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Journeys of culturally connecting: Aboriginal young people's experiences of cultural connection in and beyond out-of-home care

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Abstract

With growing overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC), cultural disconnection is an omnipresent threat. Despite research and inquiries that have highlighted the risk of cultural disconnection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in OOHC, limited research has explored Indigenous children and young people's experiences of cultural connection in the Australian context. Informed by Indigenous Standpoint Theory, this Aboriginal-led qualitative study sought to understand 10 OOHC-experienced Aboriginal young people's experiences of cultural connection over time, including after exit from OOHC, through retrospective interviews that employed a phenomenological lens. It was found that Aboriginal young people experienced cultural connection as a heterogenous process involving identity formation and the practice of culture, enacted as a choice over time. The complexity of Aboriginal young people's experiences of cultural connection over time gives rise to a new understanding of cultural connection as a *journey of culturally connecting*, wherein the risk of cultural disconnection is complicated by intergenerational child removals, dominant discourse about what constitutes Aboriginal culture, and removal from an Aboriginal cultural milieu.

KEYWORDS
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, children and young people, cultural connection, culture, identity, out-of-home care

1 | INTRODUCTION

In out-of-home care (OOHC) in Australia, cultural connection refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander[1] children and young people's right to develop, and maintain, connections to their Indigenous families, communities, Countries and cultures (SNAICC, 2017). It is a fundamental right for Indigenous peoples, espoused within human rights treatises such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007). The right to cultural connection also forms part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP), which is applicable in all Australian OOHC jurisdictions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2021).

The connection element of the ATSICPP highlights the importance of culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children growing up in OOHC and includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait

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Islander children and young people's rights to the maintenance and/or (re)establishment of cultural connection in OOHC (SNAICC, 2017). However, despite the ATSICPP and other well-intentioned policies and practices (such as cultural planning), cultural disconnection remains a concern for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in OOHC. For example, in 2016, a national survey of 296 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in OOHC found that 30.7% of respondents felt 'little or no connection with culture' (McDowall, 2016). A later systemic inquiry conducted by the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) in Victoria also found that 'a significant number' of the '82 Aboriginal children and young people' spoken to for the inquiry 'felt disconnected from culture, family and community and that being in care had made this worse' (CCYP, 2019, p. 21). Issues of cultural disconnection have historical resonance with the Stolen Generations, the term used to refer to the systematic removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, communities and Countries between the 1910s and 1970s (Wilson, 1997). In the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry, survivors of the Stolen Generations spoke about multiple effects of being removed, including disruption to identity, cultural knowledge and experiences of loss that affected belonging (Wilson, 1997). In part, these experiences were connected to the disruption of the enculturation process.

1.1 | Placement in OOHC and cultural connection

Enculturation refers to how culture is learned within one's immediate environment, where 'there is an encompassing or surrounding of the individual by one's culture', socialized by, among and around members of the same cultural group (Rogoff et al., 2014, p. 547). In contemporary OOHC contexts, exposure to and immersion in one's Indigenous culture may be limited by various factors, including placement with non-Indigenous carers. This is because placement in OOHC disrupts organic processes of learning culture, such as enculturation, particularly when Indigenous children and young people are placed with carers who do not share their Indigenous culture.

Placement rates with non-Indigenous carers in OOHC have remained relatively constant over the past five years (Liddle et al., 2022). Nationally, at 30 June 2020, 57.8% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC lived with non-Indigenous family members or carers (AIHW, 2021). This suggests that for more than half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in OOHC, opportunities for immersion in their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures are likely to arise outside the day-to-day context of their immediate environments.

Placement with non-Indigenous carers can compromise an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child's ability to develop, or maintain, meaningful connections to their culture. This is because placement into a different cultural milieu disrupts enculturation, which occurs organically within familial contexts where the same culture is shared. Furthermore, given that culture is a factor in the development of identity (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011), placement in OOHC can exacerbate and further complicate issues encountered by Indigenous peoples in constructing Indigenous identity. For example, in Clark's (2000) research, Aboriginal participants who were removed from their birth families spoke about its impact on their identity journeys, where reconnection to an 'Aboriginal way of life' was viewed as pertinent to identity development. This reconnection was sought when cultural disconnection had occurred. In Moss's (2009) research with Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander children and young people, some of whom had lived in OOHC, feelings of identity confusion and cultural disconnection were related to not always knowing one's heritage, not knowing the details of one's kinship ties, and feeling estranged from parents.

It is therefore critical that in OOHC, a high level of responsibility and liability must rest with service providers to proactively prevent cultural disconnection by ensuring that there is adequate support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to develop, as well as maintain, cultural connection. As part of the connection element of the ATSICPP, these services may include cultural planning and activities, such as the development of cultural plans, the organization of 'Return to Country' trips to enable connection to Country and children's attendance at cultural camps (SNAICC, 2017; Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), 2021).

