Defining well-being for Indigenous children in care

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Indicators for children in care typically describe the administrative status of children, an approach that serves administrative decision-making more than the personal well-being of foster children. At the same time, there is little research on what constitutes indicators of the personal well-being of children in care, especially Indigenous children.

This paper reports research that sought to define social, cultural and spiritual well-being indicators for Indigenous children in care by seeking the opinions and knowledge of Indigenous child protection workers and foster carers. The study examines a series of strategic change indicators that address Indigenous concerns about the social, cultural and spiritual development of Indigenous children in care.

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The generally disadvantaged position of Indigenous Australians relevant to the overall Australian population is well-documented (e.g. SCRGSP 2003, 2005) and is especially evident in child protection (AIHW 2007). These types of reports set out indicators of Indigenous disadvantage relevant to the national or state level of policy implementation. In a similar fashion, indicators for children in care typically describe the administrative status of children, an approach that serves administrative decision-making more than the personal well-being of foster children. Administrative indicators can be criteria such as reasons for coming into care, length of time in care, racial or ethnic identity (especially for Indigenous children), and whether specific bureaucratic milestones have been reached or requirements met. There is a further need, therefore, especially for Indigenous children in care, to develop indicators that would consider the child's well-being while in care in addition to their administrative status (McMahon & Reck 2003).

DEFINING WELL-BEING

The Australian Bureau of Statistics, in its publication *Measuring wellbeing* (2001), sets out a 'commendably inclusive and comprehensive' definition of well-being (Rapley 2003, p. 32).

> From birth to death, life enmeshes individuals within a dynamic culture consisting of the natural environment (light, heat, air, land, water, minerals, flora, fauna), the human made environment (material objects, buildings, roads, machinery, appliances, technology), social arrangements (families, social networks, associations, institutions, economies), and human consciousness (knowledge, beliefs, understanding, skills, traditions). Wellbeing depends on all the factors that interact within this culture and can be seen as a state of health or sufficiency in all aspects of life. Measuring wellbeing therefore involves mapping the whole of life, and considering each life event or social context that has the potential to affect the quality of individual lives, or the cohesion of society. At the individual level, this can include the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects of life. At a broader level, the social, material and natural environments surrounding each individual, through inter-dependency, become part of the wellbeing equation (ABS 2001, p. 6).

Thus, the quality of a person's life, and their concept of well-being, can be influenced by both objective and subjective indicators of well-being. Objective social indicators 'represent social data independently of individual evaluations' (Rapley 2003, p. 11): life expectancy, unemployment rate, school attendance, perinatal mortality rate, for example. Subjective social indicators represent 'individuals' appraisal and evaluation of social conditions' (Rapley 2003, p. 11): sense of community, relationships with family, class identification, for example. The impetus for this study is to begin defining indicators of well-being for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care so that these indicators can be incorporated in case planning. Since definitions of indicators, especially subjective indicators, are not always well-defined in the literature, asking Indigenous people what they see as important for their children in care will help clarify the definitions.

> *... all three focus groups ... returned time and again to discussion of social, cultural and spiritual indicators as essential in the management of Indigenous children in care.*

METHODOLOGY

These preliminary results are based on three focus groups conducted with 20 Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) foster carers and workers in the north Queensland town of Mackay. (ASSI carers and workers were part of the discussion because of the historical relationships between Indigenous and ASSI communities in the Mackay area, including intermarriage.) The two workers' groups were from a Mackay Indigenous agency concerned with child care and fostering and from the (then) Queensland Department of Families. The focus groups were guided by the definition of family well-being outlined by Fisher et al. (1999, p. 70):

> Family well-being means that a family has the capacity to care for its children and fulfill their basic developmental, health, educational, social, cultural, spiritual, and housing needs.

In the three focus groups, participants focused on subjective indicators of well-being such as social cohesion, culture and spirituality as being more relevant to Indigenous/ASSI children in care than objective indicators. Objective indicators were not ignored altogether but most discussion was focussed on subjective indicators. This paper will focus on these indicators since all three focus groups, despite prompting, returned time and again to discussion of social,

cultural and spiritual indicators as essential in the management of Indigenous children in care.

