Strengths of Australian Aboriginal cultural practices in family life and child rearing

Shaun Lohoar, Nick Butera and Edita Kennedy

This paper explores some of the characteristics of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander[1] cultural practices that contribute to effective family functioning, and how these practices can have positive effects on children and communities. The approach is to gather the views of Aboriginal families and compare these perspectives with supporting evidence drawn from the literature. The findings suggest that, provided the necessary social conditions are in place, culture can be a protective force for children, families and communities.

KEY MESSAGES

- Aboriginal kinship relations reflect a complex and dynamic system that is not captured by existing non-Indigenous definitions of family.

- Emerging evidence supports some of the strengths of traditional Aboriginal culture in family functioning and raising children, yet conventional academic wisdom can be incompatible with traditional Aboriginal knowledge systems.

- The strengths of Aboriginal cultural traditions, as they apply to family life and raising children, revolve around four interrelated themes, including:

  - Theme 1: A collective community focus on child rearing helps children—The values of interdependence, group cohesion and community loyalty are key features of Aboriginal family and community life, where raising children is considered to be a shared responsibility of all community members.

  - Theme 2: Children need the freedom to explore and experience the world—Aboriginal communities offer their children every opportunity to explore the world around them, to help them develop the necessary skills to successfully negotiate their pathways to adulthood.

  - Theme 3: Elderly family members are important to family functioning—The elderly are highly respected for their contributions to family life in Aboriginal communities, particularly in helping children to understand the practical aspects of life and society.

  - Theme 4: Spirituality helps families cope with challenges—Families and communities who engage in spiritual practices benefit from a greater sense of identity, and individuals are more likely to connect with, support and help protect one another.

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1 For this paper, "Aboriginal" refers to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

Introduction

> "Aboriginal culture is strength, and acts as a protective force for children and families"

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander[2] parents understand "what works" to keep their children safe and to raise them to be active contributors to family and community life. The effects of intergenerational trauma, cultural disconnection and family disruption among many Aboriginal communities, however, are increasingly being recognised by the broader Australian community. The high levels of disadvantage faced by many Aboriginal families and communities are, as a result, now widely acknowledged (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2011; Bowes & Grace, 2014; Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009; Price-Robertson, 2011).

For many Aboriginal families and communities, engaging in traditional cultural practices and reclaiming a sense of cultural identity is the key to alleviating Aboriginal disadvantage and regaining their rightful place in broader Australian society. In this sense, Aboriginal culture[3] is strength, and acts as a protective force for children and families (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet [PM&C], 2012; Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care [SNAICC] & Innovative Resources, 2009; SNAICC, 2011; Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency [VACCA], 2013).

Understanding how Aboriginal culture can help to deliver positive outcomes for children may also help service providers in their work with non-Indigenous families. Some of the strengths of traditional Aboriginal cultural practices are supported by evidence that could be applied in cross-cultural settings. This paper explores some of those strengths, with an aim to:

- identify the characteristics of Aboriginal culture that contribute to effective family functioning and child-rearing practices;
- contribute to the body of knowledge about Aboriginal family and community life, to promote greater understanding about traditional Aboriginal cultural practices; and
- explore the ways in which service providers working with non-Indigenous families might draw from some of the strengths of traditional Aboriginal family practices.

Approach

The views of Aboriginal families were gathered through a series of focus groups and compared with understandings drawn from the literature. To frame the discussions with focus group participants, a review of the literature helped to identify some of the key themes that frequently arise when referring to Aboriginal family life and child-rearing practices. These themes focus on: collective community approaches to raising children; issues of child autonomy and independence; the contributions of elderly family members in family and community life; and the role of spirituality in family functioning. Other literature was explored to identify how these issues can impact on families and communities in both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous contexts.

There were 16 participants interviewed for this paper across four focus groups in three locations. Participants included a range of parents, carers and community members, including Aboriginal Elders, living in various regions across Australia. Staff at the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) conducted the focus groups in Victoria, North Queensland and the Northern Territory in October 2013.[4] While the views of focus group participants are not necessarily representative of all Australian Aboriginal groups, they do highlight a range of cultural strengths that appear to be shared by Australian Aboriginal people.

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2   In the literature, the term "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander" is used interchangeably with "Indigenous", "Aboriginal and Islander people", "First peoples" and a variety of other variations. For this paper, "Aboriginal" refers specifically to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

3   This paper defines "culture" as "… a universal, shared understanding of what is important to a collective group, that provides a framework for beliefs, attitudes, actions, etc." (Fejo-King, 2013, p. 193)

4   The data were collected in accordance with SNAICC's Community Engagement Protocols and under the governance of the SNAICC National Executive. All participants were consulted about how the data would be used for this publication.

The paper begins with an exploration of how "family" is defined in non-Indigenous and Aboriginal contexts. Four key themes are then explored through a series of quotes taken from the Aboriginal focus group participants. Each theme includes a brief comparison of relevant non-Indigenous perspectives, and a summary is provided to help readers reflect on the strengths of Aboriginal culture.

Defining "family"

The definition of a "family" is subject to a range of economic, political and social complexities (Corbet, 2004; Qu & Weston, 2013; Robinson, 2009). In Australia, the concept of family is often examined using data from the Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS), where family is defined as:

> a group of two or more people that are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who usually live together in the same household. This includes newlyweds without children, gay partners, couples with dependants, single mothers or fathers with children, and siblings living together. At least one person in the family has to be 15 years or over. A household may contain more than one family. (ABS, 2012)

Some authors argue that any conception of family that is limited to physical connections alone (i.e., living in the same household) does not adequately reflect the reality of many families living in contemporary societies (Corbet, 2004; Harris, 1983; Morphy, 2006; Qu & Weston, 2013; Robinson, 2009). This is particularly the case for Aboriginal families living within in a complex system of social relations (Corbet, 2004; Robinson, 2009).

