

A new paradigm: Bringing a historical and sociopolitical trauma lens to the training for welfare practitioners working with Aboriginal families

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Abstract

This article argues that child protection agencies must provide mandatory training about the Aboriginal experience within the welfare state and the resultant trauma that exists in Australian Indigenous communities. This article highlights the areas of curriculum to be included in training for welfare practitioners working with Aboriginal families in the New South Wales child protection system. The training content explores the Stolen Generations' trauma experiences of child loss and examines the dichotomy between past child welfare laws and present child protection laws and intergenerational racism. Another key component of the training comprises information about the impacts of trauma on brain development.

KEYWORDS

brain development, child protection training, Indigenous Australians, trauma, trauma-informed practitioners

INTRODUCTION

The safety of children and young people is paramount and child protection professionals must be equipped to act in the best interests of those in need of protection. Specialised child protection training is required to ensure that practitioners possess the necessary skills and knowledge for their role. In the Australian context, because of the stark over-representation of Indigenous children and families in the child protection system (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2018), it is essential that welfare practitioner training addresses the factors that contribute to the over-representation, including the ongoing impact of past government policies of forcible separation and assimilation, and the resultant

trauma that exists in many Aboriginal communities today (Atkinson, 2002). This article argues for the provision of specifically tailored, and mandatory training for child protection practitioners working with Aboriginal families and outlines essential curriculum components.

Throughout this article, the word Indigenous is used respectfully and interchangeably with the terms Aboriginal and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. All terms are used to acknowledge, describe and honour the original inhabitants and traditional owners of Australia and their descendants.

This article may benefit from a brief explanation to position myself as the author. I bring over 20 years of experience working with statutory child protection services, ongoing experience as a consultant delivering training programs to Government and non-Government organisations, and over 10 years in academia. I am an Indigenous Australian woman from the Wonnarua people in the NSW Hunter Valley and have both personal and professional working knowledge of the traumatic impact of forcible child removal in the Indigenous community. I also worked as a social worker on the Stolen Generations Inquiry at the Australian Human Rights Commission, where I was a witness to hundreds of very personal and painful testimonies from Indigenous Australians who had been forcibly removed from their families.

This article argues that child protection agencies must provide mandatory training about the Aboriginal experience within the child welfare state and the resultant trauma that exists in Australian Indigenous communities to their workers if fair and equitable services are to be provided to Indigenous families. This article illustrates the suggested areas of curriculum that can and should be included in entry level training and ongoing professional development for welfare practitioners working with Indigenous families in the New South Wales child protection system. It is critically important that the pervasiveness of propaganda about Indigenous child removals is confronted, challenged and corrected in child protection training. Training content must highlight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's trauma experiences of child loss and examine the dichotomy between past child welfare laws and present child protection laws with a focus on intergenerational discrimination and racism. Another key component of the training curriculum needs to explore the impact of trauma on early brain development, understand trauma-related behaviours and emphasise the importance of trauma-informed practice to guide the integrity of child protection work.

CONCERN RELATING TO THE INADEQUACY OF CURRENT TRAINING

There is widespread understanding that preparation for working within child protection must include job-specific training on working with children and families from diverse communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This has led to a plethora of 'cultural awareness training programs' which have purported to provide the best practice knowledge (Bromfield & Ryan, 2007). However, there is concern, both anecdotally within the field and in the research literature, that cultural awareness and cultural competence courses are limited in scope, and do not fully address relevant issues essential to effective working with Aboriginal children and families, including an identified lack of trauma content (Bromfield & Ryan, 2007; Carmody, 2013; Child Protection Systems Royal Commission, 2016; Northern Territory, Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, Wild, R., & Anderson, P. 2007; Wood, 2009). Morrison and colleagues (Morrison, Rigney, Hattam, & Diplock, 2019) argue that training programs on cultural awareness and cultural competence 'fail to address or challenge sociopolitical inequalities at structural, institutional and interpersonal levels' (p. 53). Efforts to be 'competent' in the cultural norms and nuances of each

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community ultimately result in workers gaining a ‘superficial, essentialist and reductionist’ understanding of culture (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 54).