1.2 | Previous research about cultural connection in OOHC

Limited research has investigated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people's experiences of cultural connection in OOHC in Australia. For example, in Davis' (2019) systemic inquiry into child protection and OOHC services in New South Wales, case file reviews provided insights into how cultural connection efforts were supported for some Aboriginal children living in OOHC. It was found that contact with extended family and kin was concerning, with '… data highlight[ing] that many Aboriginal children were not supported to have enough, or in many cases, any, contact with their extended Aboriginal family members, kin or community' (Davis, 2019, p. 327). Despite a robust methodology incorporating desktop research, stakeholder submissions and consultations, case file reviews and administrative data analysis, the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people were not directly included. Similarly, Libesman's (2011) and Bamblett et al.'s (2012) research into cultural care, and social and emotional wellbeing, respectively, for Indigenous children in OOHC did not include the perspectives of children and young people. Instead, the perspectives of workers within non-government and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) were included and analysed.

Mendes et al. (2019) have reported on the experiences of Indigenous young people transitioning from OOHC, finding that culturally appropriate supports during the transition phase were not always available. However, Indigenous young people's experiences of cultural connection throughout their time in OOHC were not the main focus of the research, and thus, only briefly reported. Given the dearth of

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research showcasing young people's perspectives and experiences of cultural connection in OOHC, there is a need to better understand how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experience cultural connection in OOHC and what meaning they ascribe to cultural connection.

1.3 | Rationale for this research

The high rates of OOHC placement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the longer length of placement in OOHC compared to non-Indigenous children and the high rates of OOHC placement with non-Indigenous carers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (AIHW, 2022, 2021) necessitate a focus on cultural connection in OOHC. Although some research and inquiries have highlighted the issue of cultural disconnection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in OOHC, limited research has examined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's experiences of cultural connection over time, both during and after OOHC. Hence, the aim of this study was to explore how cultural connection is understood and experienced over time by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people with a lived experience of OOHC in Victoria, from an Aboriginal perspective as an Aboriginal-led project undertaken by a Mineng Noongar woman and social work researcher.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

Ten interview participants were recruited for this study, which formed part of a larger Aboriginal-led mixed methods doctoral project wherein data were collected in 2018. These 10 participants comprised the entire interview sample for the project which was underpinned by Indigenous Standpoint Theory. The analytical framework for the project – Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2007), as described later in this section – provides scope to focus on individual variability (as opposed to generalisability), and the "push-pull tensions" encountered by Indigenous people as they navigate the Cultural Interface between the Indigenous and the Western, inclusive of cultures, systems and knowledges. Given the approach taken to this project (Indigenous Standpoint Theory), the richness of the data (i.e. the complexity of responses where meanings ascribed to cultural connection included tensions around one's Aboriginality being derived from parental lineage while Aboriginal parental relationships were strained), the 'information power'[2] held by young people (Malterud et al., 2016) and the focus on understanding individual experiences and meanings ascribed to cultural connection by Aboriginal young people, 10 interviews were sufficient to enable insight into the phenomenon of interest.

Participants were Aboriginal young people living in Victoria, between the ages of 15 to 25, who had previously lived in OOHC. For all young people, exit from OOHC occurred either via reunification (with parents) or via permanent care. Three young people were subject to a Permanent Care Order at the time of interview. Four siblings (two groups of two) were also interviewed separately. Young people were recruited via surveys (undertaken in Phase 1 of the broader doctoral project) and via an ACCO in Victoria.

2.2 | Research design

Underpinned by Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2007) and led by an Aboriginal researcher, this research applied a phenomenological lens to retrospective, semi-structured interviews with Aboriginal young people. The research design was informed by the AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies[3] (AIATSIS, 2012) and the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines concerning Ethical Conduct in Research With Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018). A phenomenological lens to qualitative interviews was employed to privilege the perspectives of Aboriginal young people who have lived experiences of OOHC in an area dominated by adult-centric decision-making (Connolly, 2017). Given the importance of oral storytelling in Indigenous cultures, applying a phenomenological lens to qualitative interviews was also considered culturally appropriate.

The research questions, design and associated interview guides were developed by an Aboriginal researcher through an iterative process with an Aboriginal Advisory Group. Consisting of interchanging members, this Aboriginal Advisory Group was formed to enable cultural support, and accountability, for the researcher throughout the research, and to increase the involvement of Aboriginal peoples in this research. Members of the Aboriginal Advisory Group included Aboriginal Elders (including one Elder with lived experience of the Stolen Generations), Aboriginal OOHC professionals, Aboriginal researchers and Aboriginal social workers.

Interviews were designed to understand how cultural connection was understood and experienced, both within and outside of OOHC, by Aboriginal young people with lived experience of OOHC. The use of an interview guide with open questions ensured that interviews provided space for Aboriginal young people to describe their stories and experiences of cultural connection, and learning culture, over time (within and outside of OOHC), and to reflect on their experiences retrospectively.

