

Raising strong, solid Koolunga: values and beliefs about early child development among Perth's Aboriginal community

Article

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Abstract

There is a paucity of published information about conceptions of Aboriginal child rearing and development among urban dwelling Nyoongar/Aboriginal people in Australia. We detail the unique findings from an Aboriginal early child development research project with a specific focus on the Nyoongar/Aboriginal community of Perth, Western Australia. This research significantly expands the understanding of a shared system of beliefs and values among Nyoongar people that differ in important ways from those of the broader Australian (Western) society. Consistent with the findings of research with other Aboriginal groups in Australia, and internationally, our work challenges assumptions underpinning a range of early childhood development policies and highlights the implications of cultural biases and misunderstandings among non-Aboriginal professionals in child and family services, education and other settings.

When we try and compare wadjella kids, if you like, and kids that grow up in that way, is that what they see as priorities. Maybe Nyoongar families don't see those same things as a priority, do you know what I mean? So, why are we measuring one against the other and saying, 'Look, this is better' or 'this is not so good' you know. (Community forum participant)

A lot of families were like, 'Oh, I never thought about the way in which I bring up my child, the difference, you know, that it is okay; it is just a difference', whereas before they had the perception that it was not okay. They felt like they weren't measuring up. (Community forum participant)

Background

As the above quotes suggest, many of the factors that are central to how Nyoongar families seek to raise their children differ to non-Aboriginal factors including concepts and perceptions. There is, however, limited evidence of what Nyoongar Aboriginal people report as important with regard to raising their children. The 5-year *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* (Our Children, Our Heart) project (2016–2020) is a participatory action research project on Aboriginal child development that is exploring the values and priorities of the Nyoongar Aboriginal community of urban Perth. The project is seeking to enhance knowledge about Nyoongar Aboriginal child rearing in order to promote greater understanding among government and non-government programmes and service providers and improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and their families.

There is a relative absence of Aboriginal worldviews across the mainstream child health and development measuring and reporting frameworks, policy and programme design, and resource and service allocation. This results in a lack of recognition or understanding of the different ways Aboriginal families raise their children. The research evidence, however, confirms that there are some distinct differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal/Western values and beliefs. In particular, behaviours and outcomes considered indicative of a child's secure attachment and bonding within Western culture can differ considerably to those within Aboriginal cultures (Ryan, 2011; Yeo, 2003). Research has also highlighted shared values and the continuation of many traditional practices among Aboriginal families in both remote and urban settings. Some authors note that while traditional patterns tend to be modified in urban situations, they are still maintained (Byers, Kulitja, Lowell, & Kruske, 2012; Penman, 2006; Siggers & Sims, 2005). Other differences identified in research studies include the valuing of children's independence and self-reliance from a very young age, sociability and the important role of multiple familial relationships and kinship connections in the child's care (Byers et al., 2012; Nelson & Allison, 2000). Investigations have uncovered differences in parenting behaviours and childrearing practices between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families that are influenced by differing perceptions of babies and children (Kruske, Belton, Wardaguga, & Narjic, 2012). Lohoar,

Butera, and Kennedy (2014) detail some of the cultural values and perspectives of Aboriginal families' child-rearing practices from which the authors identify a range of cultural strengths. They note that knowledge and understanding about family functioning is critical to recognising some inherent differences. They also suggest that these differences challenge the notion of agreed or universal understandings about certain aspects of parenting (Lohoar et al., 2014).

Prior to the commencement of the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* project, the published research on urban-based Nyoongar values, beliefs and practices on child development and child rearing was limited. Collard, Crowe, Harries, and Taylor (1994) translated stories told by Aboriginal families in the south-west of Western Australia (WA) that emphasised specific values, including the importance of culture, respect and family harmony to Aboriginal family life, child rearing and kinship maintenance (Collard et al., 1994). Kickett-Tucker et al. (2015) explored the development of self-esteem and racial identity among urban-based Aboriginal children; while in examining Nyoongar children's transition to school, Taylor (2011) noted that there are specific cultural factors and differing values with which Aboriginal children are raised, particularly an emphasis on independence and autonomy that is encouraged from an early age, together with the importance of sibling and peer support solidarity. This paper details the specific Nyoongar Aboriginal values and priorities about early child care and development the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* project has accessed through its consultation processes with members of the Nyoongar Aboriginal community.

