates that ‘within Aboriginal families, much of the upbringing of children is undertaken by grandparents,

and specifically, the grandmother’, and Lester (2001) highlights the importance of extended family to broader conceptualisations of parenting.

During interviews, some young people, such as Tabitha and Lamar, spoke about living with their Indigenous family—before, after or during OOHC—and how they were most exposed to the values and norms of Aboriginal cultures that are often invisible to outsiders of the culture at these times. In interviews, other young people were not exposed to Aboriginal family life in the same way. For example, Jace entered OOHC shortly after birth and lived with his non-Indigenous grandparents, while his sister, Sabrina, remarked that ‘I don’t think they [child protection] ever even looked into the option of placing me with my other [Aboriginal] family’ (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.2.8). This suggests the failing of child protection and OOHC systems to adequately explore extended Aboriginal family as kinship carers for Sabrina and Jace. Other young people, such as Faith, spoke about their strained relationships with their Indigenous parents, noting feelings of both love and hatred (see Chapter 7, section 7.2.3.1). While these strained parental relationships are experienced by many children and young people living in OOHC—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, for young people in this research, these strained parental relationships resulted in limited contact with their Aboriginal parent, or Aboriginal people in general. This strain produces a choice in terms of culturally connecting: continued engagement with Aboriginal culture and exposure to Aboriginal norms and values, or ending contact with Aboriginal parents and risking cultural disconnection. This is a choice that should not have to be made by Aboriginal children; (re)connection with extended Aboriginal family should be facilitated by the state in OOHC contexts, in line with the ATSICPP.

While community members highlighted the importance of extended family to cultural connection in the survey findings, in interviews, most young people did not

have strong relationships with their extended Aboriginal family, thus signalling both practice and policy failure. For example, Cade spent 2-3 years with non-Indigenous foster carers before entering permanent care (see Chapter 7, Table 9), which presented an opportunity for the state to implement strong foundations to ensure culturally connecting for Cade into the future. In lieu of contact and/or strong relationships with their Indigenous family members, the interview findings showed that some young people, such as Caitlyn, constructed their own ‘Indigenous families’ with members of the local community; others, such as Cecilia, felt separate from the community and were still seeking belonging, while other young people, such as Sabrina, waited until they were old enough to make their own contact with extended Indigenous family to find belonging. Thus, while Indigenous family is intimately connected with relationality (Graham, 2014), community acted as a conduit to culture—and Indigenous peoples—for some young people in the interviews. This highlights the diverse ways in which Indigenous relationality is enacted, and the ways in which relationality means different things to different people.

The survey and interview findings highlight that community can act as an enabler for cultural connection in OOHHC, whereby community may be able to fill an important void in lieu of Indigenous family, particularly in the context of intergenerational disconnection and trauma. That is, community may be able to guide Indigenous children and young people how to *be* in relation to others (particularly mob-specific community), and may enable relationships with Indigenous peoples for Indigenous children and young people in OOHHC. This is of more significance to cultural connection when Indigenous family relationships are strained or extended family is unknown.

Community of origin, as well as local community, were highlighted as important mechanisms to enable cultural connection in the survey findings, thus highlighting the importance of Indigenous peoples to journeys of culturally connecting. It also reflects the diversity of Indigenous peoples who participated in the survey component of this research, in which 69.8% of community members were not currently living in their community of origin (see Chapter 6, section 6.1.1). While this may signal disconnection from community of origin, from an Indigenous standpoint, it evidences how Indigenous peoples develop connection in a context of forced dispossession and movement away from their traditional Countries by constructing belonging to Indigenous people with a shared history of oppression. Within an OOHC context, it is an adaptive mechanism to enable survival—as a distinct cultural group—when Indigenous children are separated from their Indigenous families. This highlights the importance of enabling Indigenous relationality in a context wherein Indigenous family life has been fractured.

In the interview findings, young people had stories that spoke to the importance of local community—and local community ACCOs—to their journeys of culturally connecting. Many young people in interviews did not have a connection with their community of origin and, subsequently, found ways to construct connection to local community. Given the dominant placement of young people in interviews with non-Indigenous carers, local ACCOs also provided a point of visibility for community, while community events—such as NAIDOC week—were also a point of access to community for non-Indigenous carers.

Active involvement in one's local community may also enable a level of immersion in culture that is not possible in non-Indigenous environments, through repeated exposure to culture. Connection, and involvement, with the local community thus creates opportunities for Indigenous children and young people living in OOHC to

find belonging and learn Indigenous values, norms and traditions. Community can enable a reconstructed sense of belonging to others with a shared history of oppression when Indigenous family and mob connections have been fractured. However, in interviews, most young people's narratives of culturally connecting did not feature stories about immersion in the local community.

While both community and Indigenous family were important to young people and community members in interview and survey findings, respectively, it is important to highlight that both of these mechanisms concern relationships with Indigenous peoples. For example, survey findings evidenced the importance of *immersion in culture* and *relationships with Indigenous peoples*, as opposed to this having to take place solely within the realm of family. Thus, the survey findings also evidence the importance of relationships with Indigenous people to journeys of culturally connecting. When situated within the broader literature, within Aboriginal notions of relationality, the pertinence of relationships with Aboriginal people becomes apparent; the crucial thing that makes an Aboriginal person culturally 'Aboriginal' is *being* in relation to Aboriginal people, Country and the world around them (Graham, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2017).

At this juncture, it is important to emphasise my analysis of the distinction between *being with* cultural relations and *doing* culture as an action through which culture is practised. In this context, being is a relation, whereas doing is an action. Indigenous relationality can be interpreted as existing in a triad with belonging and identity: Indigenous relationality enables belonging and identity in connected ways, and therefore enables *being* as an Indigenous person in relation to others and the world around you. Conversely, Indigenous relationality also exists in a triad with agency and immersion, wherein agency and immersion describe *how* Indigenous relationality can be

realised through the practice of *doing culture*. Within OOHC contexts, agency and immersion in culture can be facilitated, and can enable Indigenous relationality for Indigenous children and young people, but only if agency, immersion and Indigenous relationality are taken seriously and prioritised.

While the survey and interview findings do indicate the importance of Indigenous peoples (namely, family and community) to enabling journeys of culturally connecting within OOHC, it is important to me—as an Indigenous researcher—that this is not presented as ‘the answer’ to the ‘problem’ of cultural (dis)connection. I have endeavoured not to discuss these findings as ‘solutions’ to remedy cultural (dis)connection within OOHC in order not to overlook the ways in which child protection and OOHC systems remain complicit in producing cultural disconnection in the first place. At this juncture, it is important to provide an analysis of how the OOHC system is ill-equipped to enable meaningful opportunities for cultural connection by design.

### **8.3.3 The Out-of-Home-Care System Is Ill-Equipped to Enable Meaningful Opportunities for Cultural Connection by Design**

This thesis has highlighted the complexity inherent in cultural connection, while also highlighting how the pursuit of cultural connection within OOHC systems is further complicated through the removal of Indigenous children from Indigenous family, particularly when they are placed in non-Indigenous care. Gleaned from the two key insights previously discussed (the process of culturally connecting, and the importance of Indigenous relationality), this section provides a critical analysis of how Australian OOHC systems are the source of cultural disconnection, and consequently, efforts to improve opportunities for culturally connecting within OOHC systems must be cautiously pursued with a critical perspective.

As highlighted in the previous section, the survey findings showed the importance of immersion in culture, whereby culture is learned through repeated exposure and interaction with Indigenous people. This is supported by Western theories of enculturation, wherein the importance of immersion in a particular cultural milieu for learning culture is emphasised (Berry, 2014; Shimahara, 1970). In the survey findings, the importance of Indigenous people to cultural connection was evident, and this was heightened for community members who had current professional or voluntary experiences of OOHC. That is, community members with OOHC experience considered that involvement with Indigenous peoples was even more important for Indigenous children. The survey findings thus suggest that cultural connection is best enabled via immersion in Indigenous culture with Indigenous peoples.

However, in the interview findings, most young people in this research did not experience immersion in culture within Aboriginal family or community environments, particularly when living with non-Indigenous carers in OOHC, and after exit from OOHC (including permanent care). Young people's journeys of culturally connecting involved the practice of culture over time, as a form of *doing culture*, yet diverse understandings about what entailed cultural practice were evident. For some young people, the practice of culture included spending time with Indigenous family and community, while for others, cultural practice included engagement with aspects of 'traditional' culture, such as dot paintings and didgeridoos/yidakis, in ways that were detached from their cultural context.

Academic literature from several disciplines—including anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, psychology and education—highlight that culture is multifaceted (Bhabha, 2012; Eriksen, 2004; Hall et al., 2003; Hall, 2016, 2021; Matsumoto & Juang, 2016) and entails more than 'surface culture' (Hall, 1976; Hammond, 2014). For

example, anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1976) discusses the notion of the ‘cultural unconscious’, wherein ‘the most important paradigms or rules governing behaviour, the ones that control our lives, function below the level of conscious awareness’ (p. 43), while Hammond (2014) applies this to culturally responsive teaching using the metaphor of a tree. ‘Surface culture’ (what Hammond, 2014, positions in the leaves of the tree) includes artefacts, traditions or aspects of culture that are visible to outsiders of the culture—such as holidays, music, art and celebrations. Conversely, ‘deep culture’ (what Hammond, 2014, positions in the roots of the tree) is constituted by specific values, norms, beliefs and attitudes—such as worldviews, kinship systems and spirituality—that are shared among members of a particular cultural group, and are not necessarily explicitly taught, but rather learned through enculturation with people of that culture (E. T. Hall, 1976). ‘Deep culture’ is learned via immersion in a particular cultural milieu whereby children learn complex aspects of culture, such as Indigenous relationality, via repeated exposure over time. It enables access to mob-specific culture, whereby knowledge of—and organic contact with—family, kinship, mob and Country provide opportunities to foster journeys of culturally connecting over time.

For young people in interviews, experiences of culture were influenced by their placement in predominately non-Indigenous care environments. Given Indigenous children’s reliance on an adult to facilitate access to culture, young people’s experiences of artefacts of Indigenous cultures that can be considered ‘tokenistic’ were influenced not only by what is available to their non-Indigenous carers and family, but also by their non-Indigenous carers’ understandings of Indigenous cultures. Within an OOHC context, cultural connection was also influenced by (predominately non-Indigenous) caseworkers’ understandings of what constitutes Indigenous culture. Despite good intentions, a simplified, reductive and essentialised understanding of Indigenous

cultures—that seeks to illuminate ‘exotic’ difference—largely ignores the *human* elements of cultures that are embedded in Indigenous relationality. These human elements of cultures—whereby organic access to Indigenous peoples and immersion in culture are central—were largely disrupted by placement in OOHC with non-Indigenous kin or foster carers for young people who participated in interviews. For example, in Lamar’s interview, he commented on being immersed in community with his Aboriginal grandma prior to entry into OOHC (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.1.1) but then stated that he felt ‘not as connected . . . as I was anyway’ due to placement with his non-Indigenous family in OOHC and permanent care (see Chapter 7, sections 7.2.2.1 and 7.3.2.2).

As highlighted within Indigenous Standpoint Theory, Western knowledges and discourse about Indigenous cultures have continued to shape the ways in which Indigenous peoples and their (traditional and contemporary) cultural practices are understood (M. Nakata, 1997, 2007a). These discourses have given rise to understandings of Indigenous peoples and cultures in particular ways, mostly through anthropological cataloguing of visible aspects of Indigenous cultures deemed ‘untouched’ by Western culture, such as visible artefacts and traditions observable to outsiders, including art (e.g. dot paintings), music (e.g. didgeridoos/yidakis) and dance (e.g. corroborees). It is these visible aspects of Indigenous cultures (as defined by their distinctiveness from the Western) that many young people in this research engaged with as cultural practice (see, for example, Chapter 7, section 7.2.2.3). This sits in contrast to the survey findings, in which although several mechanisms (i.e. time in local community, participating in cultural events, time on land/Country; see Chapter 6, sections 6.4.1, 6.4.3 and 6.4.4) were considered important to cultural connection,

Indigenous family, community and immersion in culture were highlighted as most important to cultural connection.

While Indigenous relationality—and Indigenous peoples themselves—help us to appreciate the importance of culturally connecting over time, child protection and OOHC systems impose a risk to cultural connection *by design* in removing Indigenous children from their Indigenous parents. This removal from Indigenous parents risks disconnection from Indigenous family and community. Within these contexts, connection to Indigenous peoples is difficult to foster in meaningful ways. This is because meaningful connection with Indigenous peoples—and immersion in culture—cannot be fostered through one-off involvement in cultural events, such as attendance at NAIDOC week or an ad hoc Aboriginal art class. This is particularly relevant for non-Indigenous kinship placements in OOHC, which are given equal priority alongside placement with Indigenous family, as dictated by the ATSICPP placement hierarchy discussed in Chapter 3 (see section 3.1.4).