Interview guides were developed following a review of the extant literature, administration and analysis of a survey in phase one of the research (not reported in this paper) which identified knowledges, mechanisms, actions and feelings that are important to cultural connection for Aboriginal children and young people, as well as discussion with the Aboriginal Advisory Group. The Aboriginal Advisory Group met three times throughout the course of the research, supporting issue identification, providing advice and feedback on the research tools (including the interview guide) and meaning making in the interpretation of data. Individual discussions with Aboriginal Advisory Group members also supplemented group meetings to ensure robust feedback and input into the research design.

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2.3 | Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained through The University of Melbourne Behavioural and Social Sciences Human Ethics Sub-committee and The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics identification number 1750324.1). Engagement with young people occurred prior to interviews taking place, while written consent was obtained by all young people prior to interview commencement. For young people aged under 18, written consent was also obtained from their legal guardian.

Young people completed one semi-structured interview in-person with the researcher at a location of their choice, such as a local café or at their home. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90-minute duration and were audio-recorded (with consent) for transcription purposes. Interview themes related to young people's feelings about their culture and their cultural connection, what cultural connection means to them, their understanding of cultural connection, and their experiences of culture and cultural connection over time, including their memories of living in OOHC. For example, interview questions included 'Tell me about your culture', 'What does cultural connection mean to you?', 'How did you learn about your culture while living in OOHC?', 'Did you feel connected to culture while living in OOHC?' and 'Tell me about your experiences of cultural connection'. Young people were remunerated for their time with a $50 gift card of their choice to enable a form of reciprocity.

Interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic technique used to undertake an analysis of texts and narratives. Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) framework specifies six key phases to reflexive thematic analysis ('*Familiarising yourself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and, producing the report*'). Data were analysed by initially transcribing the interviews, checking the transcripts for accuracy and reading them in full. An inductive approach was used to organize initial codes, and subsequently, themes were searched for on an interview-by-interview basis, with initial themes reviewed and refined. Critical reflection and reflexivity were engaged in at all stages, enabling an interpretation of data that centred the impact of race, colonization and OOHC placement on young people's stories. In addition to undertaking regular bracketing exercises throughout data collection and analysis phases, preliminary findings were also discussed with members of the Aboriginal Advisory Group to enable further reflexivity in the analytic process. NVivo software was used to store, organize and analyse data.

2.4 | Analytical framework

Interview data were interpreted using Indigenous Standpoint Theory, specifically Martin Nakata's (2007) notion of the Cultural Interface, to make sense of young people's stories. The Cultural Interface was used to illuminate the diversity of experiences held by young people in negotiating cultural connection, identity and culture, where contradictions, ambiguity and confusion may be present or difficult to articulate, at different points in time for the same young person. The Cultural Interface helps to make sense of the 'messiness', push-pull tensions and diversity present in young people's stories where simplicity and binary (either/or) negotiations of culture and identity are not possible. It enables insight into the limits, and possibilities, of navigating Aboriginality in a settler-colonial environment where negative racial stereotypes and dominant discourse about what 'counts' as Aboriginal culture or what it means to be Aboriginal may be internalized. Further, the Cultural Interface enables an explicit positioning of how experiences of cultural connection are influenced by subjectivity, inclusive of Aboriginal young people's family history, knowledge of Aboriginality, mob-specific[4] history and individual understandings of cultural connection.

3 | FINDINGS

Three major themes were found from the interviews with Aboriginal young people who had lived in OOHC: (1) Cultural connection as a process of navigating Aboriginal identity, (2) cultural connection as the practice of culture and (3) cultural connection as a choice over time. Each theme consisted of sub-themes, with a total of eight sub-themes found. Not all sub-themes applied to all young people. Rather, sub-themes reflect both commonalities and differences in Aboriginal young people's experiences of cultural connection over time. All young people are referred to using a pseudonym in this section to protect their confidentiality.

3.1 | Theme 1: Cultural connection as a process of navigating Aboriginal identity

Young people encountered cultural connection as a process of negotiating Aboriginal identity, illuminated through their experiences of identity formation over time both within and outside of OOHC. Their experiences were influenced by (1) varying levels of knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage and mob and (2) experiences of identity confusion.