Methodology

The *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* (Our Children Our Heart) project (the project) is working closely with sections of the Nyoongar/Aboriginal community to identify priorities and values associated with early childhood development for children under 6 years. One of the unique design aspects of this participatory action research project is the incorporation of an Aboriginal worldview and knowledge framework through the direct involvement of nine Aboriginal Elders who are Co-researchers in the project. The decision to recruit Elders in this capacity was intended to seek to bring their cultural knowledge, wisdom, professional skills and expertise to guide the setting of research priorities and advise on community engagement strategies, data analysis and translation.

The Elder/Co-researcher's group also ensured that the project was relevant to the local Aboriginal community's needs and that the research process was rigorous, culturally safe and aligned with the strengths of Aboriginal culture. This group was supported by the project team comprised of two non-Aboriginal research fellows, an Aboriginal community coordinator and three Aboriginal and two non-Aboriginal Chief Investigators.

The project's methodology was inspired and guided by the work of Nyoongar researcher Dr Michael Wright, specifically the Looking Forward project (Farrant et al., 2019; Wright, Lin, & O'Connell, 2016). Wright demonstrates the effectiveness of research that starts with a Noongar worldview and adheres to traditional authority structures (Wright & O'Connell, 2015). In so doing, his research has been able to meet Aboriginal people's requirements regarding investigations and deliver on a range of research outcomes. His work has also enabled Noongar values and ways of knowing to stand in their own right and, in so doing, empowered Noongar people.

Setting and recruitment

The project is being conducted in the Perth metropolitan area which covers some 6,418 km². The area forms the majority of the Wadjuk Boodja region, one of the 14 Nyoongar clan regions in the south-west of WA. With some 30,000 members, the Nyoongar people comprise the biggest single Aboriginal nation in Australia. While the project is focused on Nyoongar perspectives, it is worth noting that around one-third of WA's total Aboriginal population lives in the Perth metropolitan area, not all of whom identify as Nyoongar. At the project's inaugural community meeting, attended by 51 Elders, it was agreed that the Perth metropolitan area could be divided into four regions for the purposes of this project and that two Elders in each region (preferably one male and one female) be sought to participate in the project as Elder/Co-researchers.

The primary participants were parents, grandparents and family members of Aboriginal children in Perth, Western Australia. The engagement strategy with the wider Aboriginal community was devised around a community forum undertaken in each of the four regions (held between November 2016 and April 2017). The community forums attracted 80 participants who were largely older members of the community – accordingly, the Elder/Co-researchers proposed focus groups at venues attended by younger parents. Seven focus groups were undertaken across the four regions (between April and October 2017), including a dedicated men's group involving participants of mixed ages. These were designed to support younger members to feel comfortable to speak up, and they attracted 58 participants. Both the community forums and focus groups were an Aboriginal-led process involving an Aboriginal facilitator, supported by experienced project team members and overseen by local Elder(s). They were conducted in venues considered as safe places for open discussions by community members.

Recruitment of participants for the community forums and focus groups utilised the project team and Elder/Co-researchers' networks, including a number of community-based organisations. Elders directly approached community members and organisations with which they are involved in order to seek people's interest in attending the forums and focus groups and/or in promoting them. The project team distributed flyers to community centres and organisations, community groups and play groups. Participants at both the community forums and focus groups were offered a modest payment as compensation for their time and travel expenses. Informed consent was obtained and participants were free to withdraw at any time. In total, the community forums and focus groups involved 138 participants, ranging in age from 18 through to over 80 years of age.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data were collected via the discussions at the four community forums and seven focus groups. These were digitally recorded and transcribed. These discussions focused on exploring what was important to raising Aboriginal children so as to develop a better understanding of early childhood development from Aboriginal perspectives. Specifically, participants were asked to discuss:

1. What are the moorditj (good) things that are important in raising strong, solid young kids (under 6 years of age)?
2. What things might get in the way of Aboriginal kids (under 6 years of age) growing up solid in Perth?

3. Thinking about kids under the age of 6 years, what things help Aboriginal kids grow up solid?

Use of the term solid in the discussion questions was suggested and agreed upon by the Elders during the development of the project's consultation processes. This term is familiar to many Aboriginal people across Australia and is largely understood to mean strong and good (Adams, 2014). For the project's Elders, the term solid was regarded as the ideal state of being for any child and what any family wants for their children because it encompasses resilience, confidence, happiness and good physical and mental health.