The increasing rate of OOHC entry for Indigenous children, where placement may be away from their Indigenous families (AIHW, 2020b, 2021b; Liddle et al., 2021), presents a risk to cultural connection. While kinship care is the most common form of OOHC placement, kinship care includes placement with non-Indigenous family members, and, while still valuable, is a placement that accepts the risk to cultural connection (AIHW, 2020b, 2021b). In 2019–20, in some states and territories such as Victoria and Tasmania, the rate of placement in OOHC with non-Indigenous family was higher than the rate of placement with Indigenous family (Liddle et al., 2021, p. 17). Nationally, 42.5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were placed with Indigenous family in OOHC at 30 June 2020 (Liddle et al., 2021, p. 17). Similarly, in this research, all young people interviewed who lived in kinship care arrangements

while in OOHC were placed with non-Indigenous kinship carers. However, non-Indigenous people may not be able to easily foster meaningful cultural connection, through the creation of culturally immersive environments, for Indigenous children and young people because this connection requires immersion within a particular First Nations cultural milieu (which is inclusive of Indigenous peoples) while imparting Indigenous relationality.

This is not to say that it is not possible to create a culturally immersive environment, or a constructed cultural milieu, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in OOHC and permanent care. The survey and interview findings do indicate that an environment that facilitates journeys of culturally connecting can be constructed within OOHC and permanent care when Indigenous peoples—including family, community and ACCOs—support children and young people’s journeys of connecting, alongside culturally responsive carers and caseworkers who provide consistency in *meaningful relationships* with Indigenous family, community and people. Whether or not it is possible to create culturally immersive environments that impart Indigenous relationality outside of the Indigenous family is another question, and one this thesis does not ask (see, for example, Dudgeon & Bray’s, 2019, work on the interrelated nature of Indigenous relationality with Indigenous kinship systems and lore). If it were possible, however, to create culturally immersive environments for the benefit of Indigenous children and young people living in OOHC outside of the Indigenous family, it would require a fundamental reimagining of an under-resourced system for it to shift from ‘crisis-mode’ to long-term strategising about Indigenous children’s futures. This requires better cultural planning and more emphasis on cultural connection when Indigenous children and young people are not at imminent risk. It would also necessitate significant investment in Indigenous communities, in carer

recruitment and support, and carer and caseworker training; increased resourcing of ACCOs; improved monitoring and compliance metrics for measuring and reporting on active efforts to foster cultural connection; and a way to honour and privilege the agency of Indigenous children and young people in their journeys of connecting, while enabling ‘measurement’ of cultural connection efforts in ways that uphold the diversity and complexity associated with the individual meanings ascribed to cultural connection itself.

This goal is unlikely to be realised within the current parameters of Australian OOHC systems. OOHC systems presently struggle to produce meaningful high-quality CSPs for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in OOHC (Liddle et al., 2021), which is a much lower threshold than creating culturally immersive environments for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in OOHC. Importantly, it must be said that there are inherent limitations in continuing to pursue cultural connection within OOHC systems. Improving the application of cultural connection within OOHC systems, through amendments to practice and policy, renders all those involved in these systems complicit in upholding the structural harm that is embedded in child protection and OOHC systems for Indigenous peoples, including Indigenous children and young people. This is a point that will be discussed further in the next section regarding the implications of this research.

Instead, the findings from the interviews highlight how young people seek cultural connection when culturally immersive environments—and mob-specific knowledge—are disrupted. For many young people in interviews, identifying with visible forms of culture, as well as with the broader Indigenous community, enabled access to some forms of culture (such as art and music) when they did not have contact with their own mob-specific Indigenous families, Elders or communities. Thus,

placement in OOHC resulted in disconnection from mob-specific culture, which disrupts the right of specific, culturally unique First Nations communities to raise their children in accordance with their own cultures. At this nexus, experiences of culturally connecting over time, both within and outside of OOHC, were shaped by Western knowledges that have produced particular discourses, and ways of understanding (what constitutes) Indigeneity, while also imposing a homogenised version of Aboriginality on young people.

The impact of systemic issues within OOHC systems was also apparent in this research, particularly in the interview findings. In interviews, young people in this research stated either that they did not know if they had a CSP or, if they did, that they did not know what was in it (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.2.8). Some young people, such as Aaliyah and Cade, also spoke about receiving a family tree, which provided information about their Aboriginal family, ancestry and mob, more than 10 years after their exit from OOHC. While these forms of cultural support were not mandated in legislation while young people in this research lived in OOHC, it does highlight that Indigenous children and young people living in OOHC are dependent on the state to provide them with knowledge that would organically occur if immersed in culture and raised in accordance with Indigenous relationality (whether that be as articulated by Graham, 2014, or by the specific Indigenous family and community surrounding that child or young person). In the interviews, young people experienced journeys of culturally connecting largely without the support of the OOHC system. In all, the interview findings demonstrate that for those young people who spoke about feeling ‘culturally connected’, this was achieved in spite of the OOHC system, not because of it.

As highlighted in Chapter 3, the overarching intent of the connection element of the ATSI CPP is to prevent cultural loss and assimilation, and to enable survival through the transmission of culture in OOHC environments that create the risk of cultural disconnection. This risk of disconnection was evidenced in the interview findings, in which many young people were not immersed in their Indigenous cultures while living in OOHC and after exit from OOHC. At this juncture, an awareness of the limitations of OOHC systems in enabling cultural connection is illuminated, while being cognisant that cultural connection must enable the right of unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to raise their children over time in accordance with their values, embedded in Indigenous relationality.

Cultural connection is invariably affected by colonisation itself. The colonial systems that produced cultural disconnection over generations have created the conditions through which cultural connection is now a necessary priority within the child protection and OOHC policy apparatus. That is, the need for cultural connection has been produced in response to the cultural disconnection created by child protection and OOHC systems themselves, inclusive of those systems in place throughout the Stolen Generations. The survey and interview findings provide evidence that journeys of culturally connecting are produced and influenced by individual subjectivities, in a broader environment that has created the conditions in which cultural connection is needed as an explicit policy goal for Indigenous children and young people living in OOHC. Through the intergenerational removals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities, cultural connection becomes a necessary pursuit to mitigate the harm produced by colonial systems that have fractured Indigenous family life and organic processes of learning Indigenous cultures. Any

efforts to do better within the OOHC system, and any contribution this research has made to that effort, ought to be approached with criticality.

### **8.3.4 Positioning the Findings Within the Literature**

The findings from this research demonstrate how cultural connection extends beyond the individual level to encompass a community element, in which there is a necessity for Indigenous peoples to support Indigenous children and young people in their journeys of culturally connecting. The importance of Indigenous relationality—enabling knowledges and experiences that foster culture and identity, and, by extension, belonging—has been reiterated in this thesis. This finding is consistent with other Indigenous scholarship wherein relationality has been discussed as central to culture (Graham, 2014) and cultural connection (M. Davis, 2019; Bamblett et al., 2012; Dudgeon et al., 2020).

In her definition of cultural connection in the independent *Family is Culture* review, M. Davis (2019) highlighted the complexity of cultural connection, noting that the relational and interconnected elements associated with cultural connection do not lend themselves well to definition and interpretation within a Western paradigm. Citing an example of this, M. Davis (2019) highlighted Indigenous perspectives about Country being central to understanding place, belonging and ancestry, which emphasise the ways in which belonging is derived both from people, as well as from Country, animals and spirits.

The findings from this research are aligned with M. Davis's (2019) reports on the interconnected and multifaceted nature of cultural connection, as well as the assertion that cultural connection for Indigenous peoples does not lend itself well to Western conceptualisations. However, in being able to evidence this complexity through empirical research, this research extends M. Davis's (2019) definition and

understanding of cultural connection by highlighting young people's lived experiences of culturally connecting, as well as the complexity experienced in these journeys at the Cultural Interface. In this way, this research highlights the 'real' lived implications of attempting to create the conditions through which journeys of culturally connecting can be enabled, while raising awareness of the enablers and barriers in this journey.

In this way, this research also extends the findings of Bamblett et al. (2012), who highlighted six interconnected domains of cultural connection (see Chapter 4, section 4.5), to also focus on the diversity of knowledges and mechanisms that Indigenous peoples view as important to cultural connection. In focusing on the complexity and diversity evident in the meanings Indigenous peoples ascribed to culturally connecting in this research, the diversity of perspectives held about cultural connection has been illuminated. This research has subsequently highlighted how individual subjectivities are fundamental to journeys of culturally connecting—and experiences of feeling 'culturally connected' or 'culturally disconnected'. This subjectivity is crucial to enabling a better conceptual understanding of cultural connection itself.

This finding is supported by M. Nakata's theorising about the Cultural Interface, and the way in which it is applied by Bronwyn Carlson (2016) in *The Politics of Identity*, wherein individual subjectivities add to the complexity of grappling with Indigeneity at the Cultural Interface. Indeed, there is a politics to cultural connection since it simultaneously infuses the complexity of Indigenous cultures and identities, constituted within their historical and contemporary discourses that shape the ways Indigenous peoples have learned to enact their Indigeneity. This also speaks to how Indigenous peoples navigate complexity in creative and agentic ways. It is important to highlight here that while individual agency is important to journeys of culturally

connecting, resistance and agency also take place at a collective level. As highlighted by Moreton-Robinson (2003), ‘from an Indigenous standpoint . . . power relations are frequently experienced in collective situations . . . outcomes will ultimately depend on the interaction of multiple actors and contexts’ (p. 131). In effect, cultural connection is, itself, highly contested, and indeed, all Indigenous peoples will bring their own subjectivities, experiences of Indigeneity and interpretations to understanding cultural connection. Within this contested and diverse context of what cultural connection means and how it is experienced, the work of mitigating the risk of cultural disconnection for Indigenous children and young people in child protection and OOHC systems emerges as something that is negotiated in various ways. In this way, the pursuit of cultural connection in an OOHC policy and practice context is important for the survival of Indigenous peoples throughout Australia, as well as for the benefit of individual Indigenous children and young people in the OOHC system.

#### **8.4 Implications of the Research for Child Protection and Out-of-Home Care**

My experience as an Indigenous researcher has involved navigating a site of Cultural Interface in the academy throughout this thesis journey. Initially guided by my disciplinary training in psychology and social work, I set forth to test my own ideas and assumptions, derived from the extant literature, which were premised on my desire to improve the application of cultural connection within OOHC systems for Indigenous children and young people. However, this initial desire has resulted in a tension that has become implicit in this research for me as an Indigenous researcher. On the one hand, my research findings can inform ways to improve the application of cultural connection in OOHC contexts. For example, the research findings have shown that culturally connecting entails the living embodiment of *being* Indigenous, in relation to Indigenous

people, Country and all things, yet can be experienced as a dynamic and transforming process at the Cultural Interface. At a practical level, this thesis has highlighted that culturally connecting involves learning *knowledges* of your Indigenous culture, via a range of *mechanisms*, so that children and young people know what it means to be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, in relation to others (in accordance with Indigenous relationality). Keeping the diversity of experiences of *being* Indigenous in Australia at the fore, culturally connecting may be evidenced via *feelings* one holds about their own journey of culturally connecting. In this way, culturally connecting is not uniform or linear and is experienced differently by all Indigenous peoples. This is what it means to say that cultural connection—in terms of both how it is conceptualised and how it is experienced—is complex.

However, while the research findings can inform ways to measure cultural connection, and ways to improve the quality of cultural plans in OOHC, these are also forms of amelioration for a racialised, structural harm that is produced by OOHC systems against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As an Aboriginal researcher, I have grappled with personal concerns about being implicated—and becoming complicit—in upholding, and improving, OOHC systems in this way. That is, there is a risk that in generating ‘solutions’ to make OOHC systems more culturally appropriate—via the improved application of cultural connection—OOHC systems are legitimised. While good evidence can help to improve practices for children in OOHC, there are risks to presenting findings that seek to ‘solve’ its problems in ways that legitimise the practice of child removal, which for Indigenous peoples is inherently tenuous and difficult. There are no easy solutions to the ‘problem’ of cultural connection, besides preventing Indigenous children from entry into OOHC in the first place.

