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Culture, Connection and Care: The Role of Institutional Justice Capital for Enhancing the Wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Out-Of-Home Care

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ABSTRACT

Ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from their families by child protection services remain connected to their kin, Country and culture is a priority to begin to redress the intergenerational trauma and harm caused by colonisation. This article describes the views of staff working in three mainstream out-of-home care organisations, where children are cared for by non-Indigenous foster carers. Through the lenses of recovery and justice capital, we explore the cultural assets and resources that are made available to non-Indigenous foster carers providing care for children, as well as the institutional elements that either inhibit or facilitate cultural connection and activities. We argue that the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices when ascertaining information about children's culture and connection is critical to ensuring best cultural practice. Forums that support relationships are largely absent, and we identify important elements of institutional justice capital that could ensure children are connected and prevent further harm and trauma.

1 | Introduction

There is global scholarship that details the impact of colonisation on Indigenous peoples and communities, including dispossession from lands, culture, language, family and communities, and many authors have called for harm reparation (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1997; Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2004; Australian Government 2017; Tsosie 2023; Ma et al. 2019). Colonisation has and continues to cause significant harm to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter, respectfully referred to as Aboriginal) peoples, families and communities. The Bringing Them Home Report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1997) was the first systematic, large-scale documentation of the impacts of forcible removal in Australia, which provided a more society-wide understanding of Australia's Stolen Generations. The transfer of intergenerational trauma and removal from family and community continues unabated, despite a raft of systems and policy changes (Lima 2018; O'Donnell et al. 2019; Davis 2019). One of the leading causes of Aboriginal child removal today is maternal mental health problems linked to unmitigated trauma associated with child removal across generations (Blignault and Williams 2017). Aboriginal children are admitted to out-of-home care (OOHC) at over 10 times the rate of their non-Indigenous peers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2022), and they are twice as likely to experience poor long-term health and wellbeing outcomes than their

non-Indigenous peers with OOHC experiences (Lima 2018; Australian Government 2017; Darwin et al. 2023; Bailey and Clark 2024).

There is a growing body of literature that describes the experiences of Aboriginal parents and kin that draws parallels with these arguments (Harris and Gosnell 2012; Hinton 2018; Ivec et al. 2012; Davis 2019). Repeatedly, it has been demonstrated that parents are disempowered, and their needs are either ignored or poorly accommodated. Concomitantly, there have been increasing calls for the adoption of more supportive approaches to parents, including increased consideration of their right to be involved when decisions are being made about their children (Ivec et al. 2012; Hamilton, Cleland, et al. 2020; Maslen and Hamilton 2020). These approaches need to be appropriately funded, with annual Family Matters reports (Hunter et al. 2020; Liddle et al. 2022) consistently calling for a substantial redistribution of resources from the statutory end of child protection expenditure to early intervention and family support. Similarly, North American scholars have argued that poverty is often misconceived as neglect, and that child abuse and assignation of poor attachment are often misdiagnosed among families, particularly where forced separation of children from families has occurred (Spinak and Polikoff 2021; Wright et al. 2024). Furthermore, there is a failure to address the issues for children who have experienced serious cases of abuse, from the much higher numbers of children whose families live in poverty and experience social inequity. Globally, Indigenous communities are calling for greater autonomy over their own affairs and decision-making about issues that affect their peoples (Smith 2021; Tauri 2018; Blagg 2016), including the prevention of epistemic violence (Wright et al. 2024; Hamilton and Maslen 2022). Work is being undertaken in Australia by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations that is designed to enable greater focus on historical and systemic issues that hinder changes to the child protection system, and aimed at securing an increased role in decision-making for Aboriginal families, communities and organisations (Liddle et al. 2022).