The focus groups were tape-recorded and the discussions were transcribed for analysis. The themes were analysed according to the indicator framework of the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision on overcoming Indigenous disadvantage (SCRGSP 2003, pp. xxi-xxiii). This framework defines 'headline indicators' as the major factors that need to be improved for change to occur, and the ways this improvement might occur as strategic areas for action, measured by what the SCRGSP (2003, section 2.6) calls 'strategic change indicators' because of their potential to effect change in the longer term. It is the strategic change indicators that policy makers need to focus on.

SOCIAL INDICATORS

When asked to define what they thought social indicators might be for Indigenous children in care, members of the Indigenous agency who were interviewed said that it was 'connectedness to a blood (i.e. their own) family'. This is reminiscent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle which, in Queensland, provides a hierarchy of placement options, beginning with placement with the child's family. Family contact must be maintained and work must focus on family reunification (Queensland Child Protection Act 1999, s.83). As one of the Departmental staff said:

> I think it would be so frightening if you just cut off from that extended family.

One of the agency members likened Indigenous life to living within a circle:

> (After abuse and the guilt that children may have because of the abuse) the choice that the little fellows have is taken away from them and, when they come back into the black circle here with us, they have a choice, whether they want to flow along in the stream with us or whether they want to get out of the stream and go to some other stream.

Another added:

> ... even if they go wrong, they're still accepted back into the circle, no matter what.

Participants were also able to articulate a number of strategic change indicators to ensure social cohesion:

- **Appropriate social skills**

> If you could actually put some stipulation, that all right, mum and dad are a disrupting factor in this situation, we can bring in grandma and grandad, or aunty and uncle, to take the place of mum and dad till they sort their life out. Because that is one of the big issues; I know the parents are supposed to have contact with their children, but they obviously don't care what happens

to these children, they sorta turn up and do what they wanna do, and they're undermining your words and so you're trying to teach them one way, that society won't accept that sort of rubbish (carer).

- **Appropriate skills for independent living**

We know there're 16, 17, 18-year-olds out there that can't even boil water, you know, yet they want to fall pregnant; so if you can get it in there early enough to get these old people to teach these children survival skills, and not just Indigenous (skills), but also how to cook a meal and sew a button on (carer).

Social skills are also closely tied to Indigenous knowledge and ways of educating:

When (someone) takes kids fishing or whatever, you know, if you catch something, it's not only food that you take home to eat, he usually opens it up there and then and they get an anatomy lesson at the same time – where it breathes and where its food goes in, you know. And these are only little people and you think these things they don't retain them, but they do, you know, and that is part of the culture too, you're always learning on the job (carer).

It is here, within an extended family and based on mutual respect, that young people can be taught 'what's exactly right and what's wrong', as one of the carers said.

While indicators to measure social factors important for Indigenous and ASSI children in care might focus on Indigenous/ASSI understandings of family life, the ways (strategic change indicators) by which the members of the focus groups want this to happen are not out of the ordinary and would be agreed to by Indigenous and non-Indigenous families alike.

Parental responsibility, respect for elders, and community leadership were all seen as major factors (SCRGSP 2003, section 2.12).

CULTURAL INDICATORS

Following on from social indicators for children in care, as one of the carers said, while:

... these children have got to live in two worlds, they've also got to realise that they've got culture. There's a white culture that they have to work to, to claim a job and position in life, but (they have) their own culture (and) one of the most important things is not to forget where they come from.

The following strategic change indicators were identified by the participants as indicative of cultural knowledge:

- **Knowledge of extended family relationships**

White men only go to first and second cousin. Us here at the table, we can go right back to who our fifth and fourth cousins are. And that's how the team leaders, the Family Service Officers think, 'Oh, they've only got first and second cousins';

but it's not like that. It's this big extended family. Because, in times gone past, we sort of think about that extended family. I guess the mark is the grandparents in the middle. They were the top dog and held counsel, and so the families, like if anything went wrong, you came back to there and sought guidance and what have you (Departmental staff member).