The traditional social structure of Aboriginal communities is based around kinship systems that adopt an entirely different terminology to that of an "Anglo-Celtic" system (Morphy, 2006; Peters-Little, 2000). Especially in remote areas, households of Aboriginal people tend to be complex and fluid in their composition, with kinship networks overlapping, and adults and children often moving between households (ABS & AIHW, 2011; Qu & Weston, 2013).

Some of these issues may be countered by reframing the definition of family to reflect some of the complexities of Aboriginal family life. One definition that allows room to capture these complexities is provided by Families Australia:

> Families are diverse in their composition and forms ... Families Australia believes that families are what people define them to be. It is helpful for people to reflect about whether "family" refers, for example, to a group of people living under one roof, to people who are related, to people with shared emotional bonds, or to other things. (Families Australia, cited by Robinson & Parker, 2008, p. 3)

This definition is particularly relevant for Australian Aboriginal people who, as a collective group, place great value on social relationships, their physical and emotional bonds to country, and connecting to the spirit of their ancestors (SNAICC, 2011). The themes presented below explore how these cultural characteristics are reflected in the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal families, and how Aboriginal cultural practices can benefit children, families and communities.

Theme 1: A collective community focus on child rearing helps children

Australian Aboriginal culture is built around a "collectivist" kinship system, meaning that people think of themselves in terms of their affiliation with other people and their community (Yeo, 2003). The kinship system is a dynamic and complex social structure that defines how individuals relate to each other in terms of their roles, responsibilities and obligations (SNAICC, 2011). This section explores how, as a collective group, Aboriginal families and communities care for and protect their children and raise them to be active contributors to community life.

The beliefs and attitudes that guide child-rearing practices can differ from one Aboriginal community to the next,[5] yet children remain central to the life and culture of Australian Aboriginal communities (SNAICC, 2010). Raising children to be active participants in the community is seen as the collective responsibility of all members of the community, who each have a role to play in keeping children safe and happy (SNAICC, 2011; Yeo, 2003).

"One community, many eyes"

For Aboriginal families, the concept of "one community, many eyes" captures the collectivist approach to child rearing:

> "When you live in a community, you are pretty much all family."

It's called "many eyes". There are people watching all the time. They know who you are, they know your name and they know what line you are and how you come down in your family and what your responsibilities are. (Parent, NT)

When you live in a community, you are pretty much all family. You are related some way or another or you are very close and all the kids, naturally they are going to know each other as they roam around. (Mother, NT)

Most of our families are connected … they are all connected. Like Cairns is a small place, most of the families are connected. If your boy does something down the street, someone will see it and that word is already going around and somebody would have rung the parent and said, look, I think something has happened but we don't want to touch it because we know it's your place. (Parent, Qld)

Child safety and wellbeing

At the heart of the collectivist approach to child rearing is the emphasis on protecting children and preserving their wellbeing:

For instance, in the back of the community, there is a drain there and in raining season, my son had headed out the back gate of the community, by the time the kid told me my son had gone down there, I was in the car and heading off to stop my son. (Parent, NT)

Oh, we just pick up someone else's kid. Being a parent, too, if it was your kid, you wouldn't let them just walk out in the middle of the road, you have got to do something, it's just common sense. (Mother, Qld)

One parent from Cairns explained how it works for everyone in the community, after she recently called another parent after seeing her daughter in town with an older boy:

I've called up my friend because I've seen her daughter with someone like and her daughter was only young, so I called her up and we worked at the same place and I've said, look, your daughter was just down the road here with so and so and she said, "What?" … I said, "Look! I wouldn't be telling you this if I didn't feel a concern. I'm a mother. If I saw my daughter like that, I would want somebody to tell me, so I'm telling you." So, she hopped in her car, she come from work, went straight to that place and her daughter said, "How did you get here so fast?" She said, "I have eyes everywhere, so get in this car now, put down that bottle and get in this car and get home!" (Parent, Qld)

The value of ongoing support from extended family members

Extended family members and other community members, such as local Aboriginal Elders, are particularly valued for the ongoing support they offer Aboriginal parents and children:

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5   The way Aboriginal people are grouped within communities extends beyond marriage laws and is often distinguished by a complex system of families, hordes or tribes, and religious structures, with various sections and subsections, totemic groups and clans. These distinctions will almost always depend on localised beliefs and customs, which are inherently connected to the physical characteristics of their ancestral land (Fejo-King, 2013; SNAICC, 2011).

If a kid's in trouble, whatever age, they usually go to the older cousins or siblings or an Uncle or Auntie … if it's girl-to-girl or boy-to-boy. There are so many options for them. (Parent, NT)

My parents died young, so, I became my brother's mum and dad and I also brought up my own kids as well, but I didn't do that myself, I had my godparents, I had my Uncles and Aunties, so everything I did with them, it was screened before I could even set it out to them. It meant that if anything happened within the families, my Uncle would talk to this Auntie and say, this one needs some help. This person here would be best to talk to them, you know, there's certain people that would know who was best to talk to them and that word would go out. This is just what happened to my family to this day. (Parent, Qld)

One of my boys, he works in a green team with an Aboriginal Elder, so I'll ring him up and say "Son's not doing to well," and he goes "Ah, okay. I'll fix it. Leave it!" … So, when they're working he'll bring up, "Are you okay?"… and then they'll fix it. It doesn't come back to me but I know that it's okay, things like that. So there's ways you do it … My kids have always known that they can come to me, but they don't, they always climb to their Auntie. (Parent, Vic.)

The extended family network also provides lifelong learning opportunities for *all* family members:

When the family gets together for family dinners and barbecues and Christmas all the kids grow up together, so the standards are the same and your parents are still there, so they are still teaching you even though you have kids now. (Auntie, Qld)

I'm like that with my Godchildren. My Godchild is 35 and to this day, she still calls me and asks me, she treats me like her mother and she asks me lots of questions and she has six kids. (Grandmother, Vic.)