Concern relating to inadequate staff training has been evident within a range of commissions, inquiries and reports designed to reform Australian child protection systems over the past two decades (Lonne, Harries, & Lantz, 2013). Despite the continued call for the improved training for welfare practitioners who work with Aboriginal children and families, there continues to be an absence of entry level training and professional development courses which examine the sociopolitical and historical context, and support the development of culturally responsive strategies and trauma-informed practice (Anderson et al., 2017; Bromfield & Ryan, 2007; Bromfield & Holzer, 2008, Carmody, 2013; Child Protection Systems Royal Commission, 2016; Davis, 2019; Finan, Bromfield, Arney & Moore, 2018; Northern Territory, Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007; Wood, 2009). As a result, trauma frameworks are yet to permeate the systematic practice of child protection (Menzies, 2019, 2019b) often leaving practitioners ‘ill-equipped and under-resourced to comply with the Aboriginal child placement principles, including family preservation work or work required to support family connections or reunification after removal’ (Anderson et al., 2017, p. 27).

An audit of the training provided for statutory child protection workers in New South Wales, the *National Comparison of Statutory Child Protection Training in Australia* (Bromfield & Ryan, 2007), found that cultural awareness programs regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture were inadequate because they did not provide information and theory on trauma, which constitute essential working knowledge for child protection practitioners (Bromfield & Ryan, 2007). The audit noted that the preferred Bachelor level qualifications for child protection workers were in the fields of social work, psychology or the social and behavioural sciences (Bromfield & Ryan, 2007). It may be that there is an assumption that trauma is addressed in these undergraduate courses. It is beyond the scope of this article to critically examine the undergraduate curriculum across these disciplines and the extent to which it prepares students to work within the child protection field; however, this would be a worthwhile endeavour for future research.

PRACTICE WITH ABORIGINAL FAMILIES

To affect change in families where there are child protection concerns, and strengthen the relationships between workers and clients, child protection training needs to provide practitioners with a holistic understanding of the issues that contribute to the inequities experienced by many Indigenous Australians. It is important that workers recognise the resilience of Aboriginal people, despite the devastating impact of forcible separation, and respect the values that characterise Aboriginal family and community life, including ‘interdependence, group cohesion and community loyalty’ (Lohoar, Butera, & Kennedy, 2014, p. 1). Practitioners working in the best interests of Indigenous children and families need to employ culturally sensitive strategies and practices which are ‘interpreted through an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural lens’ (McAuliffe et al., 2016, p. 367). Positioning the Indigenous perspective at the forefront of interactions between child protection professionals and Indigenous families is paramount to establishing an effective working relationship.

The approach to learning about working with Indigenous families requires active participation by welfare practitioners to critique, reflect and draw new meaning from the curriculum by consciously adopting an ‘anti-colonial standpoint’ (Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006).

This process of developing an awareness of oppressive colonial structures and systems requires the deconstruction and reconstruction of the lived experiences of Indigenous people by welfare practitioners ‘to critically interpret the field, challenging dominant beliefs and the institutions and

discourses that reproduce them, framing relations within the structures of political and cultural oppression' (Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006, p. 398). Working in ways that challenge the dominant non-Indigenous power structures gives way to the inclusion of Indigenous people's lived experiences, knowledge and voices.

Targeted and effective training in working with Aboriginal families has never been more critical to welfare practitioners. Recent figures from the Child Protection Australia 2016–2017 Report compiled by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) reveal that Aboriginal children come to the attention of child protection authorities seven times more often than non-Aboriginal children and are 10 times more likely to be in out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2018). In 2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children represented 36.9% of the national OOHC population (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2018). In the same year, the New South Wales OOHC figures for Indigenous children was 38.4%, that is, nearly two in five children in care (Family & Community Services, 2017). Vocational training needs to address the factors that contribute to the over-representation of Aboriginal children and families in the child protection and OOHC system.

ESSENTIAL CURRICULUM COMPONENTS

This article argues that training for practitioners working with Indigenous families must include the following three essential components: past forcible separation and assimilation laws, policies and practices; current child protection legislation; trauma theories and the impact of trauma. A discussion of each element follows.

Past forcible separation and assimilation laws, policies and practices

It is not possible to understand the current fear and mistrust of child protection workers that exists within Aboriginal communities without first understanding their prior experiences with child welfare authorities. Training curriculum should include an in-depth analysis of the historical and sociopolitical context of child welfare laws and practices, including the forcible separation of Aboriginal children from their families, assimilation policy and the difference between past laws and practices and current child protection legislation. The repercussions of state legislation from the recent past continue to reverberate in the present. Particularly destructive were past forcible separation and assimilation practices and policies, which have resulted in widespread intergenerational trauma for Indigenous Australians (Menzies, 2019, 2019b). Practitioners need also to consider the dichotomy between past child welfare laws and current child protection legislation. Previous New South Wales child welfare laws were highly discriminatory and based on racist ideology as they granted legal permission for the removal of an Aboriginal child purely on the basis of their cultural heritage (Menzies, 2019, 2019b). However, the present New South Wales Children and Young Persons Act (1998) seeks to preserve an Indigenous child's sense of cultural identity, family and community connectedness (Bromfield & Holzer, 2008).