3.1.1 | Sub-theme: Varying levels of knowledge of Aboriginal heritage and mob

Young people had varying levels of knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage and mob groups, which contributed to diverse experiences with identity formation. These varied from: one young person not knowing about their Aboriginal heritage until after exit from OOHC ('*Well I didn't know anything until I was 15. We didn't even know we were Indigenous. Coz I'm pretty fair-skinned, I didn't have a clue*', Dalton [24]); three young people always knowing about their Aboriginal identity and/or mob groups; three young people always knowing about their Aboriginal heritage but not knowing about their Aboriginal mob group/s while living in OOHC; to three young people always knowing about their Aboriginal heritage but not knowing about their mob group at

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the time of interview (*'All I know is I'm a Koorie. That's about it. I don't know much about my culture'*, Cecilia [16]). Most young people ($n = 6$) – Sabrina, Jace, Caitlyn, Lamar, Aaliyah and Cade – spoke about their parent's experiences of removal from their families by child protection, and in some cases, their grandparents and great-grandparents' experiences of removal by child protection as part of the Stolen Generations. For some young people – such as Dalton and Faith – these intergenerational child removals and associated trauma prevented their Aboriginal parents from telling them more about their Aboriginality before they entered OOHC:

> Mum's pretty dark. I just thought she was tanned. … she had pretty big drinking issues, because Mum was in the Stolen Gens. So she was, still is … they just grew up a bit broken because all her brothers and sisters went through foster care. (Dalton, 24)

Issues relating to OOHC placement – such as carer willingness to share information – prevented four young people from knowing more about their Aboriginal mob groups while living in OOHC (*'I think someone from [OOHC organisation] drew my [non-Indigenous] nan [my kinship carer] a family tree years and years ago and I only saw that last year just because, I don't know why'*, Sabrina [18]). At the time of interview, siblings Cade and Aaliyah spoke about receiving a family tree from their permanent care worker 2 weeks earlier, more than 10 years after their exit from OOHC, with information about their mob group contained therein resulting in surprise (*'I thought we would be in [local mob group] … I didn't realise that we were in [another mob group]'*, Cade [18]).

Three young people – Caitlyn, Tabitha and Lamar – spoke about always knowing that they were Aboriginal and possessing more knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage and/or mob groups. Growing up with their Aboriginal families prior to entry into OOHC was a shared experience for Caitlyn, Tabitha and Lamar. They also shared experiences with placements that enabled regular contact with either Aboriginal people or their Aboriginal family (i.e. placement with an Aboriginal carer, placement with their Aboriginal side of the family and regular contact with Aboriginal family members).

3.1.2 | Sub-theme: Experiences of identity confusion

Several young people ($n = 5$) spoke about grappling with identity issues between the ages of 15–17 after exit from OOHC. This was the case for Faith, Lamar, Sabrina, Caitlyn and Tabitha. For example, Tabitha (21) spoke about questioning her Aboriginal identity when living off-Country with her non-Indigenous dad after exit from OOHC:

> I don't know, because since I lived with my Dad, and he's non-Indigenous, I was kind of like … I remember growing up in high school, not knowing whether to tick that box in school, if I'm Aboriginal or not. I wasn't sure what it meant.

Possessing knowledge of mob, kinship lines and ancestry was not enough to contribute to a strong sense of connection for all young people. For example, Lamar (16) spoke about feeling 'out of place' around other Aboriginal people (*'I feel a bit out of place with events and stuff. … I'm obviously fair-skinned and you can't really tell that I'm Indigenous, but it's also because a lot of it I just haven't experienced before'*). Similarly, Tabitha (21) spoke about oscillating between feeling connected to her culture and feeling disconnected from her culture (*'I'd go through phases of feeling connected and context dependent where I was'*).

Other young people, such as Faith (21), spoke about how cultural disconnection, and a lack of knowledge of culture, mob and Aboriginality, resulted in identity confusion:

> It [disconnection] actually made me, not depressed to a point of, it's probably still a kind of depressed, like not belonging. Like who am I kind of thing. Who am I? … I'm lost. … You feel like you're drowning.

Most young people ($n = 7$) were rarely around Aboriginal people on a regular basis (except for Aboriginal siblings that they lived with, in and outside of, OOHC), which also contributed to difficulties navigating Aboriginal identity. All young people who had irregular and infrequent contact with Aboriginal people were placed with non-Indigenous carers while living in OOHC.

3.2 | Theme 2: Cultural connection as the practice of culture

Young people's stories also illuminated how cultural connection entailed the practice of culture over time. Definitions and understandings of culture were not imposed on young people, instead giving space for young people to voice what culture and cultural connection meant to them. Consequently, interviews evidenced diverse understandings of Aboriginal culture. For young people, what was understood and constituted as the practice of culture varied from (1) immersion in culture (inclusive of familiarity with cultural values, attitudes and nuances in aspects of culture, such as humour); (2) experiences with Aboriginal people; to (3) intermittent exposure to cultural practices, such as dance and art, that were – at times – detached from deeper cultural teachings, such as knowledge and values.

3.2.1 | Sub-theme: Experiences of immersion in culture

Prior to entering OOHC, two young people, Lamar and Tabitha, spoke about growing up with Aboriginal families and being immersed in culture:

> We were kind of immersed in that community because I was just with my [Aboriginal] grandma. She was

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> working so I was around Indigenous people the whole time and it was really good and I learnt a lot about culture then. (Lamar, 16)

This immersion enabled culture to be learned (*'… just being with Aboriginal family, I guess, probably made the culture more prominent'*, Tabitha [21]) while also enabling feelings of belonging that were pertinent to cultural connection. For example, when asked what is needed to be connected to culture, Lamar (16) said:

> I think you firstly need to be around your people [Aboriginal people]. That's the thing with not being … belonging… Even the humour. I like to laugh a lot and having a similar humour, that's a big thing … Here [with my non-Indigenous family], some of the jokes they say … I can't laugh at that. There's some funny ones, don't get me wrong. But, it's different the way … not only language and stuff, but the people around you affect you quite a lot.