Building security, trust and confidence

The collectivist approach to raising children is not just about keeping the children safe and happy. As a central characteristic of Aboriginal culture, the kinship system is a shared value system that helps people to bond with each other (Fejo-King, 2013; SNAICC, 2011). Some Aboriginal parents emphasised the sense of security, trust and confidence in the knowledge that others in the local community are always there to help care for their children:

When you go to community events there's Aunties and Uncles and extended community that watch your children. That's what I like about the Aboriginal community. Wherever you go, and there's a group of you, your child's safe. You know, you might misplace them for a few minutes, but they're off playing and someone else is watching them … You'll go looking for them and they'll go, "It's alright Aunt, they're here." Your child's always safe, there's never a moment when they're not in the community. That's what I like! (Aboriginal Auntie and grandparent, Vic.)

In this day and age, it gives me confidence. (Parent, Qld)

It takes a lot of burden off the person with the child. It takes a lot of stress and pressure off. You know that they're okay, you know where they are, and you know it's culturally appropriate as well. (Mother, NT)

Too many eyes?

For young Aboriginal children, having so many eyes on them is not always welcome. Only later does it dawn on the child why they were so carefully monitored:

When you're young like that, you feel that your dad's eyes are everywhere or they're watching all the time and you're like, "Come on, give me a break." And it's actually love and you realise that later, but at the time, you are self-conscious …

"Your child's always safe, there's never a moment when they're not in the community."

like subconsciously with safety. You know, you feel safe because you know that people are watching. (Parent, Qld)

Another parent recalls the mysterious eyes that would always be watching:

Oh, my grandmother was the worst. She'd say, "Oh, a little birdy told me!" I'd hate that little birdy! I don't even know who that birdy is and if I ever found out … (Parent, Qld)

For some Aboriginal children, getting disciplined by extended family members may be uncomfortable for the child, but it is seen as an effective way to teach the children and promote positive behaviours:

It's … embarrassing! Yeah, yeah, for them (the kids). It don't worry me … Grandson played up once at the Fitzroy Stars … "Oi, get here!" by one of the Uncles. All the boys were … sitting around. "You were swearing. You know you shouldn't be saying that!" … "Yes, Uncle" … "Well?" … "Sorry, Uncle." But all the boys were there, so he never did it again. It's actually better for your mum to yell at you than your Uncle or Auntie out there. (Parent, Vic.)

We could be at a family meeting and my sister can growl at my kids and my brother can growl at my kids, yeah, you know? They have the authority because they are raising them as well as me. The same as my parents as well, my parents have passed on now but if they were still here, they could growl at their grandkids, because they are teaching them. (Mother and Auntie, Qld)

"That's how it has always been!"

Some Aboriginal parents highlighted the enduring nature of the collectivist approach to raising children, and how this approach is reinforced through a shared understanding of Aboriginal cultural traditions:

We have faith in the community because we know everyone, plus we've had that history of support. (Mother, NT)

That's how it's been for centuries and there are shared values. You can drop them there, you know, you don't have to worry about them, you can just drop them off, it's like they are just at home, and it's how it's always been. (Auntie, Qld)

One grandparent highlighted the instinctive willingness of unfamiliar community members to provide support to other families as a defining characteristic of Aboriginal culture:

Maybe it's the definition of family between Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture. I don't know. Even the other week, there was an Aboriginal family and one of the little girls, she was about 2 or 3, and she was walking away … I don't know this child, I don't know this family, but I just went and grabbed this child and said, "You alright bub?" And then I went over and went and had a chat to this family, and there was no issue with this at all, because there is something … I don't know, if I was non-Indigenous, maybe I would have acted differently, but it was just instinct, this woman was like, "Oh thanks." Even though it's not blood family, it's still community. We still look after our mob, you know … even if you don't know them. (Grandmother, Qld)

For some non-Indigenous families, the collective approach to child supervision is often not seen for what it is:

I was out about a week ago and there were a whole lot of Torres Islander families and I don't know where the men were. They must have been out doing something and there was a big pool and all these beautiful children were swimming in the pool. I was walking by, walking back to my car and there was a non-Indigenous older woman and she walked up to me and said, "Oh, look at that! They aren't even supervising their children in the pool." But if she had just opened her eyes just a little bit more, she would have seen what I saw, which was lionesses, like seven or eight women ready to pounce if something happened to their cubs.

> There was a safety thing, but they were all letting their children have fun. There was nothing wrong with that, but it's that stereotypical type of thing. (Mother, Qld)

These quotes support the notion that a collective approach to raising children is embedded in traditional Aboriginal culture, where the values of interdependence, group cohesion and community loyalty underpin day-to-day community and family life (SNAICC, 2011; Yeo, 2003). By contrast, the values of many non-Indigenous Australian families are characterised by a more individualistic approach to community life.

Reflections about collective community approaches to raising children

Australia is considered to be one of the most "individualistic" societies in the modern world (Darwish & Huber, 2010), and social isolation can place high demands on many families as they struggle with day-to-day family life (Darwish & Huber, 2010; McDonald, 2011; Price-Robertson, 2011). For Aboriginal families who continue to practice their cultural traditions, the notion of "one community, many eyes" emphasises the inseparable domains of family life and community life. Through the kinship system, Aboriginal people share a common set of values that allows them to work together to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their children.

There is evidence to support collectivist approaches to child safety and wellbeing (McDonald, 2011; McLachlan, Gilfillan, & Gordon, 2013) and recent Australian policy initiatives[6] reflect this (COAG, 2009; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). Yet conventional academic wisdom may not be as readily applied in Aboriginal contexts. For example, part of growing up in a collectivist culture means that Aboriginal infants may be breastfed and cared for by several women interchangeably. Under bonding and attachment theory, the practice can be viewed negatively as indiscriminate attachment (Yeo, 2003). Similarly, issues of child neglect can often be considered as a matter of parental culpability, rather than as a shared responsibility between parents, families, community and society (Brend, Fletcher, & Nutton, 2013; Scott, Higgins, & Franklin, 2012; Yeo, 2003).