Intrusive state intervention is synonymous with the history of Indigenous Australians. The involvement of child protection authorities in their lives is strongly resisted by Indigenous people and barriers to the building of productive relationships are present from the outset because of the long history of state-sanctioned forced removal of Indigenous children from their homes without cause (Grace, Burns, & Menzies, 2016). The community perception that child protection authorities can remove children at

any time persists into the present day with child protection staff viewed as ‘those people who snatch your kids’ (Stephens, Gopalan, Aciri, Bowman, & McKernan McKay, 2018, in Strand & Sprang, 2018, p. 68). This perception has implications for how Indigenous families and child protection practitioners understand the current mandate of child protection laws and emphasises the importance for parents, practitioners and even the public to understand the dichotomy between the past child welfare laws and present child protections laws.

A key element of any training course for child protection professionals requires a thorough examination of the history between Aboriginal people, child welfare authorities and the state. In particular, the curriculum needs to identify the highly discriminatory nature of the past child welfare laws and specifically, the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Act (1909), the Amendment Acts (1915) and (1918), and the 1937 Assimilation policy which underpinned the work of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board later known as the New South Wales Aboriginal Welfare Board (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

In 1883, the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board was established but belied its name as Aboriginal people who were forced to live under the oppression of colonial rule and were controlled in every way, including having their children stolen without the binding of legislation (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Practices of forcibly taking Aboriginal children from their families continued for another quarter of a century before legislation officially sanctioned the removals. The introduction of the NSW Aborigines Protection Act (1909) and the subsequent Amendment Act (1915) provided the Aborigines Protection Board with the legal legitimacy to remove Aboriginal children from their families (Miller, 1985; Read, 1981). The Amendment Act (1915) applied to full-blood Aboriginal people living on reserves which saw court proceedings halted as the state opted to allow police and Station Managers to write on the committal notice, ‘Reason for Board taking control of the child, they simply wrote, for being Aboriginal’ (Read, 1981, p. 6).

Understanding the central premise of past child welfare laws that removed Aboriginal children due to their cultural heritage rather than safety concerns may assist to dispel any beliefs that Aboriginal parents were unable to care for their own children and provides accurate information about the racist objectives of the legislation. Offering new knowledge to welfare practitioners aims to bring about new approaches to working with Aboriginal families who are fearful of authorities and government or reluctant to engage with child protection agencies because of past child welfare laws, policies and practices. Total and unlimited power was eventually afforded to the Aborigines Protection Board through the 1918 Amendment Act which short circuited the different legal definitions of what constituted Aboriginality to include all Aboriginal people in the state:

‘removing the definition of " Aborigine " and inserting in lieu thereof the following definition:’ "Aborigine" means any full-blooded or half-caste Aboriginal who is a native of New South Wales’ (Read, 1981, p. 13).

Child protection training needs to clearly convey the notion that the NSW Aborigines Protection Board had complete and unrestricted control over the lives of all Aboriginal people in NSW. Natural justice provisions were absent in the legislative changes and the prejudicial laws targeting all Aboriginal people rendered Aboriginal families and communities powerless to challenge the organs of the state and protect their children from being stolen by welfare authorities. The driver for child welfare policy was not only underpinned by racist ideology, but it was also closely aligned to the goals of economic prosperity for the dominant Anglo society. In slave-like conditions, Aboriginal children were leased out for money to work as labourers and domestic servants and became the ‘black household servants of the wealthy’ (Miller, 1985, p. 129). Testimonies from the Bringing Them Home report (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity

Commission, 1997) document the children's experiences of neglect, sexual exploitation and brutal physical abuse and how they were without anyone to protect or comfort them and 'were rarely believed if they disclosed the abuse' (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p. 195).