A conventional thematic content analysis was applied to the data with broad themes and categories identified during the initial reading and summarising of the data. These themes then formed the basis of the coding or nodes for subsequent analysis using Nvivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 1, 2012, Melbourne). The analysis enabled the researchers to reflect upon, and establish, a deeper understanding of certain issues and, in some cases, return to earlier participants to ask further questions and explore issues in greater depth. Throughout the process of analysis, key discussion points and emerging themes were analysed by the researchers and the project's nine Elder/Co-researchers. Verification of the data analysis and theme selection by the Elder/Co-researchers played an important role in confirming these factors and ensuring that the project team can be confident about the validity of their findings and interpretations. The key findings and their pictorial representation were workshopped with the nine Elder/Co-researchers who validated these as a true reflection of Nyoongar/Aboriginal values regarding early child rearing and development.

Ethics

Ethical approval was received from the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee and the University of Western Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

A number of common attitudes, values and beliefs were expressed by participants at each of the forums and focus groups. These largely related to the specific things that were deemed important and considered by participants as unique in raising healthy, confident and proud Aboriginal children. With regard to the discussion on things that might get in the way of Aboriginal kids growing up solid in Perth, many participants spoke of negative perceptions of Aboriginal people and how they choose to raise children. This was especially noted in terms of particular child services including child protection. Participants described the barriers such perceptions pose to Aboriginal parents and families, in particular when accessing assistance from services including doctors and hospitals and engaging with their child's school. Child protection services were commonly referred to by participants as holding negative views and lacking a real understanding of the dynamics of Aboriginal families.

With regard to raising strong, solid Koolunga, the data analysis identified 17 themes, although there was some overlap across these, for instance, discussions around the importance of culture, language and identity. Some themes were more prominent than others, for example, the importance of a strong identity, learning language, belonging to large family and kinship networks and connection to culture. There were also some themes such as education,

feeling safe and the importance of good role models that are not exclusive to Aboriginal families (Irwin & Elley, 2011), but how participants discussed these was worth exploring to provide insights into Aboriginal perspectives and values on these factors.

All of the themes were summarised in a unique diagram (Figure 1) depicting the intrinsic values and factors required for healthy Aboriginal child development within the Nyoongar/Aboriginal community. This was then accepted and endorsed by over 60 Elders from the Perth Nyoongar/Aboriginal community at a special Elders meeting held by the project in October 2017.

The following provides further details from the data associated with each of the diagram's components.

Culture

Maintaining and sustaining culture were identified as critical to raising strong, solid kids. Participants described the importance of children's connection to culture as a source of strength and pride. They spoke of the value of children having access to, and experience of, cultural knowledge. A critical element of children's cultural knowledge was hearing stories from Elders about their lives and their experiences.

Culture not only embodies education but it embodies your spirit that is connected to greater than your house, you know, greater than that there, because your culture and your family is an extension of an Indigenous person to all over the place. (Participant, South Lake Community Forum, 2017)

We have to make our kids so proud of who they are and the colour they are and what their culture is so that when they do go to kindy or to school they are able to stand up. (Participant, Armadale Community Forum, 2016)

Connection to country

Nearly, all participants at the forums and focus groups were residing in an urban context; however, the role of Country in their lives and its significance to their children was highly valued. Participants described the importance of 'getting on Country' through trips to the bush, camping, going to the river, and crabbing and fishing at the beach. Some described the connection to country as a critical component of Aboriginal identity and family history. One participant stated that '*when you are out on country there is that connection and it does help you with your family*'. (Participant, Beechboro Community Forum, 2017)

Language

When participants spoke about the importance of culture to Aboriginal children, they made particular reference to the significance of learning Nyoongar language and the need to ensure that the language is not lost. Many parents questioned why their children do not learn Nyoongar at school and why Indonesian or French was regularly included as part of the school curriculum in preference to languages of local Aboriginal people. Participants also talked about the need for Nyoongar culture and history to be taught as part of the curriculum from Kindergarten onwards.