3.2.2 | Sub-theme: Experiences with Aboriginal people and culture

For most young people ($n = 8$), their experiences with Aboriginal people and culture did not occur organically as they would if raised in an Aboriginal home environment and enculturated into their Aboriginal culture. These inorganic experiences with Aboriginal culture were exemplified by intermittent contact with Aboriginal family and people. For example, when asked the question 'How much have you had to do with Aboriginal people growing up?', Cecilia (16) responded with:

> When I go down to [area that family lives in] and I see my [non-Indigenous] grandma, sometimes I go down there for NAIDOC [National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee] week or something. And I go to that and my cousin is also an Aboriginal.

The lack of exposure to organic experiences with Aboriginal family, and Aboriginal people more broadly, resulted in some young people experiencing culture as an intermittent practice, rather than as an immersive experience. This was contrary to some young people highlighting the importance of connection with Aboriginal people (*'I think you need to have a connection to a community… I think Aboriginal identity comes from that. The fundamental thing is having a connection with other people'*, Sabrina [18]).

3.2.3 | Sub-theme: Culture as involvement in cultural activities and events

Young people's stories of cultural connection, as mentioned by six young people, often highlighted times in their lives when they had experienced a certain cultural event or activity, such as school excursions at significant Aboriginal cultural sites or time-limited immersion experiences in remote Aboriginal communities. For example, Faith (21) spoke about attending a cultural camp that made her feel 'connected', like she 'belonged' (*'I didn't feel connected before, but after being with these guys [Aboriginal people at a cultural camp] I was like "I am a person and I do belong"'*). Jace and Sabrina also spoke about the importance of attending cultural camps, with Sabrina (18) stating:

> I reckon if we had been placed with anyone else, we would be completely disconnected. It's pretty much all been nan and granddad. They sent us to the camps and the program [name]… I went on that when I was in Year 9 I think.

For most young people ($n = 7$), Aboriginal culture was practiced through engagement in certain activities – such as art – that were understood to be representative of Aboriginal culture (however, one young person practiced art with the knowledge and teachings from their family Elders). For example, young people spoke about possessing, or engaging with, well-known signifiers of Aboriginal culture, such as dot paintings, that are often associated with 'traditional' forms of Aboriginal culture. This is evident in some young people's responses about feeling connection to, or disconnection from, culture. When young people were asked if they felt connected to their Aboriginal culture, responses included *'Yeah. I have paintings and stuff in my room'* (Jace, 15) and *'I believe I'm still connected to the culture, even though I haven't been in a cultural activity for a while'* (Cade, 18).

Sometimes, feelings of cultural connection were influenced by engagement in aspects of culture, such as art making, as highlighted by Cecilia (16):

> I recently did an Aboriginal painting, a dot painting. That was a thing for me to feel more connected to my culture. … it made me feel more Aboriginal than I am, I guess [than] I feel.

Engagement in art helped some young people, such as Caitlyn (25), to feel secure in their identity:

> Growing up I always felt like something was missing. Like I just didn't belong, even among other Indigenous kids … when I started learning about my culture and doing my arts … It felt like something kind of filled up and I knew who I was and where I was from.

However, although cultural activities, such as art making, can impart important cultural knowledges, some young people engaged in these practices without an Aboriginal person from their kinship group to oversee the practice, and in some cases, without another Aboriginal person present. This form of cultural exposure relates to engagement with accessible aspects of culture, such as awareness of history,

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holidays, foods, art or Dreamtime stories, particularly when they are detached from mob-specific teachings.

3.2.4 | Sub-theme: Pan-Aboriginality

Several young people ($n = 6$) did not experience cultural connection in ways that were specific to their own mob and family history. Instead, aspects of pan-Aboriginality were experienced, where exposure to Aboriginal culture does not relate to a culturally distinct mob group, but to a homogeneous, collective Aboriginal culture. This is contrary to, for example, learning a mob-specific language.