The Assimilation Policy was a conscious and premeditated attempt to eradicate the Aboriginal race. The curriculum needs to expose the calculated intentions of past child welfare legislation which was devised to remove the Aboriginality and the Torres Strait Islander heritage of the child and force them to embrace the foreign culture, customs and conventions of Europeans (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Practitioners working in child protection must recognise that the central premise of assimilation was neither a positive solution or a progressive move to invite Indigenous Australians into the opportunities of the dominant non-Indigenous society, nor was the goal inclusion. Rather, the 1937 Assimilation Policy was aimed at excluding Indigenous Australians by extinguishing their culture and eventually their race because the belief was that Indigenous Australians would 'inevitably die out from exposure to a supposedly superior race' (Anderson et al., 2017, p. 8). Dr Cecil Cook, an anthropologist, biologist, bacteriologist, Chief Medical Officer and Chief Protector of Aborigines in North Australia was credited with the introduction of the 'breeding out program' as he declared the 'quickest way out is to breed him white' (Hill, 1933, p. 49). The rising mixed descent population was viewed as a threat to the white population and ultimately interfered with the ideal of creating a white Australia (Marcus, 1990). Motivated by his fears that the 'half caste' population would outnumber the white population, Cook expressed his thoughts about the potential danger by stating the, 'position of incalculable future menace to purity of race in tropical Australia; the future of the country may well be doomed to disaster' (Marcus, 1990, p. 92).

A definitive policy was proposed by Cook (Hill, 1933) as he believed that:

[G]enerally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation all native characteristics of the Australian Aborigine are eradicated. The problem of our half-castes will be quickly eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white (Hill, 1933, p. 49).

At the 1937 national conference on Aboriginal Affairs, the Commonwealth Government endorsed Cook's views about 'saving the white element of the half castes' (Marcus, 1990, p. 92) and a resolution was passed to ensure that the 'destiny of the natives of Aboriginal origin, but not of the full-blood lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end' (Parbury, 1986, p. 105).

Welfare practitioners, or any practitioner working in the human services sector, must resist the temptation of subscribing to the false assumption that Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families due to neglectful parenting practices (Anderson et al., 2017) and child protection training needs to acknowledge the strength of survival despite the loss of land, identity, culture, language and ultimately their children. The South Australian Child Protection Systems Royal Commission notes:

[P]ractitioners need training and support to draw the distinction between parent/care-giver behaviour which harms or impedes a child's development and that which ... is considered within Aboriginal culture to be appropriate and responsible parenting practice (Child Protection Systems Royal Commission, 2016, p. 449).

Moreover, there are implications for welfare practitioners who are inadequately informed about Aboriginal lives and culture. Lack of knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal parenting practices ‘may lead non-Aboriginal practitioners to identify child protection concerns where there are none’ (Child Protection Systems Royal Commission, 2016, p. 449).

Current child protection legislative knowledge for welfare practitioners

The training for welfare practitioners in the field of child protection must demonstrate that current legislation is different from the past. Current legislation in the New South Wales Children and Young Persons Act (1998), sections 11–14 gives emphasis to self-determination, participation, placement principles and access to the records of Aboriginal children, young people and families (NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998). The legislation aims to redress the racist nature and deliberate cultural bias of previous laws by seeking to preserve the Aboriginality of children and young people by placing them with Aboriginal kinship carers, if an Aboriginal child enters the care system. It is critically important that child protection practitioners understand the differences between previous child welfare laws and current child protection laws. Failure to comprehend the differences can result in many workers being fearful to report incidents where Indigenous children and young people are at risk of significant harm, respond to child protection reports or remove Aboriginal children from harmful environments because they do not want to be accused of being labelled as racist.

A key platform of child protection training must reassure practitioners that all children require the protection of the law, and any departure from adhering to the law because of past discriminatory and racist child welfare laws, policies and practices do not assist Aboriginal children and their families. The commitment to protect all children should be a core and constant focus for welfare practitioners and it is imperative that services across the child protection sector understand that Aboriginal children should be afforded the same level of protection as non-Aboriginal children. The South Australia Government conducted the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission and produced the Report titled, *The Life They Deserve* (2016) which states:

[A]ll practitioners in the child protection system should have training, support and clinical supervision in working effectively with Aboriginal children and families, including knowledge of culture and parenting practices, but should apply the same standards of risk and safety to all children (2016, p. 452).

The past manifests as trauma in the present

The third essential content area of training is about trauma theory, understanding definitions of trauma, the manifestation of trauma, the neurological and physiological impacts of trauma, and the need for welfare practitioners to use trauma literature and trauma-informed principles to guide their practice. Providing practitioners with an understanding of trauma-related behaviours may assist workers to avoid inaccurate assumptions which minimise Indigenous people's experiences because too often ‘Indigenous peoples are viewed as possessing cultural characteristics that undermine their credibility as victims’ (Menzies, 2019, 2019a, p.121). In other words, violent or self-destructive behaviours are mistakenly seen as cultural characteristics rather than as manifestations of trauma, and so individuals are not provided the compassion and support they require to address their trauma.