In Australia, despite the very high proportion of Aboriginal peoples involved with the child protection system, commitment to building the capacity for leadership, staffing and programme, and policy development is still a challenge, and there is a need for stronger commitment to, and demonstration of, reforming issues of systemic and institutional racism and epistemic violence (Liddle et al. 2022; Davis 2019; Wright et al. 2024). More than 10 years ago, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) (SNAICC 2017) was developed to provide structured guidance for the placement of Aboriginal children removed from their families. The aim of the ATSICPP is to ensure, wherever possible, that children are placed with immediate or extended kin, or with an Aboriginal carer to assist in maintaining connections to their kin and cultural knowledge, as well as language and cultural activity. Where possible, siblings should be placed together, and reunification with family should be prioritised in a culturally secure way (SNAICC 2017; Mendes et al. 2016). Unfortunately, the ATSICPP has not been successfully implemented. Siblings who are placed together report more positive connections to caregivers (Hegar and Rosenthal 2011), better mental health (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005), placement stability (Waid et al. 2016) and the promotion of identity, belonging and wellbeing (Asif et al. 2024). Despite this, the separation of siblings in OOHC has been identified as an issue (McFarlane 2018), and Elders and senior community leaders have consistently voiced their concern about the dispersion of families and the continuing erosion of children's knowledge of their connections, language, their culture and cultural practices (Liddle et al. 2022; Krakouer et al. 2023; Hamilton et al. 2022). The latest national figures show that in 2020, 57.8% of Aboriginal children were placed in non-Indigenous carer arrangements (Lima 2018) with little tangible change to these statistics over the last 5 years (O'Donnell et al. 2019). It is likely, therefore, to be some time before a reduction in the numbers of Aboriginal children living in the care of non-Indigenous OOHC agencies is realised, and, as such, it is critical that mainstream OOHC agencies have access to reliable and relevant cultural information for children and families (Davis 2019; Liddle et al. 2022).

1.1 | Recovery, Justice Capital and the Role of Institutions

A complete appreciation of the challenges and support needs of Aboriginal children in OOHC requires the consideration of recovery from the trauma of colonisation and the policies that have caused harm, alongside the cultural assets that promote the social and cultural determinants of health and wellbeing (Commonwealth of Australia Department of Health 2017). Equitable access to resources and systems is critical for both individual growth and development and for building healthy families and communities. Developed within theories of recovery capital (Cloud and Granfield 2008), justice capital provides a measure of the resources and assets that individuals, families and communities have that allow for understanding, navigating, communicating, and engaging fairly and equitably with systems of care (Hamilton, Maslen, et al. 2020). For Aboriginal children in care with non-Indigenous OOHC agencies, salient resources that represent positive justice capital include having connections and contact with Elders, parents, family and kin and community members. Further, opportunities to engage with cultural peers and role models, access to cultural activities and to cultural knowledge, and access to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and advocates are consistent with the formation of justice capital.

Realising the benefits of justice capital assets for individuals is significantly influenced by the resources and willingness of institutions and organisations with which individuals interact (Best et al. 2021; Hamilton and Maslen 2022). Families involved with child protection systems often live in complex circumstances, which can involve navigating multiple systems of care and support, with structural and internal factors affecting access to a range of capital assets (Hamilton and Maslen 2022). As such, it is at the level of government and non-government institutions that utilising personal justice capital assets can either be obstructed or come to fruition. When not considered, there is a risk of further harm to individuals and families that can serve to compound disadvantage and injustice (Hamilton and Maslen 2022). Institutional justice capital (IJC) is a mechanism that ensures the structural elements of statutory and NGO institutions support best practice and quality service provision, and facilitate practices that capture and

understand the factors that influence child protection interventions, that consider and centre children and their networks in interventions, and that encourage change (Best et al. 2021, Hamilton and Maslen 2022). In the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, IJC involves committing to ensuring equitable, inclusive culturally relevant access for service users, and ensuring partnerships with organisations and networks that are safe (Kemshall and McCartan 2022; Best et al. 2021; Hamilton and Maslen 2022). To promote justice capital for individuals and families involved with child protection services, institutions must ensure that individual and collective cultural rights and responsibilities are facilitated at an institutional level by operating transparently, by ensuring there is access to advocacy, including legal advocacy, as well as providing forums that promote respectful and collaborative working environments that support relationships with individuals and families (Hamilton and Maslen 2022).

In child protection policy and practice that affects Aboriginal families and children, Elders and senior community knowledge holders are key to effective and lasting change (Hamilton et al. 2022). Accordingly, we have conducted an Elder and community-led and co-designed study with the Perth Aboriginal community (Hamilton et al. 2024). We examined, from the perspective of OOHC agency workers, the institutional factors, barriers and facilitators to ensuring Aboriginal children living in non-Indigenous care arrangements have access to connections, activities and knowledge which will inform efforts that build personal justice capital and institutional capacity to support recovery for children and families. Co-design principles underpin the approach, ensuring full consideration of the complex dimensions associated with kinship structures and cultural connections and activities (Black et al. 2023; Davis 2019; Krakouer 2023; Krakouer et al. 2023). We focus on findings from four focus groups with OOHC agency workers. Focus group topics explored barriers and facilitators to ensuring Aboriginal children had access to connections, cultural activities and cultural knowledge. We identify systemic challenges to ensuring children's justice capital needs are met and explore alternative institutional-level approaches. We argue that considering the barriers and facilitators to providing culturally secure services through a lens of IJC will allow for greater social, family and community capital for Aboriginal children in OOHC care, improving their wellbeing and life outcomes.