Pan-Aboriginality arose as a form of political resistance to oppression, where Aboriginal people from diverse mobs bandied together against their shared oppressor (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016). For young people in this research, pan-Aboriginality was spoken about in terms of Aboriginal people they connect with being 'family' or not knowing their mob group but connecting with a broader geographical identity, such as 'Koori' or 'Murri'. For example, Sabrina spoke about how Aboriginal people can create their own non-blood-related family:

> We can have people who are not related to us who are like your family. We don't need to be blood-related to be related. You can make your own family, as long as [you are] accepted. (Sabrina, 18)

3.3 | Theme three: Cultural connection as a choice over time

Cultural connection was a choice made by young people, not necessarily explicitly, in which ambivalence, competing tensions and shifting feelings towards culture were apparent. Young people highlighted that cultural connection can mean different things to different people (*''It's lots of things, it can be anything. It's not just one thing … It's lots of different things and it's never the same thing for one person''*, Caitlyn [25]), and how understandings of cultural connection change over time:

> There's just more to it [cultural connection] that people don't really understand. And, as you're young, we don't really understand it either though. When you're older you understand more of the stories… what they actually mean to you as a person and what they mean to our culture. (Jace, 15)

Young people's stories also highlighted how cultural connection was developed over time, from childhood, adolescence to early adulthood (*'Now, yes [I feel strong in my identity as Aboriginal]. Definitely not five years ago. But, now, yeah'*, Faith [21]). For all young people, knowledge of culture – and by extension, culture itself – was learned over time (*'Just learned it [culture] growing up, I've learned more and more'*, Aaliyah [15]).

3.3.1 | Sub-theme: Yearning for culture

Some young people described yearning to learn more about their culture while growing up in OOHC, and beyond OOHC (*'It was like a necessary thing to find out all that kind of stuff [about my culture]. I had to know to cement my own identity'*, Sabrina [18]; *'I grew up not knowing anything. Everyone just pushed away, nobody wanted to talk about it no matter how much I asked. It wasn't just my mum. It was the workers, it was everyone'*, Faith [21]).

This desire to learn more about culture was accompanied by the need to learn in comfortable ways for some young people, such as Dalton (24) (*'Because I didn't grow up with it, you want to know more about it, but you want to learn more about it in a comfortable way where it's not forced into you'*). Sometimes, learning about culture had to occur in accessible ways (*'So if you're not with where you come from, you don't know your own story or your ancestor's story, but the internet helps a lot'*, Sabrina [18]).

3.3.2 | Sub-theme: Uncertainty and ambivalence concerning culture

Other young people ($n = 2$), such as Jace and Cecilia, described uncertainty in engaging in culture (*'Like I would want to learn about my culture, but I just feel like … I'm kind of distant, but I don't want to know kind of thing'*, Cecilia [16]) or ambivalence in learning aspects of culture (*'[My sister] would know more than I do. She's looked more into it. I don't know why – I just haven't really gotten into it yet'*, Jace [15]). Sometimes, this uncertainty was influenced by fear or shame to engage with culture, with two young people describing this in relation to people they know who grew up, or currently live, in OOHC. For example, Caitlyn (25) described this in relation to her siblings for whom she was a kinship carer (*'For them [my siblings], when it comes to culture, they're disconnected … They're scared to connect'*), while Sabrina (18) stated:

> I have friends who were placed with people who had no idea about Indigenous culture and they grew up very disconnected. Now, when they're my age, they find it very hard to be around other Indigenous people because they have so much shame.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study intended to understand how cultural connection was understood and experienced by OOHC-experienced Aboriginal young people in Victoria. The findings highlight the diversity of young people's individual experiences of cultural connection, where negotiating the complexity of identity and culture over time, both within and outside of OOHC, was apparent. This has resonance with Moss's (2012) research where culture was found to be 'indelibly linked' to identity for some Indigenous young people not living

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in OOHC, whereas other Indigenous young people living in OOHC did not consider culture to be part of their identity (p. 134). In this research, young people's stories lend themselves to a reconfiguration of cultural connection as a process of culturally connecting that takes place over time. This understanding of culturally connecting as a dynamic process is supported by previous research across numerous disciplines – including sociology, psychology and anthropology – wherein identity is understood to be developed over time (Carlson, 2016; Kroger, 2006; McAdams, 1988, 2001), and culture is understood to be learned, practised and experienced over time (Hall, 1976; Kruger & Tomasello, 1996; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021; Pitman et al., 1989).

Varying levels of knowledge of Aboriginal ancestry and mob, exposure and immersion with Aboriginal family (and Aboriginal people more broadly), and immersion and exposure to Aboriginal 'culture' shaped young people's journeys of culturally connecting in this research. This finding is supported by Carlson's (2016) research, which used Nakata's (2007) notion of the Cultural Interface to highlight how individual subjectivities add to the complexity of grappling with Indigenous identity. The Cultural Interface is 'the intersection of the Western and Indigenous domain … the place where we live and learn … that requires constant negotiation' (Nakata, 2002, p. 285). The diversity of young people's experiences of culturally connecting can be explained using the Cultural Interface, where Indigenous culture and identity are subject to ongoing negotiation within the broader context of settler-colonial society.