Parents want their children to learn language – this is really important. It is important that kids have access to language and that any words are passed on from a young age. It is a disservice that we teach kids other languages but not their own. (Participant, Champion Centre Focus Group, 2017)

Strong identity

Many participants regarded a child's strong sense of Aboriginal identity and pride in that identity as critical to their resilience,

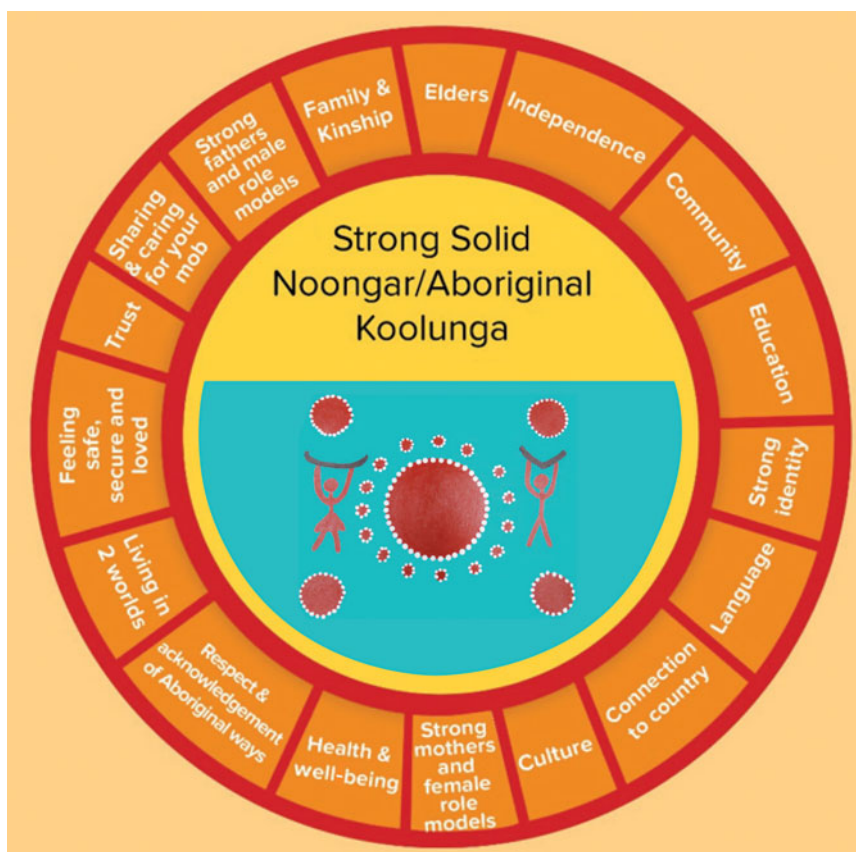


Fig. 1. Aboriginal community identified factors for healthy Aboriginal child development (Reprinted with permission from the Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort project, Telethon Kids Institute).

sense of self and belonging, confidence and learning. Culture and increased cultural knowledge were considered as integral to strengthening children's Nyoongar/Aboriginal identity. Participants were also unanimous about the importance of building and strengthening children's identity from good role modelling – especially when dealing with discrimination and racism. Related to this were participants' concerns about children experiencing shame about their identity because of the internalisation of negative stereotypes and both direct and indirect racism.

Kids need to know who they are, their identity, and become strong in the identity and their individualism, you know, 'I am me and this is who I am'. So they know themselves, who they are, instead of constantly being told who they are by somebody else. (Participant, Armadale Community Forum, 2016)

If we raise them to be proud of being a Nyoongar, show them all the good things there is, our kids will survive; they will survive. (Participant, Mirrabooka Community Forum, 2017)

Family, kinship and community

Family was seen as providing a child with a strong sense of security, belonging and support, as well as a sense of knowing who they are through an array of connections to a large network of relations, Elders and community members. Participants described the centrality of family in all Aboriginal people's lives and a concept of family that encompassed more than the child's immediate family of siblings and parents. Family was inclusive of a large network of relations who play an important role in a child's life and their development. The role of extended family in an Aboriginal child's

life was highly valued by participants. In addition to a child's parents, other family members are considered important to children's development, learning and access to and experience of cultural knowledge and kinship.

Participants identified a large family as a strength because it provides children with a wide group of people who care about them. It also means children socialise from a very young age and have multiple sources of guidance from people who are considered responsible for that child. The wider Aboriginal community is also seen as providing children with a sense of belonging, connection and relationships based on common experiences and historical connections. One participant at the Men's focus group noted a real strength from '*being present in our community, about being connected*'.