To summarise:

- Collective approaches to child rearing helps *children* to:
  - be physically safe;
  - develop feelings of self-confidence and trust in others;
  - cultivate discipline and learning through positive role modelling; and
  - access a wider range of support when they experience difficulties and need someone to turn to.
- Collective approaches to child rearing can provide *parents* with practical, social and psychological support, including:
  - identifying situations when a child's safety is at risk;
  - practical child care support;
  - helping parents to cope with the stresses of child rearing; and
  - providing parents with confidence, security and trust in the local community.

Theme 2: Children need the freedom to explore and experience the world

A major challenge for parents living in *any* society is to ensure the safety of their children while allowing them opportunities to develop their social, emotional, cognitive and physical development

"Like lionesses … ready to pounce if something happened to their cubs."

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6   The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020 (COAG, 2009), and the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), are Australian policy frameworks that acknowledge the importance of social support, social contact and neighbourhood interaction in contributing to effective family functioning (McDonald, 2011; McLachlan et al., 2013).

through unstructured play (Ably, 2005; Guldberg, 2009; Howard, 2011). As Guldberg (2009) suggested:

> Children need to be given the space away from adults' watchful eyes—in order to play, experiment, take risks (within a sensible framework provided by adults), test boundaries, have arguments, fight, and learn how to resolve conflicts. (p. 6)

Traditional cultural values ensure that Aboriginal children are provided with the freedom to explore the world and to learn their responsibilities to care for and protect one other (Daylight & Johnstone, 1986; Diamond, 2012). This section provides some insights into how Aboriginal children learn these responsibilities, and the role that adults play in providing their children with the necessary skills to help them negotiate their pathways to adulthood.

"We let the kids go", as long as it is safe!

The importance of unstructured play is well understood by Aboriginal parents:

> They (the adults) let the kids go … they have to make their own decisions! (Mother, Qld)

While the children are encouraged to explore the world around them, issues of safety are always considered:

> They are encouraged to explore, within a *safe* distance, using *common-sense* and *safe practices* put into place … they are encouraged to … have a sticky-beak at everything. (Grandmother, Qld)

"Common sense" refers to the shared values of the local community and other family members to allow the children to learn from their own experiences. If a child is exposed to any kind of risk, families trust that it will be reported back to them:

> I'm not worried as I have a lot of relations around me. The families know each other and if one child walked out of the community, another member would see that and report that to the family. I pretty much let my children go out there and learn from experience. (Mother, NT)

If someone has abandoned their caring responsibilities, for whatever reason, someone from the local community will inevitably raise the issue:

> Yeah, and you know there are consequences for that. If you didn't keep them (the younger children) out of trouble, if you knew your sister was doing this and you didn't pull her up on that, you'd have the community telling you! (Mother, Vic.)

Independent play and learning responsibility

From a very early age, Aboriginal children are taught to help and encourage one another, to protect each other and to work together (SNAICC, 2011). Unstructured play is seen as a way of providing opportunities for children to learn these important behaviours. As children grow, they are expected to help others to also learn these responsibilities.

> I think we all have that (protective nature) because we grew up knowing what our responsibilities were from the word go, and those that come behind, you have to look after, no matter what. (Mother, Vic.)

> That's the thing, we aren't always wrapping them in cotton wool, we let them go a bit, but you're controlling it … I've done it with my boys too, but what is it going to prove if you are sitting right there and they are swimming and you say, "Don't go there." I mean, what is it going to prove in the long run? You can't be right beside them when they are 18. They have to learn! (Mother, Qld).

Box 1 describes how the responsibility to protect each other is passed down through the generations, and the security that such protection provides for the children. The "protector", in this

case emphasises how a "sensible framework provided by adults" (noted above) can be achieved, to allow children to feel safe as they experience the world and learn their responsibilities.

Box 1: "My Uncle, the protector"

I've known that (I would be protected) since I was 8 years old. It's a family trait that someone will be designated to protect you. For me, it was my Uncle.

My Uncle isn't alive anymore, but when I was born he promised my father that he would protect me.

I didn't know about it at the time, but I always remember he had that thing where he would just show up.

For example, if I'd have guys come on over, or I'd gone to a party with my friends, he would always just rock up. It was funny, we'd all be having a few drinks, just laughing and joking and he'd be just standing there right behind them. Then they'd turn around and just say "hello", because they were all scared and they'd know, straight away, the drinks would go and everyone would be straight up.

He always seemed to know. It also happened when I was home alone, when both my brothers were out working, he'd just suddenly arrive. Or if I'd had an argument with my friends or family, he'd know. He'd come around, ask me what happened and help me fix it up.

After I'd thank my Uncle and I wouldn't see him for days, months even, until, then, all of a sudden, a knock on the door, and I'd know he's back. It was beautiful.

Since he passed away, his son, who is younger than I am, pops up every so often and I'm like, "What is this?", and he'll say, "Oh, just checking on you, just seeing what's happening, do you want to go for a ride?"

So, we'll go for a cruise around town and we'll see who's in town and who's doing what and he'll go, you know, "Do you just want a yarn with me?"

He's never told me but I'm pretty sure the role of my protector has been passed from my Uncle to his son. (Mother, Qld)

Modelling positive behaviours

One of the benefits of having children learn their responsibilities at such a young age is that they can, in turn, model positive behaviours for younger children:

Well, my boy is 17 now and we've got kids in care and he feeds them, picks them up and carries them if they are crying, picks them up out of the cot. I don't tell him to, he just does it, he's always done it! (Aboriginal mother and provider of out-of-home care, Qld)

We don't wrap them in cotton wool. If you've got a bigger family, the older kids grow up quicker because they help bring up their younger siblings. The children learn from doing, so you have to give them that freedom and that responsibility gives them confidence. (Aboriginal Auntie and Elder, Vic.)

I think it's the early parenting. Even now, my nieces, they look after their brothers and sisters from when they were babies, from when they were in their arms, they are carrying them … feeding them … changing them. The boys carry them and look after them as well, it's kind of like they are just copying the behaviour of the parents. (Mother, Qld)

We went to a big function down here in Cairns and we had this baby in the family. When we were all watching the concert we looked back and three of my teenage nephews were feeding this little one a bottle. It's nice to see. (Aboriginal mother, Qld)

"The children learn from doing, so you have to give them that freedom, and that responsibility gives them confidence."