4.1 | The impact of intergenerational removals

Several young people were impacted by a family legacy of disconnection – and removal from – their Countries of origin, their mobs and communities, and for some, Indigenous society more broadly. This disconnection and removal – at the hands of the State – highlights that although Aboriginal identity was always known for most Aboriginal young people in this research, their cultures and family knowledges had been significantly disrupted by intergenerational child removals. For example, despite living with their Aboriginal parents prior to entering OOHC, Dalton, Faith and Cecilia had limited information about their Aboriginality due to parental trauma and cultural disconnection. This required time for young people in this research to develop their identity as Aboriginal and learn their cultures, due to cultural disconnection where journeys of culturally connecting commenced without knowledge of mob, ancestry and Country. This process was not easy: Some young people, at the time of interview, were still grappling with what it meant to be Aboriginal, thus experiencing identity conflict over time. This has resonance with Moss's (2009) research where 35% of young people – most of whom were Indigenous (80%) and/or currently living in OOHC (65%) – experienced some form of identity confusion; the stories of survivors of the Stolen Generations who spoke about disruption to identity as a result of forced removal (Wilson, 1997); Clark's (2000) research, where it was found that removal from family impacted Aboriginal people's identity journeys; and Carlson's (2016) research, where Aboriginal adults who had newly discovered their Aboriginal identity were negotiating what this newfound identity meant to them. This has relevance for contemporary OOHC contexts, where the rate of placement with non-Indigenous carers is high (AIHW, 2021).

4.2 | Grappling with dominant discourse about 'Aboriginal culture'

Western knowledge and discourse about Indigenous cultures have shaped how Indigenous cultures are understood (Nakata, 2007). Early scholarly endeavours about Indigenous peoples and cultures, particularly in the field of anthropology, centred problematic constructions of Indigenous peoples and cultures, namely through three prominent discourses of racism, inferiority and primitiveness, or romanticized notions of the 'Other' (i.e. the 'noble savage') (Bolt, 2010). These discourses have given rise to understandings of Indigenous peoples and cultures in particular ways, mostly through anthropological cataloguing of visible aspects of Indigenous cultures that differed markedly from non-Indigenous cultures (such as art [i.e. dot paintings], music [i.e. didgeridoos] and dance [i.e. corrobborees]). It is these visible aspects of Indigenous cultures that several young people in this research engaged with as cultural practice.

At the Cultural Interface, young people's journeys of culturally connecting encompassed grappling with dominant discourse and romanticized notions of what constitutes Aboriginality and what does not. Young people's agency in negotiating – and choosing – to engage in different forms of cultural practice over others, such as art over spending time with Indigenous family, was particularly apparent. This reflects Davis' (2019) findings whereby insufficient support was available to Aboriginal children who lived in OOHC (and were part of the *Family is Culture* review) to have contact with their Aboriginal extended families and kin. In lieu of regular contact with Aboriginal family, young people in this research, who were predominantly raised in non-Indigenous environments, did not always seek to learn culture through connection to Aboriginal people. For example, some young people spoke about engaging with aspects of Aboriginal culture that felt comfortable. This suggests that journeys of culturally connecting need to afford Aboriginal children space and time to continue to learn and be immersed in, their culture throughout OOHC and beyond.

4.3 | Engagement with surface culture

The findings highlighted how culturally connecting entailed young people's journeys to find culture, belonging and identity, as a process that occurs over the life course. This process of connecting has resonance with Clark's (2000) research whereby journeys of reconnection to an 'Aboriginal way of life' were pertinent for Aboriginal people forcibly removed from their families. For most young people in this research, journeys of connecting included engagement with 'surface

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culture' (Hall, 1976; Hammond, 2014), which includes artefacts, traditions or aspects of culture that are visible to outsiders of the culture – such as holidays, music, art and celebrations.

Academic literature from several disciplines – including anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, psychology and education – highlight that culture is multifaceted (Bhabha, 2012; Eriksen, 2004; Hall, 2016; Hall et al., 2003; Matsumoto & Juang, 2016) and entails more than 'surface culture' (Hall, 1976; Hammond, 2014). For example, anthropologist Hall (1976) discusses the notion of the 'cultural unconscious', where 'the most important paradigms or rules governing behaviour … function below the level of conscious awareness' (p. 43). The 'cultural unconscious' (or 'deep culture') is constituted by values, norms, beliefs and attitudes – shared among members of a cultural group – that are learned through enculturation with people of that culture (Hall, 1976).

'Deep culture' is learned via immersion in a particular cultural milieu, where children learn complex aspects of culture, such as Aboriginal relationality (see Graham, 2014), via repeated exposure over time. 'Deep culture' enables access to mob-specific culture, where knowledge of – and organic contact with – family, kinship, mob and Country provide opportunities to develop cultural connection over time. A simplified understanding of Indigenous cultures from a Western standpoint – that seeks to illuminate 'exotic' difference – ignores the human elements of culture that are embedded in Aboriginal relationality. These human elements of culture – where organic access to Aboriginal people and immersion in culture are central – were disrupted by placement in OOHC with non-Indigenous kin or foster carers for young people in this research.