2 | Methods

The Ngulluk Moort, Ngulluk Boodja, Ngulluk Wirin (Our Family, Our Country, Our Sprit) study is being conducted between 2022 and 2026 in partnership with three mainstream OOHC agencies managing Aboriginal children living in non-Indigenous care arrangements in Perth and surrounding districts (Hamilton et al. 2024). Using culturally secure research methods and practices, and including Indigenous perspectives in research, is critical to protecting people from research harm (Evans et al. 2014; Bessarab and Ng'Andu 2010; Sherwood 2013). Research, therefore, needs to be conducted in a way that is sympathetic, respectful and ethically sound from the perspective of participants as well as prioritising Indigenous world views, wisdom, knowledge and science to inform ways of growing up Aboriginal children (Bessarab and Ng'Andu 2010; Hamilton, Reibel, et al. 2020; Farrant et al. 2019).

This research, led by the Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort (Our Children Our Heart) Elder child protection expert knowledge holders, places the community at the centre by using an Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) framework (Dudgeon et al. 2020). Using an APAR process supports relationship-building, knowledge sharing and learning, shifts power, shares resources and establishes community ownership over research outcomes (Dudgeon et al. 2020). Using a strength-based co-designed APAR approach recognises the cultural wisdom and knowledge held by the Elders and positions ideas of family and cultural aspiration as central to the wellbeing of the child within the collective context of their whole community and a flourishing future. The Elder child protection expert knowledge holders provide the cultural governance and direction for this research, and cultural guidance is provided by Aboriginal community and professional advisory groups (Hamilton et al. 2024).

2.1 | Data Collection

Between November 2022 and March 2023, OOHC agency staff participated in structured focus groups, led by the Elder child protection expert knowledge holders and Aboriginal research team members. The aim was to elucidate the barriers and facilitators to culturally secure service provision for Aboriginal children in the care of non-Indigenous foster carers across three themes: cultural connections, cultural knowledge and cultural activities. A short presentation was given at the beginning of the focus groups outlining the aims of the research and the four discussion points. All focus groups were given the same presentation and themes for discussion.

A research topic yarning (Bessarab and Ng'Andu 2010) approach was used with the themes guiding yarning. Yarning has become an established research method, both in Australian and global Indigenous studies (Bessarab and Ng'Andu 2010). Yarning is a fluid process of knowledge sharing and respectful communication that is flexible, allowing for adaptations that might be required to support language or literacy differences, and is suitable for both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous participants (Hamilton, Reibel, et al. 2020). Using yarning as a data collection method allowed for hearing the complexities that exist in this work for participants.

2.2 | Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. Initial planning for focus groups occurred in discussions with the research team and the OOHC agency leaders. OOHC agency leaders identified relevant participants and provided them with a participant information and consent sheet for the scheduled focus group. All participants provided informed consent. We recruited a total of 39 participants across four focus groups, with participants mainly employed to manage foster care arrangements with Aboriginal children. Two focus

groups were conducted with one large agency. In three focus groups, agency workers were given time separate from their management, who joined the focus groups for the discussion about the research partnership. The research team met immediately after each focus group for reflexive discussion and recording of observations.

2.3 | Data Analysis

Two researchers independently reviewed all data to identify key themes, with preliminary analysis immediately following data collection. Data were analysed using thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001) and triangulated across all focus groups. Research team members, including the Elder child protection expert knowledge holders, regularly met and reviewed data themes. These reviews helped to ensure consistency in data interpretation through multiple perspectives and iterations. The lead researcher and team members also conducted multiple analysis reviews at regular time points over 6 months to confirm and develop final data interpretations. We present the findings as they relate to elements of positive and negative IJC that influence services that support children's cultural connections as they relate to children's family and Country.

2.4 | Ethics

This research has ethical approval from the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (#1137) and reciprocal ethical approval from the University of Western Australia, and is conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research (National Health and Medical Research Council et al. 2023). Fully informed written consent was obtained from all study participants. Participants were provided with an information statement and consent form and given the opportunity to ask questions about the research before providing written consent. Participants were informed that they can withdraw from the research at any point without negative consequences and were given an assurance of confidentiality in all publicly available information and peer-reviewed publications. The study honours the rights of Aboriginal peoples to have control over their cultural intellectual property, communities, resources and Country in the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination and reuse of data (Maiam Nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective 2018).