"Responsibility" empowers children

For many Aboriginal families, instilling a sense of responsibility is seen to empower children with a sense of trust, support and confidence:

> The reason it works so well in our culture, is because that sense of responsibility empowers our children. Children think, "well, mum trusts me enough to do this, this and this, I better not let her down". (Mother, Qld)

> It comes back to communication and family meetings. It's just a big yarn up, what have you got to talk about, you know, and you feel supported. Not only in my family did we do that, like it was probably the same in everyone's. Mum would come to sit down with us and say, "Alright, I think you are old enough to know this now!" And then she would say it. As she would say this, both my sister and me would go, "Ah, mum's going to give us a bit of knowledge now." It gave us pride, the more that she would share with us about our family. And that builds on that relationship, the rapport, the communication, the trust, and then, she would have the confidence for us to go out by ourselves. (Mother, Qld)

For some parents, the term "responsibility" fails to capture the real essence of what it means to care for one another:

> It's not a responsibility, it's the way you're brought up. It's just part of being a family. (Mother, NT)

> Helping bring up extended family. I wouldn't label it responsibility, because that's like saying, "You have to" … it's not how it's looked at. It's just something you do … You could be sitting around, having a yarn and I could say to you, "I got a job", and your sister might say, "Oh well, I'll watch 'em"… "Alright, then", and you'll go like that or, "I can't have 'em today", so you'll ring someone, "So and so's sick. Can … ". "Yeah, bring them round." So there's a pool of family that you can ring around that those kids are safe with and know. (Mother, Qld)

Responding to non-Indigenous perspectives

There was a general consensus that non-Indigenous people sometimes misunderstand the positive aspects of traditional Aboriginal family life. At times, Aboriginal people need to remind each other of their kinship responsibilities as they continue to face criticism of their traditional cultural practices:

> I was speaking to my sister last night on the phone. We are both in our twenties and she was telling me that the other day she got a growling from her non-Indigenous friend. She said, "You know, you baby your sister … you should let her stand on her feet." She was talking about me and she didn't realise what it's like in Aboriginal families. I said, "But Louise, that's in our culture. You've done that since I was a bub, big sister looks after little sister." You see, she still does that now even though we are adults. There is still that nurturing. There's always that thought in her head of "oh, I've got to look after my little sister". (Mother, Vic.)

One particular criticism of the Aboriginal approach to child rearing is that children are often left unsupervised and are unnecessarily exposed to harm:

> Children are given responsibility but not at the expense of safety. People (from the wider non-Indigenous community) worry that a young sibling feeding an infant a bottle may have an accident, but you're still there, you're not going to leave the room. (Auntie and Elder, Vic.)

When asked about non-Indigenous approaches to raising children, the discussion moved towards issues of over-parenting. None of the Aboriginal participants had ever felt the need to be overly protective of their children:

> Not in my families, not in my communities. I've never experienced that (Grandmother, Qld).

Reflections about child autonomy

One of the strengths of a collective community approach to raising children is that parents and carers have the security and confidence to allow their children the freedom to explore the world on their own terms. For Australian Aboriginal families, the risks associated with children's activities are accepted as a natural part of growing up (SNAICC, 2011). Aboriginal carers actively encourage independent play so that children can learn a range of important life skills, including the capacity to learn responsibilities to care for and protect one another (Diamond, 2012; SNAICC, 2011; Yeo, 2003). To deny a child this independence would be considered a breach of parental responsibility under traditional Aboriginal culture and Law (Lore/The Dreaming/Dreamtime) (SNAICC, 2011; Yeo, 2003).

In contrast, parents living in modern societies can be overprotective when it comes to the safety of their children (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Furedi, 2002, 2005; Howard, 2011; Locke, Campbell & Kavanagh, 2012; Rudner, 2012). By over-exaggerating the risks to their children, some parents may reduce a child's resilience, independent mobility and autonomy in decision-making, while increasing a child's anxiety, obesity and sense of entitlement (Locke et al., 2012; Rudner, 2012). In doing so, risk-adverse parents may unknowingly be placing their children at risk in the longer term as they grow into adults (Furedi, 2002, 2005; Thomson, 2005).

To summarise:

■ In both modern and traditional societies, child autonomy is seen as a protective factor in child safety and wellbeing.

■ Aboriginal parents and families encourage children to explore the world, but not to the extent that children are exposed to excessive risk.

■ The need for children to develop a sense of responsibility, through autonomous play, is seen as priority for Aboriginal families and communities.

■ In Aboriginal families and communities, the responsibility to care for and protect one another is taught from a very young age and continues to be reinforced throughout life.

Theme 3: Elderly family members are important to family functioning

The focus group participants highlighted that raising children is a shared responsibility of *all* community members, yet grandparents and Elders were often mentioned as pivotal contributors to family life in Aboriginal communities. This section explores the specific roles of grandparents and elderly family members in contributing to family functioning, and the influence this has on children.

Aboriginal "Elders" and "elderly" family members are not necessarily one and the same, and the distinction between these family members, including grandparents, Aunties and Uncles is often blurred. Australian Aboriginal people focus on life stages and relative degrees of maturity, rather than on chronological age, and Elders can be comparatively young in a biological sense (Morphy, 2004).

Elders are generally respected for the value of their cultural knowledge, leadership abilities and for making decisions on behalf of the community (McIntryre, 2001). They are particularly valued for helping children to understand the practical aspects of life, society and culture. As Walker (1993) describes:

> The role of Elders is difficult for outsiders to understand. We rely strongly on them as key decision makers within families. They are the people we hold the greatest respect for because many of them went through so much, so that now we do not have to suffer the injustices they experienced. Their guidance is often illustrated through everyday life and their teachings are often done subconsciously; we follow, we observe and we go on to teach our own families. It is through our Elders that the spirit of Aboriginal people is kept alive. (p. 53)

Developing respect for elderly family and community members

Respect for elderly family members is instilled in children from a young age, and children and grandparents often form strong bonds as a result:

> In the communities, yes, there is a lot of respect. My children did because they were taught from babies to respect their Elders and it's special … that kind of thing … It's just the way we are. Just that love. They just love their poppa and he just loves all their grandchildren. He spoils them sometimes. I remember when my mother was alive, she would always get my youngest daughter to brush her hair and my daughter says that that is what she misses. (Mother, NT)

One parent described the effort required to teach children about respect:

"You have to put that effort in!"