There is nothing stronger than being with family. Everything that you want to learn about your culture, respect, even how to be a decent person, it is passed down from generation to generation. So you have to yourself want to stay connected to your family. (Participant, Beechboro Community Forum, 2017)

There are a lot of things that are so important even from birth, and that comes from the family. The family has to be the key. That is the number one, is the family. It is the family that has to do all the things we would like children to be at when they turn six, and without the families, you know, then nobody else can do it. (Participant Armadale Community Forum, 2016)

Respect and acknowledgement of Aboriginal ways and living in two worlds

Participants suggested that a critical aspect to Aboriginal children's strength in terms of good early development was the need for

recognition and understanding of the importance and value of Aboriginal knowledge and ways of learning. They acknowledged that Aboriginal children grow up negotiating two worlds – an Aboriginal reality and worldview, and a life lived in mainstream environments. This was seen as particularly pronounced when an Aboriginal child commences formal schooling. One participant commented that the school environment *'is so different for Aboriginal children – they have to code switch because life at home is very different to what is expected, even at kindy'*. (Participant, Champion Centre Focus Group, 2017). Another reflected on the differences in an Aboriginal family home:

People need to understand there are different ways of living at home and there is a difference in how Nyoongar families operate. For many Aboriginal families there are always a lot of people around, children socialise from a young age and this is a strength for Aboriginal kids. (Participant, Hilton Kindilinks Focus Group, 2017)

Elders

Elders occupy an important position in Aboriginal communities. They are recognised and respected as authority figures who hold wisdom, cultural knowledge and stories that link the present to the past. The place of Elders in children's lives was raised by many participants as a critical aspect to raising strong and solid children. One participant at the South Lake Community Forum talked about how the Elders *'have been through a lot more and, you know, they are not your parents. I feel like they help you out more and you respect them more'*. Whether as direct family members or members of the wider community, an accepted part of Aboriginal child-rearing was the role of Elders in guiding Aboriginal children. Participants also talked about the important role Elders can play in helping parents and in other settings such as early learning environments and schools.

Just seems to make a lot of sense to me that if someone that is respected in the community goes and starts talking to parents, then that is probably going to have a much bigger impact than someone that is coming from the outside. (Participant, Mirrabooka Community Forum, 2017)

Health and well-being

Participants reported that positive social and emotional well-being is crucial for strong, solid, healthy children and that this is intimately connected to positive links with community, culture and country. As one participant described, kids need *'a solid family, a healthy solid family, healthy physically, socially, mentally, a good school. I said good food, fitness, fresh air, friends, all the F words, sport, put sport in there'*. (Participant, Beechboro Community Forum, 2017)

Sharing and caring for your mob

The importance of Aboriginal children being raised with a strong sense of sharing what they have – food, toys, money, knowledge, home – was identified by participants as an important component of Aboriginal culture. Many described the ways that children are shaped by strong values and expectations of sharing and caring for family and their community.

Aboriginal people value sharing, being generous, looking after each other within your family but also the wider community. We teach this to our kids from a young age – especially the importance of sharing. We share food, money, breastfeeding each other's kids. (Participant, Champion Centre Focus Group, 2017)

And he came home and he was really stressed. And he was like, 'Mum, the teacher said we are not allowed to share our food'. I said, 'Look, you go back and you tell your teacher this is what we do. We share. We have shared from the time that we have been here on this earth'. I said, 'And we will never change'. I said, 'We will never see another blackfella hungry or we go hungry together'. (Participant, Armadale Community Forum, 2016)

Education

In all of the forums and focus groups, parents repeatedly emphasised the importance of children attending school and getting an education. Participants also identified the importance of schools being an environment where Aboriginal children's identity and culture are recognised, respected and valued. The impact of the school environment was also seen as critical to a child's schooling experience, their attendance and parents' attitude to and engagement with the school. The kindy years were seen by participants as critical to two-way learning for all children and developing understanding and respect for cultural differences. Participants described the strengths and unique characteristics Aboriginal children bring to the school and the need to acknowledge this. They also talked about the importance of the education children receive from Elders and other family members. *'Education is about equipping for life, equipping as an Indigenous person, equipping them as role models, parents, as older siblings of the family'*. (Participant, South Lake Community Forum, 2017)

Children feeling safe, secure, loved and having trust

Participants talked about the importance of children hearing and feeling love, through words, actions and emotional care (nurture). There was also an emphasis placed on children feeling safe through having routine, structure, good food and sleep, discipline and boundaries. Self-esteem, self-respect, self-confidence and resilience were linked to children experiencing trust, positive language and having their dreams and aspirations supported and fostered. As one participant described it, their needs to always have *'more focus on the child and all the positive things that the child is doing, because that helps the child in the long run growing up not to go towards the negative, but to focus on the positive'*. (South Lake Community Forum, 2017)