... Indigenous departmental staff ... emphasised that children should be aware of their particular backgrounds and not just a generic indigeneity.

- **Knowledge of Indigenous codes of conduct**

Children must also know the correct way to address family members:

... a little child just can't say 'Mary'. It has to say the proper 'Aunty Mary' (Departmental staff member).

I think you need the young men to be with the older men, so they can teach them what's exactly right and what's wrong, and if you put that proper ground in here now, then it just flows on from there (carer).

- **Knowledge of country**

You see one of the key components of healing here, in a blackfella way, is the capacity or the ability to be able to talk to people of their own country ... in a Murri way, the responsibility to that healing process of country (belongs to the) traditional elders, and I believe that's one of the keys of why we have such an impact in this state in regards to little fellas that do come into care, (by talking to) people within that circle who own that country and have a right to speak for it (agency member).

- **Participation in cultural ceremonies**

A departmental staff member wanted a specific form for Australian South Sea Islander children and Torres Strait Islander children:

It would have all types of South Sea Islander or Torres Strait Islander celebrations. You've got to encourage them now because, if you don't, you get kids who are in care, and that's when they want to know who they are.

- **Knowledge of language**

If you say something in your own language, it gives you connection to the creator and your whole family; it gives you a lot, you know, yeah, inner strength (carer).

In contrast to the strategic change indicators for social indicators, those for cultural indicators emphasised ways of

gaining knowledge that can only come to a person as part of Indigenous community or extended family. This is knowledge that can only come from Indigenous people. It is worth noting that Indigenous departmental staff distinguished between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customs and cultures, and emphasised that children should be aware of their particular backgrounds and not just a generic indigeneity.

One way of operationalising these indicators in case planning would be to incorporate them into current case planning tools such as the Looking After Children (LAC) materials ...

The question of knowledge of language can be a difficult matter for many Indigenous groups who do not know their ancestral language. While they might agree with the sentiment, there may be no way they can action such a strategic change indicator. It is also worth noting the contrasting view of one of the Australian South Sea Islander carers who said:

> When my father said that when they wanted to learn their culture, the South Sea Islander culture, the old people said, 'No, you're here now, you're in Australia now.' They wouldn't teach them the language; they wouldn't teach them the culture.

These comments mean that different groups may have varying opinions about the importance of language knowledge for children in care.

The Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision on overcoming Indigenous disadvantage (SCRGSP 2003, section 2.11) noted that:

> ... culture was indeed important but would not easily sit in one area as it was enmeshed in every aspect of Indigenous people's lives.

The SCRGSP (2003, section 9.2) also noted the importance of country and language for Indigenous peoples and the part these play in addressing Indigenous disadvantage.

SPIRITUAL INDICATORS

When respondents spoke of spiritual indicators, they tended to speak in vague terms without defining what they meant. One carer said:

> I think every child, or every person, needs some sort of hope in their life.

She went on, speaking of the importance of Indigenous children knowing their heritage:

> You let them know that there was a culture, they did come from a culture, there was religion, there were certain things that you had to do, there was a code of conduct.

For some respondents, the link between culture and spirituality was affirmed:

> We teach culture and, while we teach them culture, that's spiritual (agency member).

Other respondents were clear that they came from a Christian perspective:

> We are totally honest about it and when we talk, we do it from a Gospel perspective, and nobody can tell me that it doesn't work (agency member).

For many Torres Strait Islanders, their traditional culture and their Christian religion are intertwined:

> If you're talking about the cultural side of things, I was brought up in an Islander Christian background so that religion has a lot to do with it also. White man brought the religion and, leaving out the cultural part of it, there's nothing higher (Departmental staff member).

Strategic change indicators for spiritual indicators were similar to those for cultural indicators:

- **Participation in religious ceremonies**

The same argument is valid for participation in religious ceremonies as for participation in cultural ceremonies.