The increasing overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC, where placement may be away from their Indigenous families (AIHW, 2022; Liddle et al., 2022), poses a threat to cultural connection. Although kinship care is the most common form of OOHC placement, kinship care includes placement with non-Indigenous family members (AIHW, 2021; Beaufils, 2022). In this research, all young people interviewed who lived in kinship care were placed with non-Indigenous kinship carers. Non-Indigenous people may not be able to create culturally immersive environments for Indigenous children, unless they too are immersed within an Indigenous cultural milieu.

4.4 | Practice recommendations and implications

From a practice perspective, it is imperative that professionals and carers within OOHC ensure that Indigenous children are supported to be immersed in their cultures and to develop meaningful relationships with their Indigenous families, mobs, communities and peoples to enable relational cultural knowledges, belonging and identity. However, this is not easily manufactured in OOHC where Indigenous children and young people may be predominantly exposed to, and raised within, non-Indigenous cultures.

The overarching intent of the connection element of the ATSICPP is to prevent cultural loss and assimilation and to enable survival through the transmission of culture in OOHC (Krakouer et al., 2018, 2022). This intent is played out in an OOHC environment where the risk of cultural loss and assimilation is heightened (Krakouer, 2022; Krakouer et al., 2022), as evidenced in the findings whereby young people were not immersed in their Aboriginal cultures while living in OOHC and after exit from OOHC. In this environment, journeys of culturally connecting become fraught and messy. Further, a form of group harm – the heightened risk of assimilation – is enacted against Indigenous peoples by the State. An awareness of the limitations of OOHC systems in enabling cultural connection is necessary. OOHC itself can be experienced as a barrier to cultural connection, evidenced through the intergenerational removals that transformed the start of young people's journeys of culturally connecting. Arguably, the need for cultural connection has been produced in response to the cultural disconnection created by child protection and OOHC systems themselves (Krakouer et al., 2022).

4.5 | Strengths and limitations of this research

To the author's knowledge, this is the first Australian study to document OOHC-experienced Aboriginal young people's experiences of cultural connection retrospectively after exit from OOHC. Despite the exclusion of young people currently living in OOHC, this research enabled rich, retrospective wisdom – including hindsight and reflection – to be articulated by Aboriginal young people who have, nevertheless, experienced living in OOHC. This also enabled an understanding of how journeys of culturally connecting are experienced over time, from childhood, adolescence to young adulthood.

Nonetheless, the research may have been strengthened by the inclusion of interview participants currently living in OOHC. Furthermore, the applicability of the findings to the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander OOHC population in Australia is limited by the research design (qualitative, cross-sectional design without follow-up), the small number of young people interviewed, all who identified as Aboriginal, as well as the fact that the sample was drawn from one Australian state. No Torres Strait Islander young people were interviewed, meaning that findings cannot be extended to Torres Strait Islander populations who have their own unique cultures as sometimes distinct from Aboriginal people. Furthermore, as the sample was drawn from Victoria, there will be variations in legislation and practice in other Australian states and territories, thus limiting this study's applicability to other Australian jurisdictions.

4.6 | Suggestions for future research

Future research relating to cultural connection in OOHC will benefit by investigating the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people currently living in OOHC, including in diverse Australian jurisdictions. There is a dearth of research in Australia that illuminates children and young people's realities in OOHC, particularly in relation to cultural connection. This research is

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needed throughout Australian OOHC jurisdictions, but it should be Indigenous-led. A better understanding of how OOHC systems enable – or fail – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people regarding cultural connection while living in OOHC is critical to improved policy responses.

5 | CONCLUSION

Cultural connection is a complex process involving identity and culture. While OOHC policy highlights the importance of cultural connection to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in OOHC, social work practice needs to respond to the complexity evident in Aboriginal young people's journeys of culturally connecting highlighted in this research. Immersion in an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultural milieu – surrounded by people from the child's own family and mob – may enable children to learn 'deep' aspects of culture, such as Aboriginal relationality. However, this may be difficult to enable in OOHC, particularly in non-Indigenous placements, when removal from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander family occurs. OOHC thus presents a risk of cultural disconnection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, where the beginning of journeys of culturally connecting may be transformed by child removal.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data from this research are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality, in line with the ethics approval obtained.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The terms 'Aboriginal', 'Torres Strait Islander', 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander' and 'Indigenous' are all used in this paper to refer to First Nations Peoples from the continent now known as Australia.

[2] 'Information power' is a concept used by Malterud et al. (2016) to guide sample size decisions in qualitative studies. It refers to the notion that the more relevant information held by participants, the lower the sample size need be in qualitative research.

[3] This guideline was applicable in 2018 when the data were collected. It has now been superseded by the 2020 *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*. See https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-10/aiatsis-code-ethics.pdf

[4] In the Australian context, the word 'mob' is used to refer to one's Indigenous tribe and/or Nation group.

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