I present my findings here not as an ‘answer’ to the ‘problem’ of cultural (dis)connection. My findings *should not* be used to make OOHC systems more legitimate or culturally acceptable, without critical attention to structural transformation. Those who draw on these findings to improve the experiences of Indigenous children and young people within OOHC systems must acknowledge that doing better by Indigenous children and young people in OOHC can never be without attention to greater change that works to prevent Indigenous children from entering OOHC systems. As articulated by Black legal scholar, Dorothy Roberts, in the US context:

Scholars who deal with Black children in the child welfare system tend to focus on social work practice—how children should be treated—rather than the politics of child protection—how political relationships affect which children become involved in the system. Their primary goal is to make services more sensitive to the needs and culture of Black families, not to question the fundamental conflict between the child welfare system and the integrity of the Black family and community. (D. Roberts, 2002, p. vii)

Both this study and the extant literature presented in this thesis show that this is the case in the Australian context too, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities. However, the history of harm inflicted on Indigenous peoples by child protection and OOHC systems cannot be separated from modern-day efforts to improve the cultural appropriateness of these systems.

This section considers the implications of this research for child protection and OOHC systems, including practice and policy implications, in which, rather than focusing solely on improving practice and policy, I also convey *what is especially at stake for Indigenous peoples*, including children, young people, families, communities and ACCOs. I consider implications of this research that will also help to generate new kinds of problems and questions to the complexity of cultural connection in OOHC systems.

By taking the complexity of cultural connection seriously, these implications foreground the ongoing possibility of policy *failure*, not just the expectation that policy solutions result in direct success, because I accept non-linearity and unpredictability as part of what arises from political action, including that which concerns Indigenous peoples in child protection and OOHC contexts. These implications also provide commentary on the complicity of social workers—and other actors—within OOHC systems that sustain a continued risk to cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by design, as well as the consequences for Indigenous peoples, researchers, children, young people, families and communities, if we continue to tinker with ‘improving’ cultural connection via incremental changes to OOHC systems, rather than transformative systems change.

#### **8.4.1 Implications for Child Protection and Out-of-Home-Care Practice**

In highlighting the importance of Indigenous peoples to cultural connection for Indigenous children and young people in OOHC, as well as the importance of children and young people’s agency, this research has several implications for child protection and OOHC practice. From a practice perspective, it is imperative that professionals and carers within OOHC ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to be immersed in their cultures, and to develop meaningful relationships with their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families, mobs, communities and peoples, premised in Indigenous relationality to enable relational cultural knowledges, belonging and identity. As previously discussed, this requires the creation of culturally immersive environments for Indigenous children and young people living in OOHC. However, this is not easily manufactured within OOHC environments in which Indigenous children and young people may be predominantly exposed to, and raised within, non-Indigenous cultures.

The findings suggest that a reconceptualisation of cultural connection as requiring conditions whereby cultural immersion, and enculturation, can occur is needed. As previously discussed in this chapter, a culturally immersive environment requires Indigenous peoples to support Indigenous children and young people's journeys of culturally connecting alongside culturally responsive carers and caseworkers in OOHC contexts. This may include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, mentors, carers, family members and ACCOs as a conduit to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, thus enabling the creation of 'community' around Indigenous children and young people who may not have access to strong Indigenous communities via their immediate parents or carers.

Improving the application of the full ATSI CPP is also imperative, particularly in relation to how caseworkers, carers and Indigenous peoples—including children, young people, their families and their communities—can work *in partnership* with one another regarding cultural planning while upholding a nuanced understanding of cultural connection and its complexity. This requires Indigenous practitioners to work with Indigenous children, young people and families in developing cultural plans, and for non-Indigenous practitioners to expand their understanding of Indigenous cultures with the view to enable *cultural humility* in their practice, which necessitates lifelong learning while challenging ethnocentrism (Abe, 2020; Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Gottlieb, 2021). While this is important for all caseworkers, it is particularly imperative for non-Indigenous caseworkers and social workers, whose practice may be influenced by whiteness and ethnocentrism (Walter et al., 2011).

The findings highlight the importance of continuity in relationships with Indigenous peoples *over time*—including Indigenous family and community—as well as the need to impart relational knowledges (such as knowledge of mob and ancestry in

line with Indigenous relationality) to Indigenous children and young people in OOHC.

The importance of Indigenous peoples to this process cannot be understated.

Consequently, caseworkers and carers need to work creatively to ensure that Indigenous peoples, families and communities are engaged in cultural planning efforts throughout the life of the Indigenous child or young person in child protection and OOHC contexts.

These should, at a minimum, include:

- active efforts to enable reunification with Indigenous parents (to ensure continuity in relationships);
- family finding efforts and placement with Indigenous family members or Indigenous community members (to improve the likelihood of immersion in Indigenous culture and child-rearing in accordance with Indigenous relationality);
- better training and support for *all* carers to expand understandings about Indigenous cultures and the complexity of cultural connection. It is also needed to enable carers to work with Indigenous children and young people's families and communities to create culturally immersive environments in OOHC; and
- regular updating of cultural planning documents, such as CSPs, to reflect the evolution of journeys of culturally connecting (with the understanding that culturally connecting is a complex process that occurs *over time*). The self-determination of Indigenous children, young people, families and communities should be respected in this process (see M. Davis, 2019, for a detailed discussion of how self-determination can be better enabled in child protection and OOHC contexts).

As highlighted in this thesis, supporting Indigenous children and young people's journeys of culturally connecting within OOHC requires not only a heightened

understanding—by caseworkers and carers—of Indigenous relationality, Indigenous cultures and the complexity of journeys of culturally connecting, but also commitment to working with Indigenous children and young people to respect and support their agency. Child-directed approaches towards cultural planning efforts within OOHC contexts are pertinent to ensure that mechanisms to support journeys of culturally connecting are attuned to the child’s needs, including the need to minimise shame and enable comfort. As highlighted by young people who were interviewed in this research, the more opportunities afforded, and the more mechanisms that are utilised to support Indigenous children and young people’s journeys of culturally connecting, the better. This is because there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to cultural connection: it must begin at the point of the individual child or young person, taking their subjectivity, family history and mob-specific culture into account. For those Indigenous children and young people who come from family histories of cultural disconnection, this is part of their story, and their beginning to their journeys of culturally connecting. Consequently, engagement with culture may include the practice of surface culture, when necessary, for the comfort of the Indigenous child or young person. However, it is important that these forms of culture are practised in ways that are not detached from their cultural context. Indigenous peoples, such as Elders, preferably from the child or young person’s mob, are needed to guide and support Indigenous children and young people in cultural practice at all times. Working holistically with the child or young person, and their Indigenous families and communities, is critical. Any efforts towards cultural planning that do not fully involve Indigenous children, young people—and, by extension, their families and communities—are insufficient. Carers must also be fully involved in cultural planning processes since they will ultimately be responsible for supporting the creation of culturally immersive environments within their household, in ways that

honour the agency of the Indigenous child or young person in their care, while also respecting the right—and importance—of Indigenous family and community to support children and young people’s journeys of culturally connecting in accordance with Indigenous relationality.

The consequences of failing to improve the practical application of cultural connection within OOHC have a direct bearing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who live in OOHC. It is well established that children who experience OOHC have poorer outcomes than children who do not experience OOHC across numerous developmental domains, including health, education, and social and emotional development (Byrne et al., 2018; Conn et al., 2015; Fergeus et al., 2019; Green et al., 2021; Kääriälä & Hiilamo, 2017; Luke & O’Higgins, 2018; Lum et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2021; Mendes & Snow, 2016; Skouteris et al., 2011; Smales et al., 2020). Journeys of culturally connecting that are not well supported have the potential to affect several areas of a child’s life over time, including long-term identity development. As highlighted in Chapter 3, the long-term outcomes experienced by survivors of the Stolen Generations demonstrate how separation from Indigenous family, community and Country can affect Indigenous relationality (including belonging and identity) while disrupting culture acquisition over time (Wilson, 1997). Regardless of the ‘quality of care’ experienced, human beings have a fundamental need to belong (Maslow, 1943, 1954). For Indigenous children, this incorporates a cultural dimension that includes the need to belong to Indigenous family, community, Country and culture, as highlighted by the young people in this research who grappled with identity conflict over time.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people growing up in OOHC today, the consequences of failing to better support journeys of culturally

connecting also include grappling with identity politics within Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia (Carlson, 2016). When we fail to better support Indigenous children and young people's journeys of culturally connecting—through relationships with Indigenous family, people and community, via immersion in culture to impart Indigenous relationality—we create the conditions for Indigenous children to become the adults of tomorrow who are subject to questioning about their Indigeneity. As established in Chapter 3, if they cannot answer those fundamental questions that speak to *who they are and where they belong* (i.e. mob, lineage, family ancestry, etc.), in accordance with Indigenous relationality, we risk creating the next generation of First Nations peoples who experience cultural disconnection. This not only affects the individual, but creates a broader ripple effect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at large.

Research in NSW shows that many Indigenous children living in OOHC have Indigenous parents who have also experienced significant childhood adversity, including being removed by child protection themselves as children (M. Davis, 2019). However, if an Indigenous parent cannot answer questions about their Indigenous heritage; cannot pass on the stories about their mob, family and Country; and cannot detail who they are related to (in terms of extended family and community lineage), not only does compliance with the ATSI CPP—particularly the placement and connection elements—become further complicated, but the child begins their journey of culturally connecting 'on the backfoot'. The beginning of the child's journey of culturally connecting is subsequently transformed—and perhaps made more difficult—because of the institutional failure of OOHC systems to effectively raise that child's parent in accordance with Indigenous relationality. Thus, the state—as the legal guardian—is effectively to blame for producing intergenerational cultural disconnection, not only

through the initial removal of the Indigenous child from their Indigenous family, but also in failing to better support Indigenous children's journeys of culturally connecting over time in OOHC. This is evidenced in the lack of CSPs noted in interviews (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.2.8), as well as Tabitha's reflection about her work in a contemporary OOHC context where she sees 'a lot of Aboriginal children . . . with non-Aboriginal families . . . [who are] not involving the child in cultural activities', suggesting that this is akin to assimilation (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.2.3). This harm is subsequently experienced at a community level. Furthermore, if Indigenous children do not learn their cultures, and cannot demonstrate their Indigenous heritage, while they are in OOHC, then they are also at a disadvantage as they exit OOHC and enter adulthood. It is a responsibility of the OOHC system to ensure that Indigenous children and young people can continue their journeys of culturally connecting from a position of knowledge and strength, not one of deficit.

Indigenous communities experience the intergenerational harm associated with cultural disconnection, including cultural loss and attempted assimilation, that is perpetuated by child protection and OOHC systems, which is directly recognised in the UNDRIP (UN, 2007). This is a form of racialised group harm that OOHC systems enact against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is also a form of group harm that we must all be attentive to, because ultimately, those of us who work to sustain, support and improve OOHC practices also sustain, and provide legitimacy to, the OOHC system as a whole. This risks complicity in sustaining the institutional harm enacted against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by child protection and OOHC systems, and so must always be balanced against efforts to better care for those Indigenous children and young people in these systems.

#### **8.4.2 Implications for Child Protection and Out-of-Home-Care Policy**

There are no easy solutions to cultural connection within child protection and OOHC systems that create the risk of cultural disconnection by design. This is why efforts to eliminate the risk of cultural disconnection by preventing Indigenous children and young people from entering OOHC systems in the first place are so valuable. Even within systems where there is ‘good intent’, where the importance of cultural connection to First Nations children and young people is well understood, child protection and OOHC systems have—and still do—perpetuate the risk of cultural disconnection. Salient is the reality that in relation to cultural connection, child protection and OOHC systems are failing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities, as highlighted in systemic inquiries and reviews, including the *Family is Culture* review (M. Davis, 2019) and the ‘Taskforce 1000’ *Always Was, Always Will Be Koori Children* inquiry (CCYP Victoria, 2016). For example, as discussed in Chapter 3, the production and quality of CSPs have been a concerning feature of OOHC practice in multiple Australian jurisdictions for some time (see, for example, Baidawi et al., 2017; CCYP Victoria, 2016, 2019, 2021; M. Davis, 2019; Hunter et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2018, 2019; Liddle et al., 2021; White & Gooda, 2017). Significant structural change is needed to disrupt the status quo.

In OOHC, this policy failure is evident in the current approach towards the measurement of the connection element of the ATSI CPP, wherein placement in accordance with the highest level of the ATSI CPP placement hierarchy, and the completion of CSPs, are used as indicators of cultural connection (see AIHW, 2020b, 2021b). This type of policy compliance approach turns journeys of culturally connecting—a complex, embedded process—into something that is formulaic and superficial. The complexity of cultural connection cannot be captured using simple

metrics of policy compliance because these kinds of measurement lend themselves to *oversimplification* of a complex process. In other words, CSPs and placement according to the highest level of the ATSI CPP placement hierarchy are poor proxies for cultural connection. That is not to say that CSPs and placement according to the highest level of the ATSI CPP—with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family—are not worthwhile endeavours. Rather, this is to highlight that simple metrics of policy compliance cannot adequately capture the complexity of Indigenous children and young people’s journeys of culturally connecting.

