Cultural Dispossession and Cultural Resilience: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Experiences of Colonising Practices

Executive Summary

This chapter explores the elements of culture and ways in which destruction of culture has occurred through colonisation in ways that may affect a person's behaviour, development, physical, mental, and social well-being and lead to being overrepresented in youth and adult criminal justice systems.

Cultural dispossession should be understood in the context of white colonial settler history.[1] The colonial experience in Australia has impacted Aboriginal culture, in particular 'language, land, resources, political autonomy, religious freedom and, often, personal autonomy'[2] in ways that may have a direct and adverse impact on Aboriginal people's health, as well as social and economic wellbeing.[3]

Dudgeon et al (2014) summarise key aspects of colonisation, observing:

> Since the arrival of white people in Australia in 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced displacement, been the targets of genocidal policies and practices, had families destroyed through the forcible removal of children, and continue to face the stresses of living in a world that systematically devalues their culture and people. Such experiences have profound effects on health, mental health and social and emotional wellbeing, for individuals, families and communities.[4]

However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples maintain strong connections to their culture despite the detrimental impact of colonisation. The Commonwealth Office for the Arts in its 2013 *Culture and Closing the Gap* fact sheet recognised that 'the strengthening of Indigenous culture is a strategy to reduce disadvantage in itself … Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities know and articulate the many benefits of keeping culture strong'.[5]

The Office for the Arts cites studies which establish positive effects of culture in schooling, health, economic participation, safe communities, governance and leadership. In particular:

> Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures contain natural protective and wellbeing factors such as kinship networks; and language, culture and cultural identity have been found to be key protective factors that predict resilience in children.[6]
>
> Connection to land, family, culture and spirituality can protect against ill health and serious psychological distress.[7]

A 2021 *Review of the Cultural Determinants of Health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* concluded that cultural identity at an individual level:

> is important to benefiting from other cultural determinants of health [, while] self-determination and connection to culture and community-controlled organisations are integral factors to increase Aboriginal resilience and resistance and improve health and wellbeing outcomes.[8]

The *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* Report (2020) noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have strengths and capabilities, such as connections with kin, cultural practices and attitudes towards Elders that can be built upon.[9]

Strategies to further strengthen Indigenous culture can reduce disadvantage[10] if governments invest in 'locally based, culturally informed healing and empowerment programs for families and communities'[11] that 'emphasise culture and supportive relationships … and foster core capabilities … and cultural norms'.[12]

Attachments to land, family and culture[13] have 'natural protective and wellbeing factors such as kinship networks; and language, culture and cultural identity [are] key protective factors that predict resilience in children'.[14] They also improve likelihood of employment,[15] reduction in alcohol abuse and being charged by police[16] or being a victim of violence.[17]

Notes

[1] Pat Dudgeon et al, 'Aboriginal Social, Cultural and Historical Contexts' in Pat Dudgeon, Helen Milroy and Roz Walker (eds), *Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice* (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research/Kulunga Research Network and University of Western Australia, 2nd edn, 2014) 3–24.

[2] Linda Archibald, *Decolonization and Healing: Indigenous Experiences in the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Greenland* (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2006) 49, quoted in Chris Cunneen 'Sentencing, Punishment and Indigenous People in Australia' (2018) 3 *Journal of Global Indigeneity* 15.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Dudgeon et al (n 1) 18.

[5] Office for the Arts (Cth), *Culture and Closing the Gap* (Fact Sheet, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2013) 1.

[6] Ibid 2, quoting Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health Queensland, Key Directions for a Social, Emotional, Cultural and Spiritual Wellbeing Population Health Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in Queensland (Report, 2009).

[7] Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, *AIDA Submission to the National Preventative Health Taskforce* (11 February 2009); Kerrie Kelly et al, *Living on the Edge: Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Risk and Protective Factors for Serious Psychological Distress among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health Discussion Paper Series No 10, December 2009).

[8] Ebony Verbunt et al, 'Cultural Determinants of Health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: A Narrative Overview of Reviews' (2021) 20(181) *International Journal for Equity and Health* 1, 7.

[9] Productivity Commission, for Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2020* (Report, 3 December 2020) ('*Overcoming Disadvantage* Report') [3.1] 3.2

[10] Office for the Arts (n 5).

[11] Healing Foundation, *Make Healing Happen: It's Time to Act* (Report, May 2021).

[12] Vanessa Edwige and Paul Gray, *Significance of Culture to Wellbeing, Healing and Rehabilitation* (*Bugmy* Bar Book Committee, 2021) [177] 19.

[13] Office for the Arts (n 5) 2.

[14] Ibid, citing Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health Queensland, *Key Directions for a Social, Emotional, Cultural and Spiritual Wellbeing Population Health Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in Queensland* (Report, 2009); Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria, *The State of Victoria's Children 2009: Aboriginal Children and Young People in Victoria* (State Government of Victoria, 2010).

[15] Office for the Arts (Cth), *Culture and Closing the Gap* (Fact Sheet, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2013) 3, citing Alfred Michael Dockery, 'Culture and Wellbeing: The Case of Indigenous Australians' (Discussion Paper Series 09/01, The Centre for Labour Market Research, 2009).

[16] Office for the Arts (n 15) 3. See also Alfred Michael Dockery, 'Traditional Culture and the Wellbeing of Indigenous Australians: An Analysis of the 2008 NATSISS' in Boyd Hunter and Nicholas Biddle, *Social Science Perspectives on the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey* (Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, 2012). Conversely, '[l]oss of language in Australia has been found to have negative impacts on directly affected generations and high levels of acculturative stress have been found in children living in regional centres where language loss is occurring.': J A De Maio et al, *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: Measuring the Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and the Intergenerational Effects of Forced Separation* (Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2005); Australian Human Rights Commission ('AHRI') and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2009* (Report 1, 2010).

[17] Office for the Arts (n15) 3, citing Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing: A Focus on Children and Youth* (Catalogue No 4725.0, 23 May 2012).