> Just for argument sake, if it was a Torres Strait Islander child and it was going to an Aboriginal family, and then you've got, let's say, a tombstone opening or even a funeral where those children are connected by blood to that family. Now that's an important thing for that child to maintain so would that (foster) family stop them from going there because, not so much that they don't believe in it, but that they don't see that as an important issue? (Departmental staff member).

- **Active acknowledgment of child's belief system**

> Sometimes, you've got children that have got one belief system and they're sort of thrown into a family and they've just got total opposite (beliefs), so straight away you've got sort of a problem (Departmental staff member, talking of Catholic and Protestant children).

While respondents spoke of the importance of spirituality as a well-being indicator for children in care, they tended to lapse into conventional definitions of Christian religious belief as strategic change indicators. However, this perspective needs to be taken into account, particularly in light of the importance of Christian religions to Indigenous Australians.

A possibly contrary view is taken by the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision on overcoming Indigenous disadvantage (SCRGSP 2003, section 2.11) which says, with regard to addressing Indigenous disadvantage:

> The overwhelming view (of Indigenous people consulted) was that spiritual matters were not something that the framework should seek to address.

However, the Review is speaking of addressing disadvantage, not what Indigenous people may value for themselves and their children.

OPERATIONALISING THE FINDINGS

Table 1 summarises the findings of this study in a schematic form with each headline indicator having a number of strategic change indicators to focus on.

Table 1: Well-being indicators for Indigenous children in care

Headline indicators	Strategic change indicators
Social	• Appropriate social skills • Appropriate skills for independent living
Cultural	• Knowledge of extended family relationships • Knowledge of Indigenous codes of conduct • Knowledge of country • Participation in cultural ceremonies • Knowledge of language
Spiritual	• Participation in religious ceremonies • Active acknowledgement of child's belief system

Admittedly, this data comes from a fairly small group of Indigenous/ASSI people in one part of Australia. Nevertheless, this appears to be the first attempt to define what Indigenous Australians themselves understand as well-being indicators for their children in care and, while the definitions will require refining, the strategic change indicators are significant and clear. There needs to be feedback from other Indigenous groups elsewhere in Australia, and the indicators, however they are eventually defined, will have to be operationalised so they can be evaluated.

As increasing numbers of Indigenous children continue to enter care, it becomes imperative that the experience and outcomes of being in care are superior to their condition prior to coming into care; that, after all, is the justification for taking children from their families. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians continue to be worried about the more than one-third of their children in care who are not placed within their families or communities (AIHW 2007, p. 58). There is the fear that these children will grow up knowing little of their culture and background.

As increasing numbers of Indigenous children continue to enter care, it becomes imperative that the experience and outcomes of being in care are superior to their condition prior to coming into care ...

One way of operationalising these indicators in case planning would be to incorporate them into current case planning tools such as the Looking After Children (LAC) materials in use in five states and the Australian Capital Territory (The LAC Project Australia 2007). Generally, the assessment material on cultural identity in LAC publications is fairly vague and passive. The incorporation of strategic change indicators identified in this study would facilitate a more proactive stance and expectation for Indigenous children in care. It would require families to actively seek out social, cultural and spiritual activities for the children in their care and measure the frequency and intensity of those experiences. It would have implications for the education and training of foster carers, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, and the development of required programs for foster parents, their families and their foster children.

Health priorities for Indigenous Australians already speak in terms of social, emotional and cultural well-being and have done so for some time. The National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party (1989) defines health as:

> ... not just the physical wellbeing of the individual but the social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of the whole community. This is a whole-of-life view and it includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.

In this definition, physical and emotional health are seen to exist only within a cultural community and any protective intervention for Indigenous children would need to incorporate this whole-of-life view if it is going to be faithful to Indigenous child placement policies; that is the inference from acceptance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles in State legislations and policies. Incorporating social, cultural and spiritual strategic change indicators into child protection may no longer be an option we can debate. ∎

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