From a policy perspective, there is a need to reconceptualise how the connection element of the ATSI CPP is understood, worded, enacted and measured in policy to better reflect the complexity of Indigenous children and young people’s journeys of culturally connecting over time. Part of this includes shifting from the language of ‘cultural connection’ to ‘culturally connecting’. Policy also needs to shift away from an understanding of cultural connection as merely an individual right of Indigenous children and young people to also incorporate the right of Indigenous communities to cultural survival, as highlighted in the UNDRIP (UN, 2007), by reflecting a sense of child-as-community and child-as-future. At a practice level, this means shifting to child protection decision-making that extends beyond the individual child’s best interests, to privilege the necessary function that Indigenous families, peoples and communities must play in guiding Indigenous children and young people in their journeys of culturally connecting. At this juncture, Indigenous peoples and ACCOs are fundamental to designing and delivering an approach to cultural connection that responds to the complexity of cultural connection as a process that takes place over time. For this reason, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination is paramount to any solutions relating to the ‘cultural connection problem’.

However, we must be cognisant that ACCOs operate within child protection and OOHC systems that impose constraints on the realisation of true self-determination (see M. Davis, 2019, on the limitations of self-determination discourse in child protection and OOHC contexts). This has implications for Indigenous governance in OOHC contexts. While ACCOs are best placed to support Indigenous children and young people’s journeys of culturally connecting in OOHC, there is an inherent risk in handballing all the responsibilities to support journeys of culturally connecting to ACCOs. Indeed, as highlighted in the *Always Was, Always Will Be* (CCYP Victoria, 2016) systemic inquiry into OOHC services in Victoria, ACCOs have been found to generally provide better cultural support, and cultural planning, services to Indigenous children and young people within OOHC contexts. However, in taking complexity seriously, I am also accepting the possibility of policy *failure*. This is because transformative systems change—which includes the re-distribution of power and funding—is not guaranteed to take place seamlessly. This policy failure, however, is likely to bear negatively on ACCOs and influence the sustainability of Indigenous governance within OOHC contexts. This is the case despite decades of government failure and harm towards Indigenous peoples in Australia.

In Indigenous governance, history highlights that policy failure has a direct bearing on the sustainability of Indigenous governance approaches, for example, with consequences for funding continuity. In child protection and OOHC contexts, while failure to better uphold the full ATSI CPP has been longstanding across all Australian governments—and the overrepresentation crisis continues to worsen—governments do not tend to be held to account in the same way that Indigenous organisations are (M. Davis, 2019, 2021; Liddle et al., 2021). The disbandment of the ATSI C is a notable example of how Indigenous governance approaches are held to account when

governments view that failure is seemingly evident (Behrendt, 2005; M. Davis, 2009; Sanders, 2018). While governments are provided with opportunities to commission inquiries and reviews, to establish new reform agendas, and to respond to the recommendations of inquiries and reviews in the way that they see fit, Indigenous organisations, on the other hand, are rarely afforded that luxury. Rather, failure in Indigenous governance, by Indigenous organisations, has historically resulted in funding cuts, abolishment of the organisation, and government investment in mainstreaming, accompanied by the rhetoric that Indigenous organisations (and, by extension, peoples) are unable to look after their own affairs (see Broome, 2019; Sanders, 2018). For example, this rhetoric was evident throughout the Howard administration when mainstreaming was adopted where self-determination had seemingly failed (for example, Broome, 2019, chapter 14, p. 335).

Within an OOHC context, when Indigenous organisations, such as ACCOs, are tasked with the responsibility to, for example, ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in OOHC are ‘connected to culture’, it is probable that they will fail. If we take complexity seriously, we must accept that the complex, embedded process of culturally connecting within OOHC requires innovation to support, particularly since OOHC creates cultural disconnection in the first place. It is important here to caution against swift political reactions to failure by ACCOs in this context, and to understand that complexity results in unpredictability, non-linearity and diversity in experiences with common phenomena. Significant investment (in both time and resources) in self-determining, Indigenous governance approaches is required over the long term. This is because transformative systems change takes time.

Given that cultural connection is a necessary pursuit within OOHC systems that create the risk of cultural disconnection by design, the ultimate solution to cultural

connection is the elimination of the overrepresentation crisis that results in disproportionate numbers of Indigenous children being removed from their Indigenous families and communities. Whether the systems (including the various actors therein) that perpetuate the problem can be reasonably tasked with implementing the solutions is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, while this thesis has been cautious about the proffering of policy and practice ‘solutions’, it has provided analysis on why the current metrics used to measure cultural connection are insufficient. Suffice to say that if the status quo is maintained, it will only lead to a perpetuation of the problems associated with cultural disconnection that are produced by the disproportionate state-sanctioned removals of Indigenous children and young people from their Indigenous families and communities in the name of child protection.

## **8.5 Future Research**

Future research into the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who currently reside within OOHC systems could be undertaken. There is a dearth of research in Australia that illuminates children and young people’s realities in OOHC systems, particularly in relation to cultural connection. A better understanding of how OOHC systems enable—or fail—Indigenous children and young people regarding cultural connection while they currently reside in the system may be critical to improved practice and policy responses.

However, this thesis has highlighted that cultural disconnection is created by child protection and OOHC systems by design, and thus, there are inherent limitations to any research that seeks to enable transformative change in relation to cultural connection *within* the system itself. This presents two research opportunities: one that further works to ameliorate the risks of harm within the system; another that seeks to dismantle the system itself. This may include research that illuminates what

transformative systems change, or abolition,<sup>76</sup> may look like for Indigenous peoples in child protection and OOHC contexts in Australia in order to end the overrepresentation crisis that sustains the problem of cultural (dis)connection.

It is well established that prevention and early intervention is important to address child abuse and neglect (Herrenkohl et al., 2016; O'Donnell et al., 2008; D. Scott, 2006), and the Indigenous overrepresentation crisis within child protection and OOHC systems (Hunter et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2018, 2019; Liddle et al., 2021). Despite this, however, the rate of overrepresentation of Indigenous children and young people within child protection and OOHC systems continues to grow (Liddle et al., 2021), while early intervention remains underfunded (Teager et al., 2019). Innovative solutions, in the form of new research problems and ideas, are required to address longstanding problems.

This thesis has highlighted some of the ways in which child protection and OOHC systems harm Indigenous peoples. At this juncture, (Indigenous) researchers who are committed to justice for Indigenous peoples might pursue future research that challenges child protection and OOHC systems; questions why certain children and families (at the intersections of race and class) are more likely to become involved in these systems; and seeks to generate new, innovative research questions about what the future of child protection and OOHC systems *should* look like for Indigenous peoples in Australia. These kinds of research questions, and research topics, may enable future

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<sup>76</sup> In the US, there is an increasing amount of scholarship written by Black scholars that highlights the design flaws of child welfare, and criminal (in)justice, systems. For example, the upEND movement refers to child welfare systems as 'family policing' systems, drawing attention to the ways that Black, Indigenous and Latinx families are unfairly targeted by a racialised system that functions to destroy the Black, Indigenous and Latinx family unit (see Dettlaff et al., 2021; Dettlaff et al., 2020). In the criminal (in)justice sphere, the abolition scholarship of Black scholars in the US, such as Angela Y. Davis (2003, 2005, 2016) and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), has been drawn upon by First Nations scholars and activists in Australia, such as Latoya Aroha Rule, Amanda Porter, Alison Whitaker, Tabitha Lean (Arts Unimelb, 2021, 31 March) and Chelsea Watego (Arts Unimelb, 2021, 6 December), to argue that First Nations overrepresentation in criminal (in)justice systems is not an accident, but a feature of a racialised system that has operated, and continues to operate, differently for First Nations peoples in Australia.

Indigenous researchers to avoid the inherent tensions and conflict I experienced in my research journey due to my sense of complicity in producing research that can be weaponised to legitimise a system that continues to perpetuate harm against my community.

## **8.6 Conclusion**

This thesis set out to answer the question *'How is cultural connection understood and experienced by First Nations peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, Australia?'* It did so by designing a research method that utilised both quantitative and qualitative approaches, which enabled a wide range of diverse perspectives about cultural connection to be illuminated (while still retaining richness) by Indigenous peoples in Victoria, both within and outside of OOHC contexts. This thesis also used a research method that sought to understand how Indigenous young people with a lived experience of OOHC understood and experienced cultural connection over time, and what knowledges, mechanisms, feelings and actions would be most important to cultural connection for Indigenous children and young people in, and outside of, OOHC.

Through this research process, we have been able to understand that cultural connection is not a definitive end point, but a complex, relational and embedded process that takes place over time, which is unique to all Indigenous children and young people. This research has helped us to understand how Indigenous children and young people's journeys of culturally connecting are shaped by their subjectivities, family histories, and their agency in negotiating the Cultural Interface of OOHC, as well as the broader Cultural Interface at which Western and Indigenous knowledges intersect. While relational knowledges of mob, ancestry and Country, and mechanisms that enable immersion in culture with Indigenous peoples—in accordance with Indigenous

relationality—may support journeys of culturally connecting, this research enables insight into how, and why, culturally connecting is a complex process wherein non-linearity and unpredictability between action and outcomes must be expected.

As an Indigenous researcher, negotiating my own Cultural Interface in the academy throughout this thesis journey, I have reflected on my own assumptions and limits, and my positionality, in ways that have shaped my argument that cultural disconnection for Indigenous peoples is ultimately a product of historical and contemporary child protection and OOHC systems in Australia. While journeys of culturally connecting are undoubtedly important to support Indigenous children and young people living in OOHC, cultural connection practice and policy in OOHC contexts can only ameliorate the risk of cultural disconnection perpetrated by the state. I have come to the conclusion that the solution to the problem of cultural (dis)connection is to eliminate the disproportionate child removals of Indigenous children and young people from their Indigenous families and communities by child protection authorities. This may not be an answer to the research question I set out with, but it is the place the research question took me to.

Cultural connection matters for Indigenous peoples in Australia because it is important to improved health and wellbeing outcomes at the individual level, including for Indigenous children and young people living in OOHC. It also matters because it is fundamentally important to our survival as culturally distinct First Nations peoples. Cultural connection enables Indigenous peoples, as a collective, to continue to survive—and thrive—in settler-colonial contexts in which assimilation, if not elimination, is an ever-present threat. However, as this thesis has shown, this risk of cultural disconnection is perpetuated by Australian child protection and OOHC systems, which continue to intervene at disproportionate rates into the realm of Indigenous

family life, thus disrupting organic processes of cultural transmission in the family environment.

The findings in this thesis have highlighted that while there are shared understandings about cultural connection among Indigenous young people and adult community members in Victoria, journeys of culturally connecting are complex and experienced uniquely because of a range of factors, including children and young people's agency. When relational knowledges—and immersion in culture with Indigenous peoples—are not enabled, the findings of this thesis have highlighted how Aboriginal young people demonstrate their agency in choosing *how* to engage in processes of culturally connecting. However, while Indigenous children and young people are agents in their own decision-making about their journeys of culturally connecting, there is also a responsibility for Indigenous peoples—be it Indigenous family or community—to guide Indigenous children and young people throughout this process. In accordance with Indigenous relationality, journeys of culturally connecting are a relational endeavour, and a family and community responsibility, not solely an individual process. There is the need for OOHC systems to ensure that Indigenous family and community can guide Indigenous children and young people throughout this process to prevent the kinds of cultural loss and disconnection evident throughout the Stolen Generations.

However, all of this is hard for Indigenous peoples in Australia, because while child protection and OOHC systems are designed to protect children and young people from harm and are designed to do good, for our communities, child protection and OOHC systems are embroiled in producing harm. That is, the history of the Stolen Generations and the continuation of settler-colonialism in Australia have resulted in child protection and OOHC systems producing racialised, structural harm against

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities *by design* through ongoing, disproportionate Indigenous child removals. As a result, these systems are ill-equipped to enable meaningful journeys of culturally connecting for Indigenous children and young people by design. At this juncture, child protection and OOHC systems are a site where Indigenous peoples navigate a Cultural Interface, and negotiate how to sustain—and create—cultural connection for Indigenous children and young people when the risk of cultural disconnection is ever-present, and the integrity and fabric of the Indigenous family unit has been torn apart by child protection removal.