Nothing but love, just being surrounded by love from mum and dad from a young age, and to be able to smother my little ones with love just so they are not lost, that is one of the main areas that I want to focus on as being a father. (Participant, Men's Focus Group, 2017)

Independence

Parents placed a high value on children's independence and often from a young age. They talked about the role that older cousins and other family members play in teaching children to be independent. There were many examples provided of young children deciding what time they go to bed and getting themselves to school. Many participants also emphasised the importance Aboriginal families place on children's sense of freedom and play rather than discipline and rules. *'There is a sense of freedom in Aboriginal families and ways of parenting that are unique and provide a carefree environment for children'*. (Participant, Champion Centre Focus Group, 2017) There was also a noted perception of this being in contrast to the limits imposed on children within non-Aboriginal families.

Strong mothers and female role models

The presence of strong Aboriginal role models in children's lives was considered an important aspect to raising children. Strong mothers and grandmothers were acknowledged by participants for their critical roles in supporting, nurturing and protecting families. *'The best teacher in the child's life is generally the mother or the grandmother, one that is there for them. And that is where a lot of the teaching has got to start'*. (Participant, Mirrabooka Community Forum, 2017)

Strong fathers and male role models

Participants talked about the importance of having strong, loving fathers and other male role models for Aboriginal children. The participants at the men's focus group acknowledged the role that men must play and the lack of male role models for many Aboriginal children.

We always look at the women as the core, the backbone of the group, but a lot of the problems with all these young fellas is they have had their mums but they have never had a strong role model as in a male, a male role model, because a young man like myself, I can only look up to my mum so much, you know. She can't be my dad. That's it; that's it. I can only look up to my mum so much, so I have had to reach out and source out other positive Elders and men in the community. (Participant, Men's Focus Group, 2017)

I am able to respect myself, respect my family, and hold myself in a manner in the community and understand that I'm a man and I have got a family. I have got little ones, so I have got to get out and I've got to do things and I've got to fend for my family and I've got to work. (Participant, Men's Focus Group, 2017)

As a young man I knew I was going to be a strong leader. I thought I was going to be a strong leader as a footballer, but I'm more than that. I'm a strong leader because I'm a Nyoongar Yamatji man and it doesn't matter if it is footy. I'm going to lead without sport. I'm going to do it as a person. (Participant, Men's Focus Group, 2017)

Limitations

The project's consultation processes were conducted in an urban context with a number of Aboriginal/Nyoongar families and as such do not, and could not, involve the whole Nyoongar community. However, we suggest that many of the findings from the parents and families we did consult would apply to many Nyoongar families living in the Perth metropolitan area and the broader Nyoongar Nation, and indeed other Aboriginal families living in Perth and other metropolitan areas.

Discussion

Research on Australian Aboriginal early childhood development is typically focused on differences in outcomes and associated risks using mainstream (western) viewpoints and frameworks, with few studies exploring Aboriginal values, priorities and traditions regarding child rearing and child development. While extremely important, the ongoing preoccupation and emphasis on the disadvantages experienced by many Aboriginal families contribute to a view of Aboriginal families as inherently dysfunctional. Existing indicator and reporting frameworks further entrench the rhetoric of Aboriginal people failing to meet the mark. This deficit discourse (Bishop, 1998; Fforde, Bamblett, Lovett, Gorringer, & Fogarty, 2013) has also left very little space for a research or policy agenda that recognises the unique differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal concepts of early childhood development.

The data collected through the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* project's community forums and focus groups outlined 17 factors that are central, binding features of Nyoongar/Aboriginal early childhood development. These findings demonstrate a strong and consistent set of beliefs and values held by Nyoongar/Aboriginal parents, carers and grandparents. Many of these differ in particular ways to non-Aboriginal values and practices and can be seen as stemming from a different worldview with different ideas and beliefs about children and good early development.

Other research has described the differences within a Nyoongar/Aboriginal worldview and the significance of social relationships in this kin-based society (Wright et al., 2016). Wright et al. (2016) suggested that non-Aboriginal people often struggle to understand these differences. They found that a lack of trust between mental health service providers and Nyoongar/Aboriginal families stemmed from a lack of understanding of the critical differences in social relationships. This, then, creates a barrier for Aboriginal people that impacts on their engagement with services and reduces the quality of response by services. This is not specific to Nyoongar people. Lohar et al. (2014) found that Aboriginal worldviews are largely not understood or shared by non-Aboriginal staff working with many Aboriginal communities, which impacts on the cultural relevance and suitability of many programmes, services and advice provided to Aboriginal parents.