3 | Findings

3.1 | Positive IJC

Positive IJC requires knowledge and recognition of the importance of connections and having cultural resources that are appropriate for the Country and community/s children come from. Across the groups, participants recognised the importance of connections and the knowledge that exists in families and communities that can be drawn on to support children. Participants shared stories of success, where care in communities resulted in a de-escalation of potential issues, avoiding contact with the police through semi-surveillance in communities. A participant in Focus Group 3 articulated such a scenario:

> ... we pick up the phone and go Nanna, this child is missing, do you mind just asking the families if they've seen them around. Five minutes, they were seen running down the road across the street. He was skipping school. We found him just like that. None of this, police running around looking for him nonsense. The families know. And the mums will just ask one of the little nieces or nephews, you seen him in school today? Where did he say he was going? We know straight away.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 3)

Children leave placements to find their family and agencies are required to notify the police to report them missing. These actions represent a pathway of the 'care to prison' pipeline (Baidawi and Ball 2023). Similarly, the separation of siblings when removed from their families is traumatic and requires initiative to ensure that, ideally, they remain together and where not possible, that they remain connected (McFarlane 2018). One example was given where such problems were averted by supporting connections to, and visits with family, despite the care arrangements:

> One of our girls that we're supporting, she will leave placement to try and catch up with family, but we're closely linked with the Department in Perth and [remote place] to always be talking about who are family. She's got an Aboriginal case worker. She's been quite involved. She'll tell us where Mum is, where Auntie is, where the brother is. We try and organise for her to catch up with her brother regularly. He's with another agency.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 2)

Efforts to cultivate relationships with family members and the community represent positive IJC and were evident across the groups:

> So it might be that a carer has a child and we have arranged that we will drop that child off to contact. So, when we drop child off to contact, we meet mum and say hi, how you are going ... and then you know, we swap numbers, and we just do that but it's not necessarily an organised approach. Some carers have really strong relationships.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

> We are always looking at the community. So, who, what family they belonged to ... because there could

> be relatives in care, like other children in care that they could meet up with and things like that.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 3)

Positive IJC was described in the form of finding alternatives when connections for children were difficult, and children were empowered:

> We have said that people may not be ready to meet face-to-face, so I've just got a little template of letter writing, for example. Would you like to write a message to this child, or a card, that we can pass onto them? Connection comes in many forms, doesn't it? It wasn't somebody that didn't know them writing it and endorsing it.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

Noting that such 'good news' stories were rare, focus group participants sometimes spoke of positive IJC in relation to its absence. The following participant is talking about their experience of family-led decision-making:

> I don't know if anybody has been to a family-led decision-making meeting ... we just talked about the wealth of knowledge within families, that all the knowledge should come from that child's family, right back into the family, not just the mum and dad but further back.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

Aboriginal children in care today come from families where historical child removal has occurred across multiple generations of their families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1997). Participants recognised the intergenerational nature of disconnection and the need to delve further into cultural connections than immediate family:

> Yeah, and I think the family, not just the immediate family because often we've found parents are very disconnected as well, going right back into the family and seeking out the resources from there and having some support and direction from there. We need much more [family information] because that's the best resource that we have, and if we're not able to reach out to that, in the Department there's nobody active in reaching out into those deeper families that we're losing so much, so much valuable information for these children.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

The following participant emphasises the importance of connection to Country, which is missed without the social relationships in place to support it:

> The ability for us to link into those people who can just pick up the phone and say, let's take this kid out to the bush ... I think is really rich and we miss that if we don't have those connections.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

Participants described many incidences where organisational barriers presented complications to positive IJC that required initiative to ensure connections were supported. The focus groups captured instances in which case workers were able to support families connections off Country, where multiple children were living off Country and siblings were separated. In supporting these connections, which the case worker in question noted were relatively straightforward, this was transformed from a case of negative to positive IJC:

> They [carers] have little ones. They're siblings of [many]. And they came from off Country, but the siblings are all in Perth. So Mum is still in [place]. But look, it took very little time to connect with one sibling that linked me to another, that linked me to her partner and that carer has been very much willing to come on board, and the other carers I've been working with.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

The precise circumstances for families can make these kinds of interventions more difficult to achieve. The following participant described being able to support connections to grandparents and aunties but ultimately captured the difficulty:

> We strongly connect with families. I've got quite a few [children] going through reunification, so they have a family contact that's supervised but then other ones they can have contact unsupervised with grandparents and aunties so that's really, really good. It's a hard, hard situation.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

Barriers to making this work are, in part, organisational, as the connection to families is not the remit of caseworkers:

> I think one of the other barriers to is that we don't get to work with the families because the Department manages the families. The Department works with the family, we provide support to the child and the carer.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

3.2 | Negative IJC

Negative IJC involves poor facilitation for connecting children with their families and traditional Country, and an absence of relationships with children, family and the Indigenous community. This can be exacerbated where there is limited access to forums that support Aboriginal community input into the cultural information about children and their families. Unfortunately, there was ample evidence in the focus groups of negative IJC

affecting the connections and cultural resources available to Aboriginal children in their care.