Ultimately, cultural connection is made possible through relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families and communities, ideally outside of OOHC contexts, where immersion in culture can occur organically. Even in ideal circumstances wherein journeys of culturally connecting are supported to flourish in OOHC, this does not undo the harm caused by removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their Indigenous families and communities. While elimination of the overrepresentation crisis is pertinent to ensure that cultural disconnection is not perpetuated by state-sanctioned child removals, we—as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—not the state, are the ultimate solution to the problem of cultural (dis)connection as it is currently enacted in OOHC systems. For that reason, our self-determination is paramount because cultural connection cannot be achieved without us.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Approaching the Research—Philosophical and Methodological Considerations

Methodology is about how research does or should proceed. . . . [it] is a body of approaches and methods, rules and postulates employed by research. Indigenous methodology is a body of Indigenous and theoretical approaches and methods, rules and postulates employed by Indigenous research in the study of Indigenous peoples. The main aim of Indigenous methodologies is to ensure that research on Indigenous issues can be carried out in a more respectful, ethical, correct, sympathetic, useful and beneficial fashion, seen from the point of view of Indigenous peoples. (Porsanger, 2004, pp. 107–108)

Methodological approaches to research design are contested within and between academic disciplines (Creswell, 2014). Debates arise as to how knowledge should or can be obtained, which methods will best answer research questions, whose knowledge should be privileged in the research process, and who should benefit from the research (Smith, 2012). Broadly speaking, there are three dominant Western research paradigms, which have distinctive positions on the nature of reality and how that reality can be known or understood through research. These Western paradigms are as follows:

1. *Positivism*: The belief that knowledge is speculative, and thus claims about knowledge need to be measured and tested in an objective and scientific fashion to understand reality. Positivism lends itself well to quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014).
2. *Constructivism*: The belief that there are multiple realities that can be contradictory yet equally valid. Knowledge and meaning require subjective

interpretation by researchers. Constructivism lends itself well to qualitative methods (Creswell, 2014).

3. *Pragmatism*: The belief that reality is not static, and thus, flexible approaches to research are required. Research methods and analysis techniques lie on a continuum from ‘exploratory’ to ‘confirmatory’, and methods are chosen according to how well they provide insight or solutions to research problems (Creswell, 2014; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003).

However, regardless of the research paradigm it falls under, Western research often privileges Western approaches to understanding and interpreting the world.

French philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault (1980) articulated an inextricable link between power and knowledge construction: those in power (typically Anglo-centric, Western groups) produce knowledge and subsequently give it credibility. Conversely, the knowledge of marginalised groups, such as Indigenous peoples, is often disregarded as primitive or inferior (Smith, 1999, 2012).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have had a tumultuous relationship with research, stemming back to periods during colonisation during which Indigenous peoples were seen as specimens to be studied (for example, the skulls of Indigenous peoples were collected to test Social Darwinian evolutionary theories) (Perkins, 2008; Rigney, 1999). Not only have Indigenous knowledges been silenced, but generations of non-Indigenous researchers have built their careers on positioning themselves as experts while subjugating, dehumanising and marginalising Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2012). Considering the historically fraught relationship between Indigenous peoples and research is paramount to designing ethically sound research about Indigenous issues.

Questionable past research ‘about’ and ‘on’ Indigenous peoples has resulted in a legacy of distrust of research, with contemporary concerns focused on researcher’s

privileging of Western knowledges over and above Indigenous knowledges (Rigney, 1999; Smith, 2012). In a process of reclaiming legitimacy over Indigenous ways of knowing and being, Indigenous ways of conducting research have grown as an emerging discipline. This evolving body of Indigenous scholarship includes Indigenist research (Rigney, 1999), Kaupapa Maori research (Bishop, 1999, 1996; Smith, 1999, 2012), Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Foley, 2003; Nakata, 2007), Research as Ceremony (Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008), Japanangka Research (West, 2000), Indigenous Women's Standpoint Epistemology (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) and Dadirri Research (Atkinson, 2002).

There are diverse approaches to Indigenous research, and certainly, there is no one way to 'do' Indigenous research. However, the need for Indigenous researchers to conduct research that privileges Indigenous knowledge and benefits Indigenous peoples is paramount, as articulated by Narungga, Kurna and Ngarrindjeri scholar Lester Irabinna Rigney (1999), who stated that 'Indigenous peoples' interests, knowledge and experiences must be at the centre of research methodologies and construction of knowledge about Indigenous peoples' (p. 119).

Reflecting on the research question (*'How is cultural connection understood and experienced by First Nations peoples in OOHC contexts in Victoria, Australia?'*), the priorities for this research were to ensure that:

- The research could have real-world implications for Indigenous children and young people in OOHC contexts.
- Indigenous participation and voice would be prioritised throughout the research process.
- The voices, opinions and perspectives of Indigenous young people with lived experience of OOHC would be prioritised.

These priorities were kept at the forefront while thinking about the research design, which involved consideration of a mixture of Indigenous and Western methodological approaches, including Indigenist research, a transformative worldview, participatory research, pragmatism, Indigenous quantitative research and Indigenous Standpoint Theory.

### **Indigenist Research With a Transformative Worldview**

Indigenous Australians are the primary subjects of Indigenist research. Indigenist research gives voice to Indigenous people. (Rigney, 1999, p. 117)

Created by Narungga, Kurna and Ngarrindjeri scholar Lester Irabinna Rigney (1999) in Australia, Indigenist research seeks to privilege Indigenous voices in the research process, while also maintaining political integrity and contributing to Indigenous self-determination. Such an approach is necessary to counteract the silencing of Indigenous voices in past (and sometimes contemporary) research processes, as previously highlighted (Rigney, 1999; Smith, 1999, 2012). In this instance, since the research question was focused on understanding how Indigenous peoples experience cultural connection and disconnection, the importance of privileging Indigenous voices—as articulated by Rigney (1999)—was even more pertinent.

A transformative worldview—which privileges the voice, and involvement of, marginalised groups of society throughout the research process (Creswell, 2014)—was also an important consideration. While a transformative worldview is similar to the principle of privileging Indigenous perspectives found in Indigenist research, a transformative approach also considers other marginalised groups, such as children and young people.

As with Indigenous peoples, children and young people have also been the non-participatory subjects of prejudicial—and, sometimes, exploitative and abusive—research practices (Hart, 1992). A consequence of a risk-dominated, adult-centric

statutory system, young people are often excluded from conversations about their lives in the OOHC system. Instead, decisions are often made by adults—caseworkers, foster carers, kinship carers, magistrates and teachers for example—on behalf of, and in the best interests of, children and young people who live in OOHC (Connolly, 2017).

Indigenous children and young people experience a double layer of systematic oppression and exclusion: they are Indigenous, which means that they are the subjects of paternalistic decision-making (evidenced throughout Australia’s colonial history and discussed at length in Chapter 2), and they are often the subjects of paternalistic adult decision-making practices that view children and young people as lacking full autonomy and agency, and therefore the right to voice and full participation (S. Nakata, 2015).

Coupling a transformative approach with the principles of Indigenist research was pertinent considering the historical involvement of *both* Indigenous peoples and children and young people—as distinct groups—in research processes. Since this research was centred on Indigenous *and* youth perspectives and experiences, consideration of whose knowledge is privileged was paramount.

Consideration of a wide array of participant perspectives in the research was also important given the heterogeneity of the First Nations community in Victoria. A variety of methods to explore Indigenous people’s understandings of cultural connection were considered, such as focus groups, interviews and surveys. Privileging the perspectives and opinions of a wide array of Indigenous peoples is crucial to research; collectively, Indigenous peoples in Australia are classified as one group, yet importantly consist of individuals from more than 250 Nations with distinct experiences of colonisation/invasion and modernity. While qualitative research methods enable nuance, richness and individual stories to be elicited, quantitative methods enable a wider

sample of participants to take part, and thus increase diversity in participant opinions and responses. Both qualitative and quantitative methods have merit—and their own unique strengths—in enabling Indigenous perspectives to be privileged in research.

### **Participatory Research**

While privileging Indigenous voices throughout the research was paramount, consideration of the principles of participatory research was also necessary. The historical legacy of unethical research practices with Indigenous peoples has resulted in many Indigenous peoples and communities feeling that research can be an exploitative exercise (NHMRC, 2018). Participatory research practices—particularly those building on the values of respect, reciprocity and equity—can aid in the design of research that is beneficial and empowering for Indigenous peoples and communities. This is articulated by the NHMRC (2018) in their guidelines for the ethical conduct of research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whereby ethical research involves

equitable and respectful engagement with and inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, their values and cultures in the proposed research. This includes discussing reciprocal arrangements during the project development phase to ensure they are built into the overall project through agreements with organisations or individuals.

However, in developing a ladder of citizen participation in government decision-making processes, Sherry Arnstein (1969) proposed that there are degrees of involvement in decision-making processes, ranging from non-participation to control. While the ladder was initially designed for use in the governance field, its principles can also be applied to research when thinking about the nature of true participation in research processes. Building on from the work of Arnstein (1969), Roger Hart (1992) also constructed a ladder of participation in decision-making processes for young people, which is useful for consideration in this research given the focus on cultural connection for children and young people in OOHC. Hart's (1992) ladder of

participation similarly ranged from non-participation to shared decision-making, with three levels of non-participation (ranging from manipulation to tokenism) and five levels of participation (assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated shared decisions with young people; young people-initiated and directed; and, at the top end, young people-initiated shared decisions with adults) (Hart, 1992). Hart's (1992) work was useful in thinking about the level of participation possible in this research project given funding and time constraints.

### **Pragmatism**

A pragmatic approach was pertinent to this research. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) highlight that a pragmatic approach to research does not limit itself in the selection of research methods, but rather, research methods are chosen according to how well they explain, or provide insight into, the research issue. Thus, in pragmatism, the combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods is not only possible, but is understood to complement one another (Morgan, 2007). Pragmatism also tends to be 'real-world oriented', whereby research focuses on having real-world implications (Creswell, 2014).

In this research project, the research issue—cultural connection for First Nations children and young people—needed to be explored from the perspective of First Nations peoples who hold cultural knowledge and expertise, with diversity ranging from young people who have a lived experience of OOHC, to OOHC workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, family members, Elders and carers. Combining qualitative methods with quantitative data collection methods would thus enable a rich insight into the research issue, while also enabling a larger sample of Indigenous peoples to share their knowledge and expertise on the issue. Furthermore, a

pragmatic approach would also enable the research to result in real-world implications for Indigenous children and young people living in OOHC.

### **Indigenous Quantitative Research**

A wealth of Indigenous methodological literature focuses on the importance of culturally appropriate data collection techniques for Indigenous peoples, which often translate to the application of qualitative methodologies in Indigenous research. For example, in her book on Indigenous methodologies, Cree scholar and social worker Margaret Kovach (2009) argues that a natural starting point for Indigenous scholars is qualitative research given that Indigenous peoples possess strong oral traditions. Similarly, in her literature review on Indigenous knowledge, Mi'kmaw professor Marie Battiste (2002) articulated that Indigenous ways of knowing include 'talking or sharing circles and dialogues, participant observations, experiential learning, modelling, meditation, prayer, ceremonies, or story telling' (p. 18), and in Australia, Noonuccal scholar Karen Martin (2003, 2008) emphasises stories and story-lines as a way of knowing that can be embraced in Indigenous research.

Conversely, Walter and Andersen (2013) argue that there is an increased need for Indigenous researchers to use quantitative research methods and analyse statistics in today's modern world where governments collect large-scale data, such as Censuses, to report on the socioeconomic attributes of Indigenous populations. They argue that using quantitative methodologies accepts that Indigenous peoples have moved towards modernity just like any other culture, and that 'traditional' methods of sharing knowledge are no more legitimate than modern methods, such as those that utilise technology (Walter & Andersen, 2013). Quantitative methods are not without their issues—various statistical techniques still used today have their roots in the eugenics movement (Clayton, 2020). However, if used appropriately, quantitative methods are

just as legitimate as qualitative methods in Indigenous research, but only if researchers accept that the use of quantitative methods does not equate to objective, impartial research:

Indigenous quantitative research is in essence quantitative research framed and developed from an Indigenous socially positioned, epistemological, ontological, and axiological perspective. This is not as simple as: ‘add Indigeneity and stir’. Rather, approaching quantitative research from an Indigenous frame is a methodologically transformative process. (Walter & Andersen, 2013, pp. 16–17)

Elaborating on this point, Walter and Andersen (2013) apply the Bourdieuan concept of *habitus*, the set of ‘beliefs, attitudes, skills, and practices possessed and employed by individuals in their daily life’ (p. 15). French philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) theorised that our *habitus* influences our preferences and the decisions we make, and, to an extent, reflects our worldview. From a quantitative research perspective, the analysis of statistics is not value-free, but rather, data clean up, categorising and analysis techniques chosen are influenced by the position and background of the researcher (Walter & Andersen, 2013). In this way, the lens through which researchers see the world (which is influenced by their social and cultural position) consciously or unconsciously influences their conduct of research, meaning that research can never be an objective activity and always comes from a subjective positioning.