Multiple generations of Indigenous children were taken from their families between 1883 and 1969 before the Assimilation Policy was dismantled in New South Wales (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). It is possible during this 86-year period of forced removals that up to five generations of Indigenous children were stolen from their Indigenous families and communities. In the 50 years since the Assimilation policy was abolished, many Indigenous people have had their children placed in care. Indigenous people facing current child protection action come from families who have experienced both child removal for care and protection reasons in more recent times and also have a family history of child removal during the Assimilation era. This means that there may be two or three generations of Aboriginal children who have been removed from their families under care and protection legislation between 1969 and 2019. Knowledge of the past child welfare laws and present child protection laws is imperative for welfare practitioners to understand as there could be some Indigenous families and communities who have had a total of seven or eight generations of child loss. The immeasurable burden of child loss and ongoing trauma carried by Indigenous people requires highly trained and skilled practitioners. Conversely, failure to provide education programs about the devastating trauma and past child welfare experiences of Indigenous Australians is likely to result in inadequate service delivery to extremely vulnerable Indigenous children and families involved with child protection agencies.

The residual legacy of previous forcible removal and assimilation laws, policies and practices may mean some Aboriginal clients are fearful of authorities and government officials and distrust welfare practitioners (Libesman, 2013). Child protection professionals may respond to 'hard to engage' families differently if they are able to recognise this fear and understand the origins of the trauma, rather than seeing the challenges associated with engaging the family as being about deliberately obstructive or difficult behaviours. An understanding of the collective, historical and intergenerational trauma that sits behind a reluctance to engage for many Indigenous families may inform more appropriate engagement strategies for the practitioner, and potentially improve the relationships between child protection professionals and families and, consequently, child outcomes (Menzies, 2019, 2019b).

Welfare practitioners need to be acutely aware that the child protection system is likely to 're-traumatise parents given that a child's removal and placement in foster or kinship care results in a loss of power and control, which is the hallmark of traumatic stress' (Thompson, 2018, p. 185). Child protection workers require a professional sensitivity towards expressions of anger, apprehension, anxiety or agitation when working with Aboriginal people due to the inherent power imbalance between Aboriginal people and child protection authorities. Welfare practitioners will struggle to engage with Aboriginal children and families if child protection training does not familiarise them about the impact of trauma resulting from multi-generational removals.

Child protection training should explore the implications of the generational removals, the different types trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians and the associated profound grief, destruction of culture and loss of identity. Practitioners require training to appreciate that Aboriginal children and families are likely to be on high alert and live in a climate of fear especially when they encounter child protection authorities. It is important that practitioners recognise common trauma responses such as 'avoidance' (Thompson, 2018, p. 185) as this may assist workers to understand the reasons why Aboriginal parent fails to attend meetings with child protection agencies. When welfare practitioners are not greeted warmly during home visits or are viewed with suspicion and distrust by Indigenous families, workers need skills to depersonalise their reactions. It is important that workers understand that a hostile reception is less about the individual practitioner and more about the power of their authority and what they represent to Aboriginal people which is the threat of child loss.

Another example of trauma symptomology is 'disengagement and numbing', a 'maladaptive coping strategy that is interpreted as resistance or a lack of cooperation and/or unwillingness to what is

mandated' (Thompson, 2018, p. 185–186). This behaviour may involve a parent withdrawing from their children when they are placed in care or a parent not complying with court ordered visits. Welfare practitioners need to avoid making incorrect assumptions or negative judgements and recognise that these trauma reactions are not necessarily a reflection of the parent's lack of affection for their child or an unwillingness to respond to court orders. The use of a trauma lens can assist workers to recognise the trauma-related behaviours and adapt interventions that seek to re-engage Aboriginal people in the lives of their children. To support the work of child protection professionals, it is critical that this information is conveyed in training and grounded in organisational policies and procedures at an operational level as organisations are responsible for 'disseminating the principles of trauma informed care' (Miller, 2018, p.312).

EFFECTS AND SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA

Workers require knowledge about the impact of toxic stress during early brain development and the future complications for higher cognitive skills such as planning, organising, managing emotions and problem solving 'because forcibly removing a child from their parents is one of the most profound traumas a child can experience, since it undermines a pivotal foundation they require for self-regulation and resilience' (Teicher, 2018, p. 2). Indigenous Australians impacted by the trauma of forcible separation and assimilation display a high prevalence of trauma-related symptomology such as substance misuse, flashbacks, economic deprivation, fractured relationships, dissociation; inability to trust, nightmares, failure to self-regulate, survivor guilt and psychosomatic illnesses (Atkinson, 2013). Findings from the Aboriginal Child Health study (2005) conducted in Western Australia found the children of parents who were removed were twice as likely to experience 'clinically significant' emotional symptomology, such as conduct problems or hyperactivity than those Indigenous children whose parents were not removed during the Protectionist and Assimilation era (De Maio et al., 2005). Lack of this knowledge and appropriate responses to traumatised clients may inadvertently re-traumatise Aboriginal people, their family and community which is contradictory to trauma-informed care as seeking to avoid further traumatisation is the fundamental principle of trauma-informed practice.