Claims were made in all focus groups by many of the research participants that they, as agency workers, were typically working with incomplete information about families. This information deficit was that these workers did not know who to connect children with. We give these examples at length to emphasise the concerning frequency of these experiences:

> ... we often don't have the information we need to know where to go, who is the best placed person for this young person or this child, this baby. Who do we need to connect them with and getting that information from the Department sometimes is difficult ...
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

> ... we don't know that information [about family] either. If we kind of knew that or had that background or knew where, where this little girl came from. We know she came from [place], or her Mum came from [place]. But what does that mean? There's not enough information ...
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 2)

> We don't even have a lead, do we ... one child; I've tried and tried and tried multiple people, different places to get the names of all the siblings ... we should still at least know the names, you know, of all the siblings. That's the very basic stuff, and we don't even have that.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

> I feel like I'm working with half the information about a child. You know, I know where they've come from. I know probably a little bit about their trauma, but I feel like I would like to know more so I can, you know, I feel like it's a better relationship if you know more about it. Where they've come from, what they' have been through. How you can support them with culture.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

> Requests [for information] get lost all the time. I don't think the handover process is, I think they just have a chat and whatever gets missed gets missed but it's like a chunk of someone's life that's like, oh yeah, I forgot to tell you this but ...
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 3)

> There are barriers, there will be barriers. Obviously one of the big barriers is that don't know how to join the dots. We don't know where these kids come from ...
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

> What else can we do to link them into the positive aspects of their community because there's so much richness that they're being denied because we don't know who to link them with. And part of that is that we only get very limited information about the family. Very limited information about the family.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

> A couple of us have had kids that have been in care since they were [babies], and nobody has contacted family. Ever. They've used [non-Aboriginal relative]. You know, as a cultural connection ...
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 3)

While it is possible that there are some circumstances in which information may be incomplete, it is difficult to understand why next to no information may be available regarding family networks for a child. This appears to be a failure in the breakdown of information collection and/or sharing between organisations involved in the provision of care. The Department of Communities has removed the child, and it is responsible for providing information on cultural connections and support (Government of Western Australia n.d.). This cultural information should be distributed to agencies, but these examples indicate gaps and inconsistencies in information provided.

Given the gaps in information provided by the Department, there was evidence that carers were sometimes doing this work to fill the gaps. However, this is beyond their responsibility and also contravenes policies that discourage direct connection between carers and families:

> We do have some carers who have been able to establish a relationship with the biological family through contact, and then that's become much more fluid. So, Mum will ring the carers and carers will ring the Mum. It's not encouraged though, the idea is that if the carers are dealing with something that they go through the Department or through us then the Department ...
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

The agency workers sometimes saw this work on the part of carers as a solution, rather than a symptom, of the problem:

> If contact is inconsistent, then we're just relying on that, where the parents turn up for contact. If we have more information, then they [carers] can go and do their own research and be more active in that space. That would be really helpful.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

And yet there are various reasons why relying on carers to make these connections presents a potential problem. First, carers' are ultimately part of a system that is 'institutionally racist' (Liddle et al. 2022). Such attitudes act as a deterrent for making connections with families:

> We all know the system is bias and the system is institutionally racist. That's a reality and we come from that system, work in that system. Our carers come and work in that system. And I know for some of our carers they hold some, you know, they might hold some beliefs around the principal of returning Aboriginal children to community and family that wouldn't be aligned with how we necessarily want them to ... And I think that is one of the barriers to the work as well.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 2)

The barrier here is not necessarily one of overt racism, but more passive diminishing of the importance of these connections given the effort involved and the lack of incentives to do so:

> Some carers are more creative and proactive than others. Those ones who are not, they will benefit from a bit of a pushing. They do need to be taken by their hand and, here is this and here is that. I have a few of those. I know they will do it and they want to do it and they have done it, but they don't necessarily take the initiative ...
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