### **Indigenous Standpoint Theory**

The application of *habitus* or a lens to the conduct of research has resemblance to the feminist concept of standpoint theory. The original contribution of standpoint theory related to the subjective, gendered positioning of the researcher, and how the researcher’s gender—and its associated marginalised or dominant status—influences the conduct of research. In building on the importance of subjectivity and the researcher’s

position, Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata (1997, 2007) originally spoke about the role that culture plays in influencing a researcher's standpoint, particularly as it relates to Indigeneity. Nakata (1997, 2007) theorised a 'Cultural Interface', a point where the Indigenous researcher traverses both their Indigeneity and the dominant, Western culture in the conduct of research. Dennis Foley (2003) articulated an Indigenous Standpoint Theory as well, referring to the oppression of Indigenous peoples, and the view that their experiences of oppression and marginalisation uniquely influence the conduct of research, as well as the interpretation of knowledge.

Building on from Martin Nakata (1997, 2007) and Dennis Foley's (2003) conceptualisation of Indigenous Standpoint Theory, Goenpul distinguished professor from Quandamooka Country, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2013), added gender into the equation, arguing that Indigenous men's and women's subjective experiences of reality are vastly different. Moreton-Robinson articulates an Indigenous women's standpoint as shaped by a range of shared themes, including

. . . an inalienable connection to land; a legacy of dispossession, racism and sexism; resisting and replacing disparaging images of ourselves with self-defined images; continuing our activism as mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, grandmothers and community leaders, as well as negotiating sexual policies across and within cultures.

(Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. xvi)

One contribution of Indigenous Standpoint Theory is that the conduct of research is subjective and shaped by the researcher's Indigeneity and their characteristics, values and experiences. Importantly, subjectivity is conscious and owned, which enables reflexivity throughout the research. Coupling Indigenous Standpoint Theory with Indigenous quantitative methodologies (which similarly apply the subjective positioning of *habitus* to the conduct of research) enables the researcher to consciously understand that every single design, method and analytical choice is

influenced by their social, historical and cultural experiences. Thus, all Indigenous research is unique and influenced by the researcher's experiences of Indigeneity, just as mainstream research is influenced by the researcher's (mainstream) social and cultural position.

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## Appendix B: Plain Language Statements



### Information Sheet for Survey Participants

Department of Social Work  
Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences

#### “Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care”

Dr Sarah Wise  
Responsible Researcher  
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Ms Jacyнта Krakouer  
Doctor of Philosophy student  
Phone: 8344 4171  
Email: [krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au)

#### What is this research about?

This research, called *‘Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care’*, aims to understand what connection to culture means for Indigenous Australians. It also aims to understand how connection to culture is best nurtured, and how Indigenous Australians know when they’re connected to (or disconnected from) their culture. The results from this research will be used to inform the second part of the research, which is about how Indigenous children experience cultural connection in out-of-home care (i.e. foster care, kinship care, residential care, etc). These results will be used to inform government policy on how to better foster connection to culture for Indigenous Australian children living in out-of-home care.

#### Who is conducting the research?

Dr Sarah Wise is the person responsible for the research project. Sarah works in the Department of Social Work at the University of Melbourne. Jacyнта Krakouer is the student researcher. Jacyнта is an Aboriginal Australian and is doing this research for her doctoral degree.

#### Who is funding the research?

The research is funded by the Australian Government through a Research Training Program Scholarship.

#### Who can take part?

Indigenous Australian adults, aged over 18 years of age, can take part in this research. Participants must self-identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and must be currently living in Australia. Non-Indigenous Australians, and Indigenous Australians under the age of 18 years old, cannot take part in this research.

#### What does taking part involve?

Taking part means completing a short online survey. The survey contains a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions about the importance of connection to culture for Indigenous Australians. It also asks participants for their opinion on how Indigenous Australian children learn best about their culture. The survey can take up to 20 minutes to complete.

### **What are the risks?**

This survey is about connection to culture. This can be a sensitive topic for Indigenous Australians, particularly those impacted by the Stolen Generations. You might find some of the questions on the survey upsetting. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No. Participation is completely voluntary. You are able to withdraw at any time. But, if you have already completed the survey, your answers will still be used.

### **Why should I take part?**

Results from this research will help government and agencies better understand connection to culture for Indigenous children living in out-of-home care. It is hoped that the research will be used to make sure that Indigenous children in care are not disconnected from their culture when they are removed from their families. Participants can also choose to go into the draw to win 1 of 3 Coles Myer gift cards to the value of \$100 each (total prize pool = \$300). Three winners will be randomly selected a fortnight after the survey finishes.

### **Will I hear about the results of this research?**

Results will be published widely and made available online. Results will be shared with you through social media, journal articles and conferences.

### **What happens to my information?**

We will do our best to protect your privacy. Your information will be treated confidentially in line with the legal requirements of the Privacy Act 1988. You will not be named in any reports. We will store your information securely at the University of Melbourne, and only the research team will be able to access it. All information collected for the research will be kept securely for 10 years at the University of Melbourne. Your information will not be used in future studies.

### **Who has approved this research?**

This research has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne (Ethics ID number 1750324.1).

### **Who can I contact if I have any concerns about the research?**

If you have any concerns about this research, you should contact the Manager of Human Research Ethics at the University of Melbourne via phone: +61 3 8344 2073 or email: [HumanEthics-complaints@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:HumanEthics-complaints@unimelb.edu.au).

### **Where can I get further information?**

If you would like more information about the research, please contact the Student Researcher via phone: 8344 4171 or email: [krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au). You can also contact the Responsible Researcher via phone: +61 3 90355371 or email: [sarah.wise@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:sarah.wise@unimelb.edu.au).

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## Information Sheet for Interview Participants

Department of Social Work  
Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences

### “Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care”

Dr Sarah Wise  
Responsible Researcher  
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Phone: 8344 4171  
Email: [krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au)

#### What is this study about?

This study, called *‘Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care’*, aims to understand what connection to culture means for Indigenous Australians. It also aims to understand how connection to culture is best nurtured, and how Indigenous Australian youth experienced cultural connection while living in care. The results from this study will be used to inform government policy on how to better foster connection to culture for Indigenous Australian youth living in out-of-home care.

#### Who is conducting the study?

Dr Sarah Wise is the person responsible for the study. Sarah works in the Department of Social Work at the University of Melbourne. Jacynta Krakouer is the student researcher. Jacynta is an Aboriginal Australian and is doing this study for her doctoral degree at the University of Melbourne.

#### Who is funding the study?

The Australian Government is funding this study.

#### Who can take part?

You can take part if you are:

- An Indigenous Australian, AND
- Aged between 15-24 years of age, AND,
- Have lived in out-of-home care before (i.e. foster care, kinship care, residential care)

You will either be living in permanent care, or will be over 18 years old (i.e. aged out of state care). Non-Indigenous Australians, and Indigenous youth currently living in out-of-home care cannot take part in this study.

#### What does taking part involve?

Taking part means talking to the student researcher for up to 60 minutes in a face to face interview. You can take a break and complete the interview another time if it gets too long. The interview can be done at a public place of your choice where you feel comfortable. With your permission, we will audio record the interview in order to make sure that we don’t miss anything you have said.

In the interview, we will talk about your culture and what cultural connection means to you. We will also talk about your time in care, and whether or not you felt connected to (or disconnected from) your culture while living in care.

### **What are the risks?**

This study is about connection to culture, which is a sensitive topic for Indigenous Australians who have been removed from their families. You might find some of the interview questions upsetting. But, you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to, and you can stop the interview at any time.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No. It's up to you if you want to take part in this study. Participation is completely voluntary. You can pull out at any time. But, if you have already done an interview, we will still use what you have said (i.e. your data will still be included in the study).

### **Why should I take part?**

Results from this study will help governments and agencies better understand what connection to culture means for Indigenous youth living in out-of-home care. We hope that the study will be used to make sure that Indigenous children in care are not disconnected from their culture when they are removed from their families.

### **Do I get paid for taking part?**

If you take part in this study, you will get a \$50 voucher as a thank you for your time. There is a choice of gift vouchers from JB Hifi, Coles, Woolworths, Target, Big W, Officeworks and Kmart. A meal will also be provided if you choose to complete the interview at a local café.

### **What happens to my information?**

We will do our best to protect your privacy. Your information will be treated confidentially in line with the legal requirements of the Privacy Act 1988. You will not be named in any reports. We will use a fake name instead. We will keep your information locked away at the University of Melbourne, and only the research team will be able to look at it. All information collected for the study will be kept securely for 10 years at the University of Melbourne. Your information will not be used in future studies.

The audio recording of your interview will be typed up (transcribed) by the student researcher and erased once it's been checked for accuracy. We might use the typed transcript of your interview in presentations or written reports for this study. But, your name and any other identifying information (such as your voice) will *not* be used.

### **Will I hear about the results of this study?**

Results will be published widely and made available online. Results will be shared with you through social media, journal articles and conferences. You can also request a softcopy or hardcopy of publications from the Student Researcher via phone: 8344 4171 or email: [krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au) if you are interested.

### **Who has approved this study?**

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne (Ethics ID number 1750324.1).

**Who can I contact if I have any concerns about the study?**

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## “Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care”

Dr Sarah Wise  
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### What is this study about?

This study, called ‘*Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care*’, aims to understand what connection to culture means for Indigenous Australians. It also aims to understand how connection to culture is best nurtured, and how Indigenous Australian youth experienced cultural connection while living in out-of-home care. The results from this study will be used to inform government policy on how to better foster connection to culture for Indigenous Australian youth living in out-of-home care. We hope that the study will be used to make sure that Indigenous children in care are not disconnected from their culture when they are removed from their families.

### Who is conducting the study?

Dr Sarah Wise is the person responsible for the study. Sarah works in the Department of Social Work at the University of Melbourne. Jacynta Krakouer is the student researcher. Jacynta is an Aboriginal Australian and is doing this study for her doctoral degree at the University of Melbourne.

### Who is funding the study?

The Australian Government is funding this study.

### Who can take part?

Indigenous Australians, aged between 15-24 years of age, who have previously in out-of-home care (i.e. foster care, kinship care, residential care) can take part in this study. You may have a young person living in your care who is eligible to participate. If so, the young person needs to be on a permanent care order, or over the age of 18, to take part. Non-Indigenous Australians, and Indigenous youth currently living in out-of-home care cannot take part in this study.

### What does taking part involve?

Indigenous young people taking part in the study will be asked to complete a face to face interview with the student researcher. The interview can take up to 60 minutes, and will be held at a public place where the young person feels comfortable. With the young person’s permission, we will audio record the interview for research purposes only. In the interview, we will discuss: the young person’s culture, what cultural connection means to them, and how connected to their culture they felt during their time in out-of-home care. We will also discuss cultural disconnection. This can be a sensitive topic for Indigenous Australians who have been removed from their families. The young person may find some interview questions distressing.

### **Is participation voluntary?**

Participation is completely voluntary. Young people can withdraw at any time, and they don't have to answer any question they don't want to. But, if the young person has already done an interview, their answers (or data) will still be included in the study.

### **Do young people get paid for taking part?**

Young people taking part in an interview will get a \$50 voucher as a thank you for their time. There is a choice of gift vouchers from JB Hifi, Coles, Woolworths, Target, Big W, Officeworks and Kmart. A meal will also be provided if the young person chooses to complete the interview at a local café.

### **Can you protect participant's privacy?**

We will do our best to protect participant's privacy. Participant information will be treated confidentially in line with the legal requirements of the Privacy Act 1988. No participant will not be named in any reports or publications. All information relating to the study will be stored securely at the University of Melbourne. Only the research team will be able to access the data. All information collected for the study will be kept securely for 10 years at the University of Melbourne. All information collected for this study will not be used in future studies.

The audio recording of interviews will be transcribed by the student researcher and erased once it's been checked for accuracy. We might use the typed transcript of interviews in presentations or written reports for this study, but no identifying participant information (i.e. participant's name or voice) will be used.

### **Will I hear about the results of this study?**

Results will be published widely and made available online. Results will be shared with you through social media, journal articles and conferences. You can also request a softcopy or hardcopy of publications from the Student Researcher via phone: 8344 4171 or email: [krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au) if you are interested.