Trauma-related behaviours may manifest in a variety of ways. Certain situations can trigger past trauma experiences resulting in trauma survivors seeking out alcohol or narcotics to anaesthetise and deaden their pain (Herman, 1992). It is critical that practitioners are able to distinguish between what is a cultural norm and a response to trauma. For instance, there are some people who would describe petrol sniffing within some Aboriginal communities as though it has a cultural basis and is an Aboriginal tradition or a leisure activity for Aboriginal youth. This activity is neither traditional nor recreational. This behaviour is trauma in the extreme and illustrates the severe psychological and physical torment of the individual and the survivor's desperate attempts to escape traumatic feelings, overwhelming multisensory sensations and intrusive memories. Ober, Peeters, Archer, and Kelly (2000, p. 248) point out the reluctance of some professionals to fully comprehend and embrace a trauma framework to contextualise and understand Aboriginal distress, pain and suffering by noting,

[U]nderstandings and responses to acute trauma in Aboriginal settings today, need to be understood within a framework of collective and cumulative traumatisation over several generations.

Practitioners using trauma literature and applying a trauma lens to situations where Aboriginal people are portrayed as ‘the problem’ are more likely to achieve a successful working relationship with Aboriginal children and families. Without an in-depth understanding of trauma-related behaviours and knowledge about the origins of the trauma there is potential that Aboriginal people will be blamed for their plight and insulting and offensive descriptions will be used to define Indigenous Australians. To explain the harm caused to Indigenous Australians, Bamblett (2006) used the term ‘cultural abuse’ to highlight the impact of this blame:

‘when the culture of a people is ignored, denigrated, or worse, intentionally attacked, it is cultural abuse. It is because it strikes at the very identity and the soul of the people it is aimed at; it attacks their sense of self, it attacks their connectedness to their family and community’ (2006, p. 42).

IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Understanding brain development and the impact of trauma on neurological and physiological development should be core knowledge for working in child protection services. The in-built human survival mechanism to cope with stress is known as a fight, flight or fright (freeze) response and, when activated, results in physiological changes in the body such as increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure and heightened respiration (Strand & Sprang, 2018; Zeigler, 2011). These reactions offer an opportunity to seek protection or defend ourselves against harm. However, babies and young children are inherently vulnerable with few options available to be able to shield themselves or escape from a potentially harmful situation. Infants and children are rendered powerless and are left with two basic choices, system hyperarousal marked by a heightened state of anxiety and/or dissociation which causes a disconnection in behaviours, feelings, memories and thinking (Zeigler, 2011, p. 55). Physiological changes resulting from trauma ‘recalibrates the brain's alarm system, an increase in stress hormone activity, and alterations in the system that filters relevant information from irrelevant’ (Van der Kolk, 2015, p. 2–3). If child protection practitioners have a theoretical knowledge base about the impact of trauma on the brain and the many ‘processes that underlie traumatic stress’ (Van der Kolk, 2015, p. 349), it may assist them to develop a variety of interventions and strategies to work more effectively with Indigenous children and families who have been impacted by past and present trauma experiences.

Navigating the world for trauma survivors can be a daunting process and a life-long pursuit. Robust research studies confirm that the stress of chronic and prolonged trauma in early childhood affects the growth, functioning and ultimately the architecture of the brain (Strand & Sprang, 2018; Tiecher 2018; Van der Kolk, 2015; Zeigler, 2011.). Neurological imaging shows changes to the connectivity in the brain structure as the result of early childhood trauma. These ‘alterations are adaptations to an anticipated stress-filled malevolent world’ (Teicher, Samson, Anderson, & Ohashi, 2016, p. 257). Training for welfare practitioners must convey important information about post trauma experiences so child protection professionals are aware that when the trauma is not fully integrated into the survivor's life, the individual can be left with permanent maladaptive responses associated with their trauma. For instance, when infants and young children are without the care and comfort from protective adults the stress response remains switched on and welfare practitioners need to understand that trauma survivors of all ages may be constantly on guard because they need to be ‘prepared to be assaulted or violated at any time’ (van der Kolk, 2015, p.21). Workers must draw on this information when engaging with Indigenous people impacted by the trauma of forced

separation and assimilation to understand that contact with child protection authorities and workers gives rise to being on guard.