> I think that a lot of that [connecting] has actually been up to the carers, when it's not seeming to happen so naturally. I don't know. I've come across having a bit of fear into delving into the unknown or fear of not choosing correctly or judgement.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

Some participants also noted that the lack of cultural knowledge on behalf of carers created a barrier to supporting cultural connection, both in the sense of having information as well as the negative emotions that this evoked:

> A lot of our carers they have this like, sort of embarrassment or like shame that they're not Indigenous but they're caring for Indigenous children, and they want to speak to someone about how to go about introducing to that life. Like I'm thinking about one ... she's from [overseas]. And she's a lovely, lovely carer but she just doesn't know how to get that and sort of have that in his life as part of his identity.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 3)

There were cases where these questions of cultural difference between children and their carers caused some confusion among workers, who effectively lost sight of putting the priorities of children's connection with family first, thinking also of supporting the carers' culture and experience:

> We've got a little girl, [placed as a baby] ... there were always plans for her to be reunified ... there's a place for this little one to go home. ... the [carers] trying to say, 'well you know no one's considering our culture and our background and how we're raising her so to speak in terms of our culture' ... You know it took me by surprise when they said that. But I kind of get it. But how do we navigate that conversation ... because they're great ... there's nothing missing in that space. And these carers aren't Australian either. They're from a British background, so they've got their own trauma.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 2)

Examples of negative IJC relate not only to information provision but also to decisions with respect to the placement of children. Despite the ATSICCP (SNAICC 2017), it is often the case that children removed from their families from remote and regional areas are placed in metropolitan foster care arrangements. This presents major barriers to supporting connections:

> And here in Perth we don't have that support because we don't have all the information because they're not here in Perth. It's very hard to get those connections.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 3)

> This person has been waiting for way over 12 months for any sort of progression on a return to Country. And then the carer is asked [by the Department], well who do you want to see? And they're [carers] like, well ... I want them to be connected to their family and you're [the Department] and I'm asking you to help me understand who this family is and connect the child back to their family. And it's put on them [carers when trying to connect children], well, where do you want to go, who do you want to see? You tell me. I want him to be connected to his family and I need your guidance because you know the family.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

The most negative form of IJC comes in the form of no contact with families, reflecting a lack of relationships that can support connection by all systems:

> I have never in the three and a half years have had any contact with any biological family at all.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 4)

There was a sense of apathy on the part of the Department to encourage relationships between carers and families, despite potential benefits recognised by participants:

> I think there's a reluctance to get carers and families together as well. I was invited to [event], so we met mum and dad and the foster carer and baby, and it was great. We got such a good insight and I think it gives them hope as well, meeting the carer and seeing the baby, how well it's looked after. She was so grateful ... that's probably the second one I've been invited to in 4 years. They don't make a habit of it and it's such a shame because it's just a missed opportunity there to get together.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

Other participants added:

> It's the Department, yeah, we don't get invited. We really don't. I mean, we did push to get invited to this one, and they were like, ooh, we don't usually like carers and biological family meeting. And I went, well ... they actually said, oh, okay, then you can come. I think we need to push more for that.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

> And it's just not the connection also with the family, but the children ... the land itself means a lot. And the carers know that. But the Department doesn't seem to acknowledge that, or they probably don't care.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

Ultimately, power and control, combined with a lack of trust and a lack of understanding of the importance of culture, represented a damaging form of negative IJC that impacted children and workers:

> So, [child protection worker] "I'm wondering, why do you have to go to [remote place]? We're not supporting a holiday entertaining trip". And it's like, well he was born in [remote place] and there is family there and there's connections there and he likes doing that and this. And it's like "oh no, it has to be culturally appropriate, and you don't decide. We organise." And it's like, okay, well do something then because you're not doing it actually.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

> We trust people to look after the children ... they do all of the things they need to do and yet, they still don't have trust to make a very simple decision ... it seems ridiculous.
>
> (Participant, Focus Group 1)

4 | Discussion

The health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children is significantly advanced when they are engaged with their traditional culture, and there is an urgent imperative to change both social attitudes and institutional practice to allow for this to occur when children are removed from their families and placed in OOHC (Krakouer 2023). The findings suggest that although there is recognition by agency workers of the importance of having access to knowledge about cultural connections that can be drawn on to support strong culture for children, there are a range of barriers to supporting the engagement and connection of Aboriginal children in their care with their culture. Recognising and facilitating opportunities to culturally connect children, no matter the challenges, represent important institutional components for supporting personal justice capital assets and, thereby, the long-term health and wellbeing outcomes for children in care (Krakouer 2023; Davis 2019).