> I think you have to put in some effort though … into instilling the values a bit more now because of all the other influences around. Simple things like, saying "give nanny a hug", or making sure Nanny Jen gets to hug the little grandchild … With four boys who are really boisterous, you know, footy, wrestling, the other things, it's quite easy for them to just go off and watch TV or whatever, but she makes sure when you walk in there, you have to put that effort in. (Mother, Qld)

It doesn't take long for the children to learn respect:

> Now when we meet for family gatherings and stuff like that, when we arrive, we don't even have to tell them that, they will just go and greet all the Elders and all their grandparents and Aunties and Uncles, they just go and do it. You don't have to tell them, only the little ones. You know, we have to teach them, but when they get older, they will just do it automatically. (Mother, Qld)

Beyond respect: Practical lessons from elderly family and community members

Building respect for elderly family and community members provides a foundation for some of the more practical aspects of family functioning. Many of the focus group participants spoke of the value of grandparents and elderly family members in providing care for their children, and described the opportunities for children to learn other important life skills.

For instance, through the provision of child care, grandparents can teach their grandchildren about traditional cultural practices while, at the same time, establishing close relationships with their extended family members:

> I drop my kids at my parents every day. It's so much more than child care. They grow strong and learn about our culture and get really close with all their cousins. (Father, Qld)

Having guidance and instruction from a family matriarch was particularly meaningful for this mother:

> They learn a lot from grandma. When I was younger, my sister, it was before school age, we never had to do that kindy and stuff like that. We were dropped off at our nans, who was the matriarch of all our family, because it was a matriarchal tribe. You know, even though she was an elderly woman, she still looked after us: "Come on, come on girls, you are going to come out and chop your lunch up", and she would help us, but she gave us a firm guidance. "This is what you are going to do, you are going to chop up a tomato like that, this one is good for you. Next week, your Auntie is taking you to the beach and your Auntie is going to help you find pippies." (Mother, Qld)

Imparting knowledge is a particularly important role for grandparents:

> There are others things too … like, I was working when my four girls were little … I would drop them off at my parent's every day and the things that my parents taught my children were the alphabet, so they would sit on my bed and by the time preschool came along, they

knew the alphabet and they could count and this was not because of me, it was because of my mum and dad and the real good thing that I credit my mum and dad to is the beat my kids got for music, you know. They would sit them on the lap and they would clap to *Mary Had a Little Lamb* or whatever … it was all nursery rhymes and they just had a really good beat. Yeah, so, the things grandparents can teach your kids are so much. (Auntie and mother, Qld)

One participant spoke of her multiple roles to care for both her family and the local community:

I'm an Elder on the … Elders Council. But I am also an Elder in my community in which I live, … and I'm an Elder in my immediate family—which is still [name of clan], but I still look after my immediate family. So I have three hats—I look after the whole family line … if they're in any trouble or they need anything in their life … if they need money or they need advocacy for gas or electricity, I help. And I talk to them every day. So that's part of it. Also, I have an open door at home so that if anybody in the community or my family are in trouble, they can come and stay. And I look after them until they're able to be on their own feet. (Auntie and Elder, Vic.)

Elderly family members are positive role models:

I don't drink. Well, I have one Christmas Day, but I don't drink. I now don't smoke, but I did two and a half years ago, but I can't tell others not to smoke if I smoke. (Auntie and Elder, Vic.)

Reflections about the role of elderly family members in family functioning

The collective imagination of a modern society places great value on its youth, where health, virility, speed and agility are treasured. By comparison, old age represents sickness, loss of usefulness, poverty and loss of sexuality, and advertising continues to represent the elderly as slow, decrepit or weak (Bytheway, 2005; Diamond, 2012; Nelson, 2005; North & Fiske, 2012). Yet non-Indigenous families often provide extensive support to their elderly family members even though they rarely live in same household (Connidis, 2010; Lowenstein, 2005; Qu & Weston, 2013),[7] and certain skills, such as interdisciplinary thinking and the ability to solve complex problems, increase with age (Connidis, 2010; Diamond, 2012).

In both modern and traditional societies,[8] elderly family members provide practical "hands-on" care for children. This care translates into a range of benefits for children as they negotiate their pathways to adulthood (Connidis, 2010; Diamond, 2012; Walker, 1993). For Aboriginal families, elderly family and community members are often respected for their narrative historical value, where testimonies about the Dreaming and daily community life help others to understand the practical aspects of life and society (Diamond, 2012).

To summarise:

■ Grandparents and elderly family members are highly respected as important contributors to family functioning in both traditional and modern societies.

■ Aboriginal people, including "Elders" are not judged on the basis of age, but by the mutual benefits they bring to family and community life.

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7 Australian grandparents are the main providers of child care for children under 12: In 2011, there were 46,680 grandparent families in Australia where grandparents were the primary carers of their grandchildren (ABS, 2011; Qu & Weston, 2013).

8 There are complexities that need to be taken into account when comparing the role of the elderly in traditional and modern societies. For example, life expectancy is considerably less in traditional societies, where people rarely live to 60 years of age, and are considered "old" at 50 years of age or even earlier (Diamond, 2012). In modern societies, with improved medical care and life conditions, life expectancy has reached an average of 85, and people are considered old at 65 or more (Diamond, 2012; Lowenstein, 2005; North & Fiske, 2012).

- Mutual benefits include the provision of child care and instilling and passing down Aboriginal cultural values, traditions and responsibilities to children, and for keeping the spirit of Aboriginal culture alive.