Essential working knowledge for child protection professionals is an understanding that trauma-related behaviours may affect the behavioural, cognitive, emotional and spiritual domains of an individual's life. Research shows that exposure to chronic and severe violence, abuse and neglect in early childhood can alter the neural pathways of the brain due to the prolonged activation of the stress response which can negatively affect emotional regulation, attachment, behaviour and learning and poses a major risk for adult psychopathology (Teicher et al., 2016; Van der Kolk, 2015). Welfare practitioners working with Indigenous children, their parents, families and communities who have trauma histories need to develop way to address and mitigate the deleterious effects of trauma.

INTERGENERATIONAL DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM TOWARDS INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

Some child protection practitioners may recognise that intergenerational trauma impacts on Indigenous Australian society. Nevertheless, there needs to be greater recognition and attention paid to the parallel experience of intergenerational discrimination and racism meted out by non-Indigenous society to Indigenous Australians. The description of the impact of the intergenerational transmission of discrimination and racism may not yet have a place in the literature in the way intergenerational trauma is recognised. However, it is important to understand the ongoing consequences of discrimination and racism experienced by Indigenous Australians at the hands of the dominant non-Indigenous society (Royal Commission into Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2016). Child protection training needs to examine the consequences of intergenerational discrimination and racism which has been passed down from generation to generation by non-Indigenous people who have sought to control, oppress and subjugate Indigenous people. Training needs to develop ways to confront individual and systemic intergenerational discrimination and ongoing racism in the child protection sector by challenging:

'discriminatory practices of reporters (such as police, teachers and health workers); institutional racism and system biases such as a lack of cross-cultural competence; culturally inappropriate or inaccessible service delivery; and discriminatory practices of child welfare workers' (Tilbury & Thoburn, 2009, p. 1104).

Failure to address the cascading effect of these discriminatory and racist attitudes and behaviours by non-Indigenous society, including non-Indigenous welfare practitioners will continue to re-traumatise Indigenous children, parents, families and communities and potentially derail and negate any effective child protection intervention.

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE FOR CHILD PROTECTION PROFESSIONALS

Responding to the demands of traumatised children and families requires highly trained practitioners. Quality training and professional education are critical for the development of a trauma-informed service system (Child Protection Systems Royal Commission, 2016). Working within a trauma-informed

framework is an important advancement for child protection professionals that offers a new perspective by changing the system and staff to seek information about the individual's experience of trauma and asking 'what happened to you' in contrast to 'what's wrong with you', which promotes new discoveries about the trauma survivor's experience, and fosters new ways of working (Jackson, 2018, p. 42) Trauma-informed practice has six guiding principles. Briefly they are as follows: (a) safety; (b) trustworthiness and transparency; (c) peer support and mutual self-help; (d) collaboration and mutuality; (e) empowerment voice and choice; and (f) attention to cultural, historical and gender issues (Jackson, 2018, p. 42). Welfare practitioners must actively draw on this new body of literature to develop trauma-informed approaches that seek to establish trust and collaborative partnerships, empower self-determination in Aboriginal children and families, offer choice, value-lived experiences by respecting Indigenous voices, and most importantly avoid the re-traumatisation of Aboriginal Australians.

Trauma training for child protection practitioners should be core curriculum in mandatory workplace courses. Evidence provided to the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Response of Child Sexual Abuse revealed there is, 'limited trauma education in universities and vocational training programs' (Anderson et al., 2017, p. 196). The recent Western Australian coronial inquest into the suicide deaths of 13 Aboriginal children and young people, the youngest just 10 years old, in the Kimberley region, noted an absence of trauma training and found there is a direct correlation between trauma and suicide concluding 'the forced removal and relocation of children from family and cultural settings, the trauma of which continues to affect individuals and families today' are major contributing factors for the deaths (Fogliani, 2019, p. 11). The Coroner also emphasised the importance of intergenerational trauma being included in training programs for those service providers working with Aboriginal people and called for the training be 'co-designed with Aboriginal people' (Fogliani, 2019, p. 315). If welfare practitioners have not been exposed to information about past historical and sociopolitical events, this is likely to inhibit their understanding of the Aboriginal experience within the welfare state and the historical and intergenerational trauma that exists in Indigenous communities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE—TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES

Training in trauma theory and trauma-informed approaches is vital to the meaningful and effective engagement of child protection practitioners with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families, to the building of relationships, and to reducing the number of Indigenous children in the child protection and out-of-home care sector (McAuliffe et al., 2016; Menzies, 2019, 2019b). Trauma-informed practice requires that practitioners understand the definitions of trauma, the manifestation of trauma, including trauma-related behaviours and outlines ways to engage and work with traumatised individuals and groups and developing culturally sensitive strategies. A key requirement of trauma-informed practice is acknowledging that it is not a one size fits all approach and trauma-informed care demands that the worker has an extensive understanding of the origins of the individual's trauma by paying attention to 'cultural and historical issues' (Jackson, 2018) and is able to tailor interventions specifically to the individual's needs. The ability to assess traumatic cultural and historical experiences should be a key undertaking for effective child protection practice. Welfare practitioners that draw on trauma-informed principles must acknowledge Indigenous people's relationship with child welfare authorities, the pervasiveness of trauma exposure and the cumulative impact of intergenerational removals throughout history.

The importance of learning about trauma frameworks and theories which include cultural and historical issues regarding Aboriginal people has recently been recognised in the NSW Department of Family and Community Services, 'Family is Culture' Report (Davis, 2019). The report recommends that child protection training should be delivered by Aboriginal people and the content must focus on Aboriginal child protection history, such as forcible child removal practices and policies from the protection and assimilation eras, draw on trauma-informed principles which allows practitioners to implement trauma-informed care approaches to recognise and respond to the complexity of intergenerational trauma (Davis, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This article argues that it is imperative for welfare practitioners in NSW statutory and non-statutory child protection agencies to develop a deep understanding of the historical and sociopolitical context of past child welfare practices of forcible separation and assimilation and the current Aboriginal experience of collective, historical and intergenerational trauma as a result of these experiences. This knowledge must include the traumatic impact on neurological and physiological development and trauma-informed skills to work with Indigenous children and families. Practitioners entering the field of child protection need to be adequately equipped to make sense of, and effectively intervene with one of their most vulnerable client groups. Without a framework for understanding trauma symptomology, workers are at risk of failing to recognise trauma-related behaviours and employ appropriate strategies. Lack of knowledge and appropriate responses may inadvertently re-traumatise the Indigenous child, their family and their community. Furthermore, those welfare practitioners without access to trauma training may be at risk of compromising their own well-being when working with traumatised clients as they are vulnerable to vicarious trauma (Frederico, Long, McPherson, McNamara & Cameron, 2016).

In order to understand the issues facing Indigenous children and families and work effectively with Indigenous clients, child protection practitioners require specialist training delivered by Indigenous facilitators about the trauma experienced by Indigenous people. Greater awareness about the direct relationship between stress and trauma is crucial working knowledge for child protection work and training must explore the trauma resulting from the experiences of Stolen Generations. The training also needs to address the current dilemmas facing Indigenous Australians, their past and present relationship with welfare authorities and provide workers with the knowledge and expertise to navigate these issues. While it is possible that some practitioners have completed tertiary subjects that provide a historical overview of the Aboriginal experience within colonial Australia. It is unlikely that every practitioner will have had access to pre service education courses which specifically identify the traumatic impact of past forcible separation and assimilation laws, policies and practices which incorporates the manifestation of trauma, definitions of trauma such as collective, historical and intergenerational trauma and encompasses trauma-informed principles and guidance on the implementation of trauma-informed approaches in child protection practice. To equip practitioners entering the field of child protection, the onus is on the child protection agency to provide tailored training to welfare practitioners to contextualise Indigenous people's lived experience of forcible separation and assimilation, identify trauma symptomology and develop relevant trauma-informed approaches and strategies.

The strong sense of community and the collectivist approach to raising children is contributing factors to the strength and resilience of Indigenous Australians. However, too often child protection services informed by 'conventional academic wisdom' are reluctant to consider how 'cultural

characteristics could be used to strengthen family and community capacity' as child protection protective measures (Lohoar et al., 2014, p. 17). Greater recognition of how 'traditional Aboriginal cultural practices help children to grow into active contributors to family, community and societal life' (Lohoar et al., 2014, p. 16) needs to be valued and implemented by welfare practitioners and child protection organisations.

This article offers a useful blueprint for the content of curriculum to be used in mandatory in-service entry level vocational training and ongoing professional development for child protection agencies to draw on to ensure that their staff are trained and have the knowledge and skills to work more effectively with Indigenous families, assist with the recovery from trauma and ultimately reduce the number of Indigenous children in the child protection and OOHC system.

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