In Western Australia, OOHC services are provided through the Department of Communities, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and NGO's. Significant reform is being undertaken by the Department of Communities to establish a system where the statutory and NGO sectors work together in a way that is better coordinated, more flexible, sustainable and economically viable, and aims to ensure that services are of high quality and accountable (Government of Western Australia n.d.). There is a commitment to working with the national peak body for representing the interests of Aboriginal children and their families, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, on a 10-year roadmap (SNAICC 2022). This is designed to give an increased participatory role when decisions are made about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. The reforms also involve the transfer of funding and care of Aboriginal children to ACCOs. It is important that, during this transition, ACCOs and NGOs work together in strong partnerships to ensure the care and connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children is optimal. Regardless of these innovative policy reforms, it is likely to be some time before progress will be seen in reducing the number of Aboriginal children living in non-Indigenous care arrangements and, as such, underscores the importance of working to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in non-Indigenous care arrangements are connected to their kin and culture.

There is a requirement by the Children's Court of WA, for the Department of Communities to submit written proposals for care that is considered is in the best interests of children and must include a cultural support plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, that stipulates how children will keep connection to culture before final orders are administered (Childrens Court of Western Australia n.d.). The Department of Communities maintains responsibility for collecting information about children's families, developing cultural plans and arranging child contact with biological families. Yet, the findings from this research suggest that there is no consistent way with which the provision of cultural plans to NGOs is undertaken. As such, in the neglect of government responsibility to provide comprehensive, or in some cases, any cultural information for Aboriginal children, OOHC agencies are left to fill in the gaps as best they can. The findings show situations where carers do their best to support connections with families and aspects of culture. In some cases, carers seek to fill information gaps. However, this is beyond their responsibility and these inconsistencies suggest a potentially dangerous

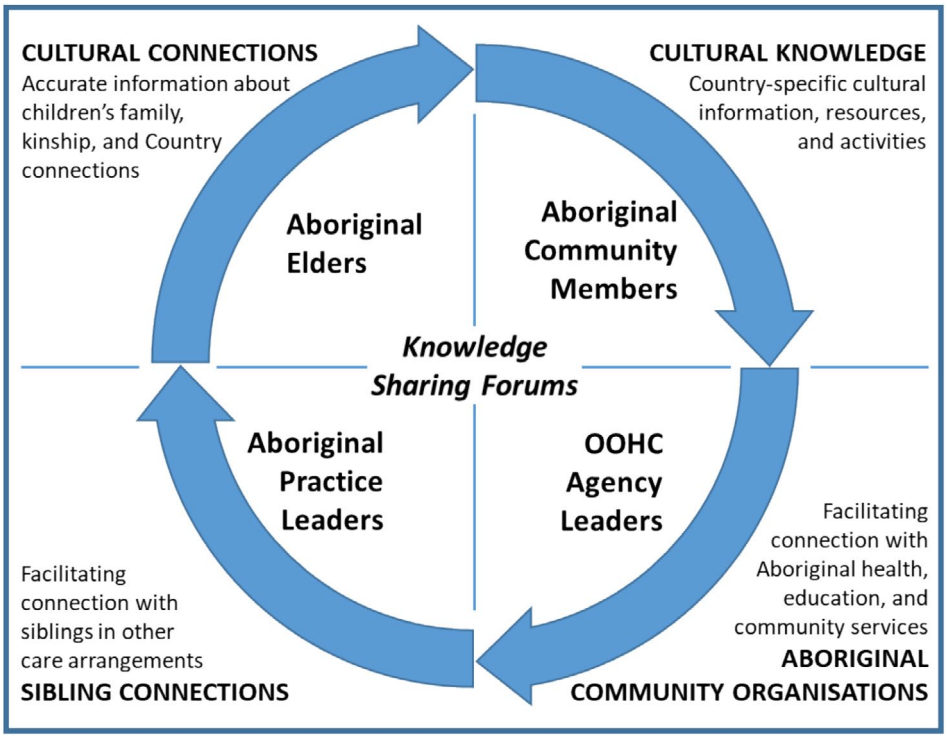

FIGURE 1 | Conceptualising Aboriginal community-led knowledge-sharing forums.

failure of the system for a number of reasons. First, the findings show that, from agency worker perspectives, not all carers prioritise the cultural needs of children due to perceived competing needs and differing priorities. Second, it is predictable that foster carers who consider children 'our kids' do not make connections to families and culture and focus on forging bonds with 'their' children, at the expense of being inclusive of Aboriginal family and community priorities. Foster carers should have a clear understanding that they take on the care of other people's children who, at any time, may go home, and a clear expectation that where children are unlikely to go home, they are required to support contact with the connections and culture children need for their wellbeing. Third, where motivations to care are more altruistic, leaving connections to carers may pose a risk to child safety, as however well-meaning, the carers are unable to vet those family members they are contacting.