### **Who can I contact if I have any concerns about the study?**

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne (Ethics ID number 1750324.1). If you have any concerns about this study, you should contact the Manager of Human Research Ethics at the University of Melbourne via phone: +61 3 8344 2073 or email: [HumanEthics-complaints@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:HumanEthics-complaints@unimelb.edu.au).

### **Where can I get further information?**

If you would like more information about the study, please contact the Student Researcher via phone: 8344 4171 or email: [krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au). You can also contact the Responsible Researcher via phone: +61 3 90355371 or email: [sarah.wise@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:sarah.wise@unimelb.edu.au).

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## Appendix C: Consent Forms



### *Consent Form for Survey Participants* *Department of Social Work* *Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences*

#### **“Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care”**

Dr Sarah Wise  
Responsible Researcher  
Phone: +61 3 90355371  
Email: [sarah.wise@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:sarah.wise@unimelb.edu.au)

Ms Jacynta Krakouer  
Doctor of Philosophy student  
Phone: 8344 4171  
Email: [krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au)

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with an electronic information sheet to read.
  2. I understand that the purpose of this research is to investigate cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.
  3. I understand that my participation in this project is for research purposes only.
  4. I acknowledge that the risks associated with participating in this research project have been explained to my satisfaction.
  5. In this project I will be required to complete an online survey that will take up to 20 minutes to complete.
  6. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this project anytime, and to withdraw any unprocessed data that I have provided.
  7. I understand that the data from this research will be stored at the University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after 10 years.
  8. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements; my data will be password protected and accessible only by the named researchers (Jacynta Krakouer and Sarah Wise).
  9. By clicking the text below, I give my consent to participate in this research project.
- I give my consent to participate in this research project



## Consent Form for Interview Participants

Department of Social Work  
Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences

### “Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care”

Dr Sarah Wise  
Responsible Researcher  
Phone: +61 3 90355371  
Email: [sarah.wise@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:sarah.wise@unimelb.edu.au)

Ms Jacynta Krakouer  
Doctor of Philosophy student  
Phone: 8344 4171  
Email: [krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:krakouer.j@unimelb.edu.au)

**Name of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.
2. I understand that the purpose of this research is to investigate cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in Victoria.
3. I understand that my participation in this project is for research purposes only.
4. I acknowledge that the risks associated with participating in this research project have been explained to my satisfaction.
5. In this project I will be required to take part in a face-to-face interview that can take up to 60 minutes. I understand that I can stop the interview at any time if it gets too long.
6. I understand that my interview may be audio recorded/taped with my consent.
7. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this project anytime and to withdraw any unprocessed data that I have provided.
8. I understand that the data from this research will be stored at the University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after 10 years.
9. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements; my data will be password protected and accessible only by the named researchers.
10. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form, it will be retained by the research team.
  - I give my consent for my interview to be audio-recorded

**Participant Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**“Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care”**

Dr Sarah Wise  
Responsible Researcher  
Phone: +61 3 90355371  
Email: [sarah.wise@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:sarah.wise@unimelb.edu.au)

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**Name of Guardian:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. I give consent for \_\_\_\_\_ [*insert young person's name*] to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.
2. I understand that the purpose of this research is to investigate cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in Victoria.
3. I understand that participation in this project is for research purposes only.
4. I acknowledge that the risks associated with participating in this research project have been explained to my satisfaction.
5. In this project, the young person in my care will be required to take part in a face-to-face interview that can take up to 60 minutes.
6. I understand that interviews may be audio recorded/taped with the young person's consent.
7. I understand that participation is voluntary and that the young person in my care is free to withdraw from this project anytime and to withdraw any unprocessed data that they have provided.
8. I understand that the data from this research will be stored at the University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after 10 years.
9. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information provided will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements, that data will be password protected and accessible only by the named researchers.
10. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form, it will be retained by the research team.

**Guardian Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Survey

Question	Response options
Q1 Are you Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes, Aboriginal only (1)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes, Torres Strait Islander only (2)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (3)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> No, neither Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (4)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Don't know (5)</li> </ul>
Q2 What age were you last birthday? <i>(You must be over 18 years old to take part).</i>	_____
Q3 Do you live in Victoria?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes (1)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> No (2)</li> </ul>
Q4 What is your postcode?	_____
Q5 What community/communities, mob/s or clan group/s do you identify with? <i>(If you are unsure, please write 'don't know').</i>	_____
Q6 Do you live in your community, or communities, of origin? (e.g. the community or communities that you identified with in question 5).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes, I live in my maternal community of origin (Mum's side) (1)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes, I live in my paternal community of origin (Dad's side) (2)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes, I live in both my maternal and paternal communities of origin (Mum and Dad's side) (3)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> No, I don't live in my community/communities of origin (4)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Don't know (5)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> If respondent answered 'no' to Q6:</li> </ul> Q6.1 In which state or territory is your community of origin located? <i>If you belong to more than one community, you can click multiple states and territories.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> New South Wales (NSW) (1)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Victoria (VIC) (2)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Queensland (QLD) (3)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> South Australia (SA) (4)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Western Australia (WA) (5)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Tasmania (TAS) (6)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Northern Territory (NT) (7)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Australian Capital Territory (ACT) (8)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Don't know (9)</li> </ul>
Q7 Are you an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Elder?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes (1)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> No (2)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Prefer not to say (3)</li> </ul>
Q8 Are you the parent or guardian of any dependent children, under the age of 18, currently living in your household?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes (1)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> No (2)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Prefer not to say (3)</li> </ul>
<p><i>These next few questions are about the knowledge or understandings children need to be connected to Indigenous culture.</i></p>	
<p>Q9 Thinking about <b>the knowledge or understandings Indigenous children need</b> to be connected to culture, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following, where 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree.</p>	

To be connected to culture, Indigenous children need to know...						
	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Don't know (6)
...about their mob/ancestry (e.g. their personal history and where they come from) (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...Koori/Aboriginal English or an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander language (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...about Indigenous spirituality (e.g. spirits, ancestors, connection to land) (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...about Indigenous traditions and practices (e.g. traditional lore/law, art, hunting, ceremony) (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...about their land/country (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...their totem (e.g. animal, being or object, such as a snake, eagle or crocodile) (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...about Indigenous music and instruments (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...about Indigenous foods (e.g. damper, kangaroo, bush tucker) (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What else do Indigenous children need to know to be connected to their culture? (please specify)						
<p>Q10 What is the most important thing Indigenous children need to know about their culture? Please complete the sentence below.</p> <p>To be connected to their culture, Indigenous children need to know ....</p>						

*These next few questions are about feeling connected to Indigenous culture.*

Q11 Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following, where 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree.

A person feels connected to their Indigenous culture if they...

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Don't know (6)
...identify as an Indigenous person (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...feel they belong to their Indigenous family (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...feel they belong to their own, or their local, Indigenous community (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...feel connected to Indigenous people in general (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...speak Koori/Aboriginal English or an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander language (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...have a sense of spirituality (e.g. spirits, ancestors) (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...uphold cultural values (e.g. respect for Elders) (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...feel connected to land/country (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...feel proud of their Indigenous culture/heritage (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...want to raise their kids as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...adopt Indigenous traditions and practices (e.g. traditional lore/law, art, hunting, ceremony) (11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...listen to, or play, Indigenous music and instruments (12)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

...eat traditional Indigenous foods (e.g. damper, kangaroo, bush tucker) (13)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>																																			
...watch Indigenous films/TV shows (e.g. NITV) (14)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>																																			
...participate in cultural/sporting events and celebrations (e.g. Football/Netball carnivals, NAIDOC week, Survival Day) (15)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>																																			
How else do you know if an Indigenous person is connected to their culture? (please specify) _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>																																			
<p>Q12 What is the most important way people show they are connected to their Indigenous culture? Please complete the sentence below.</p> <p>You know an Indigenous person is connected to their culture when...</p>																																									
<p><i>These next few questions are about <b>how</b> children develop a sense of connection to their culture.</i></p> <p>Q13 Thinking about <b>how Indigenous children</b> develop a sense of connection to their culture, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following, where 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree.</p> <p>For Indigenous children to develop a sense of connection to culture, it is important for them to ...</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Strongly Disagree (1)</th> <th>Disagree (2)</th> <th>Neither Agree or Disagree (3)</th> <th>Agree (4)</th> <th>Strongly Agree (5)</th> <th>Don't know (6)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>...grow up/be raised by their Indigenous family (1)</td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>...have Indigenous friends who are also family (e.g. cousins, siblings) (2)</td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>...have Indigenous friends who are not related (3)</td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>...have a relationship with an Indigenous</td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> <td><input type="radio"/></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>								Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Don't know (6)	...grow up/be raised by their Indigenous family (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	...have Indigenous friends who are also family (e.g. cousins, siblings) (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	...have Indigenous friends who are not related (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	...have a relationship with an Indigenous	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Don't know (6)																																			
...grow up/be raised by their Indigenous family (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>																																			
...have Indigenous friends who are also family (e.g. cousins, siblings) (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>																																			
...have Indigenous friends who are not related (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>																																			
...have a relationship with an Indigenous	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>																																			

mentor/role model (4)						
...have a relationship with an Indigenous Elder (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...spend time in their local Indigenous community (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...spend time in their community, or communities, of origin (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...spend time on land/country (e.g. going out bush) (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...live on land/country (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...participate in traditional Indigenous practices (e.g. ceremony, art, initiation) (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...watch Indigenous films/TV shows (e.g. NITV) (11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...listen to, or play, Indigenous music and instruments (12)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...participate in cultural events and celebrations (e.g. NAIDOC week, Survival/Invasion Day) (13)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...use Indigenous-specific services (e.g. child care, health, education) (14)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How else do Indigenous children develop a sense of connection to culture? (please specify)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q14 What is the best way Indigenous children can develop a sense of connection to their culture? Please complete the sentence below.

The best way Indigenous children can develop a sense of connection to their culture is by ....

<p>Q15 Out-of-home care is the care of children and young people aged 0-17 years who are unable to live with their primary caregivers. It involves the placement of a child or young person with alternate caregivers on a short-or long-term basis.</p> <p>Many Indigenous children in out-of-home care do not live/grow up with their Indigenous family. How do you think Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children can develop a connection to their culture in this situation?</p> <p>Please complete the sentence below.</p> <p>The best way Indigenous children in out-of-home care can develop a sense of connection to their culture is by....</p>	
<p>Q16 Are there different degrees of cultural connection?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes, I think it can range from being a little bit connected to very connected to culture (1)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> No, I think you're either connected to culture or you're disconnected (2)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Don't know (3)</li> </ul>
<p>Q17 How do you know if an Indigenous person is disconnected from their culture? Please complete the sentence below.</p> <p>You know an Indigenous person is disconnected from their culture when...</p>	
<p>Q18 How do you think children are affected by being disconnected to their culture? Please complete the sentence below.</p> <p>If a child is disconnected from their Indigenous culture ...</p>	
<p><i>These final few questions are about if you have lived, or worked with children, in out-of-home care.</i></p>	
<p>Q19 Do you currently work or volunteer with Indigenous children who live in out-of-home care (e.g. foster care, kinship care, residential care)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Yes (1)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> No (2)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Prefer not to say (3)</li> </ul>