- Aboriginal grandparents, elderly family members and Elders often assume multiple roles within families and communities and, as a result, can provide a wide range of opportunities to contribute to family and community functioning.

Theme 4: Spirituality helps families cope with challenges

A key characteristic of the collective Aboriginal community is to help the spirit of a child emerge as he or she grows and experiences life. This is done by letting the child know who they are in relation to their family, the broader society, the environment and the living spirits of their sacred ancestors and land (SNAICC, 2011).[9] These relationships are guided by Aboriginal Law (the Dreaming/Dreamtime/Lore), and define a child's identity and how they are connected to everything in life (SNAICC, 2011).

Aboriginal "spirituality", kinship and the Dreaming

The Dreaming is a holistic, multilayered framework that integrates the physical, personal and spiritual dimensions of Aboriginal culture with past, present and future life (McEwan & Tsey, 2009; Nicholls, 2014a). In Aboriginal communities, where traditional cultural practices continue to thrive, the spiritual connection to the Dreaming is as relevant to the daily life of Aboriginal people today as it was to their ancestors (McEwan et al., 2009; SNAICC, 2011).

The holistic nature of Aboriginal life applies to Aboriginal communities all around Australia. Yet the Dreaming, as a religion grounded in the land itself, is subject to the locality rules of a particular "country".[10] Inevitably, the physical characteristics of a specific region will determine how kinship regulations, morality and ethics are applied in people's economic, cognitive and spiritual lives (Nicholls, 2014a). Furthermore, Aboriginal spirituality is a highly abstract and experiential notion, and the Dreaming is "impossible to relay in words" (SNAICC, 2011, p. 49). For these reasons, spirituality is explored here in terms of how it is passed on to children to help them cope with life's challenges, and to keep the spirit of Aboriginal culture alive for future generations (Walker, 1993).

The focus group participants rarely referred to the Dreaming, or "spirituality" directly. Instead, they spoke about "culture", "values", "beliefs" and "traditions" interchangeably to describe how a sense of spirituality is passed down to their children. Often the sentiments reflect the themes presented in the previous sections, which further emphasises the holistic, inseparable elements of Aboriginal family life.

Caring and sharing: The "heart" of Aboriginal spirituality

At the heart of Aboriginal spirituality is the emphasis on caring and sharing. While these values are important for the children, they can also remind adults of their own role to help look after others in the community:

> I've decided in my life that I have a responsibility as an Elder and I will fulfil that responsibility. Our culture is caring and sharing … full-on caring … I decided a long time ago that that's where my niche is, and … also I do wellbeing about healing. I'm not a doctor and I'm not a preacher or anything like that, but I try and do appropriate cultural activities that help people to heal with all of the past wrongs … (Auntie and mother, Vic.)

9   This paper explores the notion of "spirituality" in terms of: "those things that have *something to do with the sacred* … If there is no connection with the sacred, then it should not be referred to as spiritual or spirituality". (McEwan, Tsey, & the Empowerment Research Team, 2009, p. 13)

10 Land-based narratives differ in subject matter from place to place depending on specific environmental features, landmarks, and local flora and fauna (Nicholls, 2014b).

As part of a collective culture, the responsibility to care for others is central to one's identity:

> You kind of want to instil in your kids that caring mentality where they are like, that's caring, you can label it, I guess a kind of responsibility, but really it's instilling in them that caring for their family and themselves is so important to who we are. (Parent, Vic.)

The caring mentality is instilled in children from such a young age so that they can help care for the younger children:

> You might see a 12 year old change a nappy or feed a bottle or go to the fridge and warm a bottle, you know, do things like that. And that's our way of teaching our kids. It's sort of going back to 200-odd years ago. It's when you were brought up with the mums and you were taught what to do. Even the boys were brought up with the mums until they were initiated. (Auntie and mother, Vic.)

Ways of passing the spirit of Aboriginal culture to children

One father describes how his children learn about Aboriginal cultural values through his extended family network, by having his children spend time at their grandparents with his nieces and nephews:

> My kids learn about who we are, the history of family, our culture and they also get to know their cousins, so that they become more like brothers and sisters. (Father, Qld)

Sharing cultural knowledge through traditional activities is an important way to pass "culture" down to the children:

> In my culture, it's the Uncle that teaches my son to hunt, not the father. In my culture, it is the Uncle that teaches his nephews to go hunting or to make things or to you know, to make spears or those types of things … the Uncle is the one. The mother teaches her young daughters … I knew how to cook and all that from a very young age. Wash up, wipe up, clean up and sweep the floor from a very early age. (Parent, Qld)

Using modern technology is another way to connect with families and to learn about Aboriginal culture. This quote highlights how one Auntie is able to help other family members who are struggling to cope:

> I'll get phone calls. So then I'll have a yarn … To try and combat that modern stuff, I've joined Facebook. So, I'm up … late of a night, because I go through and check out what people are saying and, if I see someone struggling by the way that they've written something, I inbox them, "Are you alright?" and they'll go, "No, Aunt. I'm not." And then we'll have a yarn. When I do meet them, I talk about doing old ways. I just use the modern ways to get to them. (Auntie and mother, Qld)

Teaching traditional language is important for imparting knowledge about Aboriginal culture, even if the children don't recognise the significance of such knowledge at the time. In this case, the children listened carefully to their Elder, thanks to the respect that they had developed as younger children:

> I walked into the room one time after the lunchtime and I saw [name] who is now 30 something and my younger brother … they were lying there. Mum and dad's place is really hot and it's the middle of summer, they were lying there on the floor, like little boys do and there was mum, she was telling them the story in full language and when I walked away, I said to one of my nephews, do you know what Nan is talking about and he said, nope. They didn't know, but they listened to that whole, you know, she would talk for hours about language, no English whatsoever and they would be twiddling with their thumbs, but they'd be listening, but they wouldn't know what she was talking about. Now they've learnt their language. (Auntie and mother, Qld).