Central to the concept of recovery and justice capital is the need to cultivate relationships (Best et al. 2021; Hamilton and Maslen 2022). The findings suggest that there are few mechanisms between the Department of Communities and the OOHC agencies to share knowledge and information about cultural connections and resources that are relevant to children in non-Indigenous care arrangements, and if they are present, they are not inclusive of community knowledge-holders. An absence of these knowledge-sharing opportunities represents a major institutional barrier for children to have access to kin and cultural connection, likely perpetuating disadvantage and trauma, and grief for children, families and communities (Krakouer 2023). Transforming these aspects of negative IJC to positive IJC requires a collective commitment to providing accurate cultural information about children and trusting that agency workers and carers pursue safe, innovative approaches with stakeholders in the sector when there are challenges connecting children. The findings from this research suggest that it is critical that information about children's cultural connections is managed at institutional levels and that NGOs and ACCOs develop strong partnerships to undertake this work.

As such, we put forward a central element of IJC that we see as necessary for centring Aboriginal children and community to bolster the accuracy and amount of knowledge and information available for providing cultural support for Aboriginal children in care with non-Indigenous agencies (Figure 1). We propose that mainstream OOHC agencies are best placed to take on the responsibility of facilitating and maintaining regular cultural knowledge-sharing forums where Aboriginal Practice Leaders from the Department of Communities and OOHC agency leaders regularly come together with community Elders and Aboriginal community knowledge holders to oversee and inform the cultural support of children. Given the diversity among Western Australian Aboriginal communities and the fact that many Aboriginal children are placed in the Perth metropolitan area from regional and remote communities, there is a need to ensure wide representation from across Western Australia.

We also recommend a greater focus on connecting children and their families with Aboriginal community organisations for their health, education and socio-cultural needs, and on facilitating connection to siblings in other OOHC arrangements. Supporting child-centred, culturally focused events for maintaining connections with siblings, particularly those living in other OOHC arrangements, is critical for children to experience the wellbeing associated with connection to their siblings and strengthening identity (Asif et al. 2024).

5 | Conclusion

Increasingly high numbers of Aboriginal children being removed from their families continue to bear the brunt of colonial harm. The ATSCIPP (SNAICC 2017) was designed to ensure children are placed with family or kin or an Aboriginal community member, yet more than half of the Aboriginal children removed from their families are placed in non-Indigenous arrangements. This article has presented the findings from research with mainstream OOHC organisations that suggest the information they are provided with by the responsible government agency is scant, incomplete and at times not culturally accurate or relevant. Recovery from the trauma of colonial child removal practices should be central to child protection policy development. Providing no (or inconsistent) information about the cultural connections of children is not conducive to recovery, and there is an urgent imperative to provide opportunities for cultural knowledge and information sharing that can inform the cultural connections, resources and needs of Aboriginal children in care with non-Indigenous agencies. It is the responsibility of institutions, in this case government child protection services and OOHC agencies, to ensure that the cultural needs of children are supported, to interrupt the cycles of intergenerational child removal and associated harms, and promote healthy, connected futures for Aboriginal children. The way forward for this work to be successful is bringing together Elders and community knowledge holders and listening to their wisdom for informing the culturally secure care of Aboriginal children while they are living away from their kin, Country and community.

Author Contributions

Sharynne Hamilton: conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, writing – original draft, methodology, writing – review and editing, project administration, supervision, formal analysis, validation, resources, data curation, visualization. **Larissa Jones:** conceptualization, investigation, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, project administration, resources. **Millie Penny:** conceptualization, investigation, writing – review and editing, supervision, formal analysis, resources. **Charmaine Pell:** conceptualization, investigation, writing – review and editing, supervision, formal analysis, resources. **Sarah Maslen:** methodology, writing – review and editing, visualization. **Carol Michie:** conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, methodology, writing – review and editing, project administration, formal analysis, resources, supervision. **Raewyn Mutch:** conceptualization, funding acquisition, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis. **Melissa O'Donnell:** conceptualization, funding acquisition, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis. **Carrington Shepherd:** conceptualization, funding acquisition, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, validation. **Brad Farrant:** conceptualization, funding acquisition, methodology, writing – review and editing, supervision, formal analysis.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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