<p>○ If respondent answered 'yes' to Q19:</p> <p>Q19.1 What is your role with Indigenous children in out-of-home care?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Caseworker at an Indigenous community-controlled agency (1)</li> <li>○ Caseworker at a non-Indigenous community agency (2)</li> <li>○ Caseworker at a government agency (3)</li> <li>○ Foster carer (4)</li> <li>○ Kinship carer (5)</li> <li>○ Cultural mentor (6)</li> <li>○ Other (please specify) _____ (7)</li> <li>○ Prefer not to say (8)</li> </ul>
<p>Q20 Were you in out-of-home care (e.g. foster care, kinship care, residential care) for any time during the first 18 years of your life?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Yes (1)</li> <li>○ No (2)</li> <li>○ Prefer not to say (3)</li> </ul>
<p>○ If respondent answered 'yes' to Q20:</p> <p>Q20.1 Overall, how many months/years did you spend in in out-of-home care (e.g. foster care, kinship care, residential care)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Less than 3 months (1)</li> <li>○ Less than 6 months (2)</li> <li>○ Less than 1 year (3)</li> <li>○ 1—2 years (4)</li> <li>○ 3—5 years (5)</li> <li>○ 6—9 years (6)</li> <li>○ 10—15 years (7)</li> <li>○ More than 15 years (8)</li> <li>○ Don't know (9)</li> </ul>
<p>○ If respondent answered 'yes' to Q20:</p> <p>Q20.2 Who looked after you in out-of-home care (e.g. foster care, kinship care, residential care)? <i>Select all answers that apply.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ An Indigenous relative (e.g. kinship care - biological aunt, uncle, grandparent, etc.) (1)</li> <li>○ A non-Indigenous relative (e.g. a non-Indigenous parent or grandparent) (2)</li> <li>○ An unrelated Aboriginal foster carer (e.g. foster care) (3)</li> <li>○ An unrelated non-Indigenous foster carer (e.g. foster care) (4)</li> <li>○ Indigenous workers (e.g. residential care, group home) (5)</li> <li>○ Non-Indigenous workers (e.g. residential care, group home) (6)</li> <li>○ Other (please specify) _____ (7)</li> <li>○ Prefer not to say (8)</li> </ul>
<p><i>These final questions are about your educational attainment, weekly income and gender identity.</i></p>	
<p>Q21 What is the highest level of education that you've completed?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Postgraduate degree (1)</li> <li>○ Graduate diploma or Graduate certificate (2)</li> <li>○ Bachelor degree (3)</li> <li>○ Advanced Diploma or Diploma (4)</li> <li>○ Certificate III or IV (5)</li> <li>○ Certificate I or II (6)</li> <li>○ Year 12 or equivalent (7)</li> <li>○ Year 11 or equivalent (8)</li> <li>○ Year 10 or equivalent (9)</li> <li>○ Year 9 or equivalent (10)</li> <li>○ Year 8 or below (11)</li> <li>○ Never attended school (12)</li> <li>○ Prefer not to say (13)</li> </ul>
<p>Q22 What is your weekly personal income?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ No income (\$0) (1)</li> <li>○ \$1-\$199 per week (2)</li> <li>○ \$200-\$299 per week (3)</li> <li>○ \$300-\$399 per week (4)</li> <li>○ \$400-\$599 per week (5)</li> <li>○ \$600-\$799 per week (6)</li> <li>○ \$800-\$999 per week (7)</li> <li>○ \$1,000-1,249 per week (8)</li> <li>○ \$1,250-\$1,499 per week (9)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ \$1,500-\$1,999 per week (10)</li> <li>○ \$2,000 or more per week (11)</li> <li>○ Prefer not to say (12)</li> </ul>
Q23 What is your gender identity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Male (1)</li> <li>○ Female (2)</li> <li>○ Non-binary (3)</li> <li>○ Prefer to self-describe: _____ (4)</li> <li>○ Prefer not to say (5)</li> </ul>
Q24 Do you agree to being contacted by phone for a follow-up interview?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Yes, my phone number is: _____ (<i>please enter phone number</i>) (1)</li> <li>○ No, thanks (2)</li> </ul>
Q25 If you would like to go into the draw to win one of three \$100 Coles Myer gift cards, please enter your email address and phone number.	<p>Email address: _____</p> <p>Phone number: _____</p>
Q26 Would you like to receive a copy of the brief results by email?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Yes, please. (<i>If you haven't already done so in the last question, please enter your email</i>) _____ (1)</li> <li>○ No, thanks (2)</li> </ul>

## Appendix E: Interview Topic Guide

Topic	Questions
<i>Learning about culture in care</i>	<p>Tell me a bit about your culture.</p> <p>What did, or have you, learnt about your culture in care? What have you been taught?</p> <p>How did you learn about your culture in care? Who taught you?</p> <p>In your opinion, how do children in OOHC learn best about their culture?</p>
<i>Feelings about Indigenous culture</i>	<p>How do you feel about your Indigenous culture? <i>Prompt: Are you proud to be Indigenous? Do you identify as Indigenous?</i></p>
<i>Cultural connection in care</i>	<p>What do you think it means to be connected to culture? <i>Prompt: How would you describe connection to culture?</i></p> <p>What was important for you to connect to your culture while living in care?</p> <p>What can be done to make OOHC children feel more connected to their culture in care?</p>

## Appendix F: Survey Debriefing Statement



### Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care *Debriefing Statement*

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your responses are greatly appreciated! The information you provided will help government agencies and community service organisations better understand and support cultural connection for Indigenous children in out-of-home care (i.e. foster care, kinship care).

People sometimes have a delayed reaction to their participation in research about sensitive topics.



**HealingFoundation**  
Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People

If you this survey has raised any feelings or concerns for you about cultural connection (or disconnection), and/or Aboriginality, please check out the **Healing Foundation's** website (<http://healingfoundation.org.au>).

Alternatively, if you want further information about tracing your Indigenous family heritage, please check out the **Link Up** service that operates in your state or territory, or community of origin.

See <http://aiatsis.gov.au/research/finding-your-family/where-get-help/link-up-services> for further information.



**Link-Up Victoria**



**NORTHERN TERRITORY STOLEN GENERATIONS  
ABORIGINAL CORPORATION**



**Nunkuwarnin Yunti  
of South Australia Inc.**



**Central Australian  
Aboriginal Congress**  
ABORIGINAL CORPORATION | ICN 7823



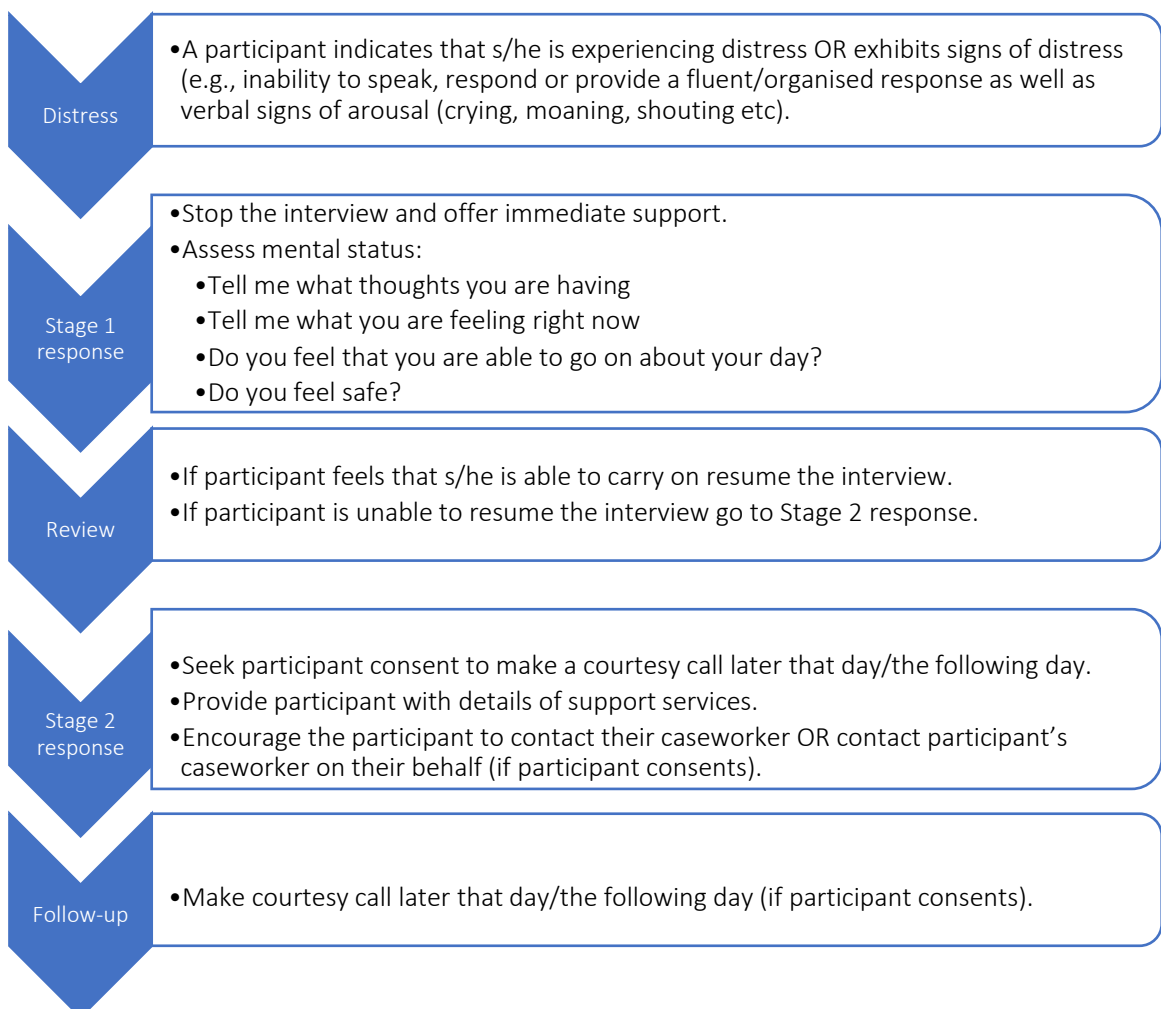
**Kimberley Stolen Generation  
Aboriginal Corporation**

## Appendix G: Interview Distress Protocol, Debriefing Statement and Support Services Sheet



### Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care

#### Distress Protocol for Interview Participants





## Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care

### Debriefing Statement for Interview Participants

That is the end of my questions. Thank you for taking the time to complete this interview. Your responses are greatly appreciated! The information you provided will help government agencies and community service organisations better understand and support cultural connection for Indigenous children in out-of-home care (i.e. foster care, kinship care).

Before I end our conversation, do you have any questions that you'd like to ask me:

- About the research?
- About any feelings you might be having?

People sometimes have a delayed reaction to their participation in research about sensitive topics. If you have things you'd like to discuss later on please make sure you contact your caseworker. Otherwise, there are a range of services that you can contact if you want any further support. You are also welcome to contact me or the Principle Researcher—Dr Sarah Wise about your participation in the research project. These contact phone numbers are on the Information Sheet for Interview Participants. Do you need me to SMS you these numbers your reference?

Thank you again for completing this interview with me.

End

#### *Potential Questions and Answers*

**Q.** How is this research going to help me (or other people in my situation)?

**A.** The research will help us better understand how cultural connection is experienced by Indigenous youth who have lived in out-of-home care. We will use this information to develop better cultural services and support for Indigenous children in care.

**Q.** When will I be able to see the results of the research?

**A.** We will be conducting interviews for the next 2-3 months and then there will be another 2-3 months analysing the data before the results are sent to participants, so in about six months' time. You're welcome to contact me or Dr Sarah Wise for an update anytime.

**Q.** Will you need to speak to me again?

**A.** No, we have collected all the information we need from you so there will be no need to recontact you. We will only be recontacting participants who have asked for details of the research results.

**Q.** Will you be speaking to my caseworker (or other professional) about the details of the interview?

**A.** We will not be sharing information about this interview with anyone. If you become troubled or upset by any issue that we discussed today we encourage you to speak with your caseworker. We will not contact your caseworker without your consent.

**Q.** Can I call you later if I think of a question?

**A.** Certainly. You are welcome to contact me or the Principle Researcher—Dr Sarah Wise about your participation in the research project at any time.

**Q.** Who else will you be telling the results of the research to?

**A.** The results of the research will be shared with organisations who provide services and support to Indigenous children in care and to government agencies who fund these types of services. The results will also be published so that students, researchers and people generally can access them.

**Q.** What sort of things would I call the Ethics Committee about?

**A.** The ethics committee deals with complaints you might have about how the research was conducted, for example the way you were contacted about the study, how the interview ran, or how I managed any concerns you had.



Understanding cultural connection for Indigenous youth in out-of-home care

Support Services Sheet

<b>Emergency services</b>	
Ambulance, Police, Fire	000
<b>Health</b>	
Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS)	Medical (Fitzroy) - phone: (03) 9419 3000 Dental (Fitzroy) - phone: (03) 9419 3680 Family counselling (Preston)—phone: (03) 9403 3300 <a href="https://www.vahs.org.au/">https://www.vahs.org.au/</a>
<b>Child and family support</b>	
Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)	Preston Office—phone: (03) 9287 8800 Eastern Office (Ringwood) - phone: (03) 9871 9000 Southern Office (Dandenong) - phone: (03) 9701 4200 Morwell Office—phone: (03) 5135 6055 Western Office (Werribee)—phone: (03) 9742 8300 Frankston Office—phone: (03) 8796 0700 Melton Office—phone: (03) 8746 2776 <a href="https://www.vacca.org/">https://www.vacca.org/</a>
<b>Tracing Aboriginal family heritage</b>	
Link-Up Victoria	273 High Street, Preston VIC 3072 Freecall: 1800 OUR MOB (1800 687 662) <a href="http://www.linkupvictoria.org.au">http://www.linkupvictoria.org.au</a>

## **Appendix H: Deidentified Interview Transcript**

*This material has been removed by the author of this thesis for privacy and confidentiality reasons.*