"They would be twiddling with their thumbs, but they'd be listening"

Elders and grandparents help to reinforce the strength and resilience that can be gained from knowing one's culture and being connected to it:

> I think Elders bring connection to our past and our history, and they bring us stories … I wish I still had my grandmother around … When you've got an older person, they can confirm your connection … they can confirm your connection to country and family and their stories— which is what we should have and a lot of us don't have. And your language, you don't have a lot of language. And their stories that they tell you are our history and it tells you where you belong, and it gives you that strength. (Auntie and mother, Vic.)

Reflections about spirituality in coping with family challenges

Evidence suggests that engaging in spiritual practices is associated with improved physical and mental health. Improvements in immune system function, lower blood pressure and lower rates of heart disease, stroke and kidney failure are just some of the physical benefits from engaging in spiritual practices (McEwan et al., 2009). Mental health benefits include a greater sense of responsibility, increased self-control and greater tolerance (McEwan et al., 2009). Spiritual engagement is also shown to be a protective factor against adolescents' risky behaviours (Bradford Wilcox, 2007; McEwan et al., 2009; Miller, 2007; Resnick et al., 1997; Rostosky, Danner, & Riggle, 2007).

For Aboriginal families, spirituality is a key cultural characteristic that embodies the interconnectedness of life's dimensions. The sacred connection to the Dreaming provides guidance for families and communities in raising children and helps to instil the shared values of interdependence, group cohesion and community loyalty. These qualities help to provide a safe environment for raising children and help both adults and children to understand the importance of caring for and protecting one another.

To summarise:

- Aboriginal spirituality is instilled and reinforced at a very early age through a range of social relationships.
- Spirituality helps Aboriginal children to identify the place they hold in the family, the local community and in broader society.
- Spirituality can instil positive values in Aboriginal and non-Indigenous children, including caring for and sharing with others, and taking responsibility for their own actions.
- Spirituality provides a healing framework to help children build resilience and coping abilities.

Summary of Aboriginal strengths in family life and child-rearing practices

Taken together, the themes presented in this paper highlight some of the strengths of Aboriginal culture in terms of raising children and family functioning. Traditional Aboriginal cultural practices help children to grow into active contributors to family, community and societal life. Children have access to a wide network of support, and through a collective community approach, Aboriginal people work together to ensure their children are safe and happy. In doing so, children are given opportunities to explore the world, develop their independence and, hence, build their capacity to make responsible decisions that help them throughout their journey to adulthood.

The kinship system, which embodies the spiritual essence of the Dreaming, helps Aboriginal people to understand their relationships to one another, and the roles and responsibilities they have in raising children. The importance of harmonious social relationships and the spirit of culture continue to be a feature of traditional Aboriginal family and community life. Modelling positive behaviours, such as caring and sharing, and working together to help children build their identity, discipline and self-confidence help both children and families to trust others in the community. Grandparents and elderly family and community members play an important role in this respect,

and they are particularly valued for passing down their cultural knowledge and traditional values to the children. These values help to build family and community strength and, provided the necessary social conditions are in place, Aboriginal culture is a protective force for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

Lessons for practice

Reflecting on the themes presented, there are striking similarities between emerging evidence and the cultural strengths of Aboriginal child-rearing practices:

- Theme 1: Evidence shows that socially inclusive approaches to raising children, where ensuring the wellbeing and safety of children is a shared responsibility, helps to improve family functioning and build strength in communities.

- Theme 2: Research supports the notion that child autonomy and independence helps children to develop the necessary skills to cope with life's challenges as they negotiate their pathways to adulthood.

- Theme 3: Elderly family members are known to provide crucial support to families in raising children and contribute to family functioning.

- Theme 4: Engaging in spiritual and/or religious practices have been shown to have positive effects on individuals and families.

These themes might be considered as factors that help to build the necessary social conditions to ensure children are raised in safe and happy environments. This paper is by no means a "how to" guide for family support workers. However, it may prompt service providers to consider how cultural characteristics could be used to strengthen family and community capacity. For instance, practitioners might work with families to explore, in greater depth, the factors that lie beyond those of the immediate household unit. Some explorations may include:

- the extent of a family's social connections, and the degree of support that may already be available to help families cope with challenges, or to provide hands-on care for their children;

- understanding some of the prevailing attitudes of parents and carers about child autonomy and independence;

- identifying some of the values that parents would like to see in their children as they grow into adults; and

- exploring some of the tensions families might experience when trying to balance societal expectations with the competing demands of private family life.

Where to from here?

This paper has provided a brief overview of some of the cultural values that help Aboriginal families keep their children safe and happy. By gathering and reflecting upon the perspectives of Aboriginal families on their traditional child-rearing practices, a range of cultural strengths have been highlighted. Not only does this help to build understandings about Aboriginal culture and day-to-day family and community life, it also helps service providers to consider other approaches to help strengthen non-Indigenous families living in the broader Australian community.

Understanding the true nature of family functioning and child-rearing practices is important in both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous contexts. Yet caution must prevail when comparing Aboriginal knowledge to non-Indigenous understandings about raising children. For example, ideas about what constitutes adequate parental monitoring, as well as appropriate bonding and attachment, are not always compatible across these two cultures. The challenge for non-Indigenous policy-makers, researchers and service providers is to understand how knowledge can be more effectively shared as part of a collaborative approach to child safety and wellbeing.

The rich oral traditions, experiential knowledge and cross-cultural sharing of knowledge has been applied by Aboriginal people through their own science for centuries, in order to ".… share what we know about living a good life" (Estey, Smylie, & Macaulay, 2009, p. 3). Sharing knowledge through community engagement and participation are essential factors for social change, irrespective of cultural differences (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006; Estey et al., 2009; McEwan et al., 2009). Yet, recognising how cultural factors can impact on family functioning is crucial to help ensure the best outcomes for children.

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Shaun Lohoar is a Senior Research Officer, Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) information exchange at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. **Nick Butera** is Manager, Resources at the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care. **Edita Kennedy** is an intern from Swinburne University.