Currently, much early childhood development policy in Australia fails to effectively respond to the different ways Aboriginal families raise their children. A lack of knowledge or recognition of the differing values and priorities among Aboriginal families is contributing to an already serious lack of trust in mainstream services by many Aboriginal families, as well as successive policy failures. Participants in the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* community engagement processes talked about the lack of policies and programmes that suit Aboriginal families and the extent to which services and providers do not understand the differences between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal ways of raising children. Participants were especially critical of early years' programmes and schools that were unable to recognise or respect cultural differences and specific Aboriginal child-rearing practices. This was seen as detracting from the unique strengths of an Aboriginal child whose differences were not valued or seen as contributing to the knowledge and learning of all children.

Many participants talked of the need for more Aboriginal teachers, education assistants and liaison officers within schools and kindies to bridge the gap between Aboriginal families and mainstream settings. This resonates with the research undertaken by that identified Nyoongar/Aboriginal parents' concerns with a school's readiness to provide for their children by understanding their differences and valuing their strengths. Taylor, Kickett-Tucker and others note that a successful transition to early schooling requires schools to recognise the importance of the child's Aboriginality and to understand the differences in their early socialisation and culturally specific capacities and characteristics (Jackiewicz et al., 2008; Taylor, 2011; Kickett-Tucker et al., 2015; Kitson & Bowes, 2010).

Participants in the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* project also talked about their child-rearing values and practices being viewed negatively or seen as poorer than those of non-Aboriginal families. Many participants described the ways in which Aboriginal families are compared to a specific non-Aboriginal nuclear model and judged as inadequate or deficient. They talked of misunderstanding

and perceptions of Aboriginal parents as neglectful and children being seen as potentially at risk. This issue was often raised with regard to non-Aboriginal staff in a range of settings who are perceived as negatively judging Aboriginal parents. Participants described how this judgement can be internalised by Aboriginal parents and can negatively shape and moderate their behaviour. Furthermore, this was seen as a distinct barrier to attending a raft of services, including hospitals, doctors, schools and parenting services. Others have found a similar experience in other parts of Australia with regard to non-Aboriginal staff working in hospitals, health services including mental health as well as child, family and parenting services (Durey, Thompson, & Wood, 2012; Isaacs, Pyett, Oakley-Browne, Gruis, & Waples-Crowe, 2010; Reibel, Morrison, Griffin, Chapman, & Woods, 2015).

Participants in the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* project were especially critical of being judged negatively by non-Aboriginal staff working in child protection services. Other research in Australia has also explored the devastating implications of cross-cultural misunderstandings in child protection practice and policy (Funston & Herring, 2016; Lindstedt, Moeller-Saxone, Black, Herrman, & Szwarc, 2017; Long & Sephton, 2011; Yeo, 2003). Yeo explored a number of Australian Aboriginal values and practices of child rearing to examine the way cultural differences about behaviour, relatedness, sensitivity and competence influence the meaning and psychology of secure attachment (Yeo, 2003). The author concluded that behaviours and outcomes considered indicative of a child's secure attachment and bonding within western culture differ considerably to those within the Aboriginal cultural values she explored. This evidence led the author to question the basis on which Aboriginal children and Aboriginal caregivers are assessed in child protection practice. Similarly, Ryan (2011) concluded that a greater understanding of the differences between Australian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal values is critical to child protection assessments and how parenting behaviour is interpreted by child protection practitioners and policy makers (Ryan, 2011).

Similar conclusions about the disconnection of child and family policies and services directed at Aboriginal people have been drawn from researchers in Canada and New Zealand (Fernandez & Atwood, 2013; Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013; Toombs, Dawson, Bobinski, Dixon, & Mushquash, 2018; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). As with Australia, Aboriginal people in these countries continue to experience the devastating impact of historical child removal policies and the contemporary over-representation of their children in out of home care. Many suggest that the current situation within services in these countries is evidence of the pervasive effect of cultural bias that stems from a lack of understanding about Aboriginal families (Blackstock, 2009; Choate & Engstrom, 2014; Lindstrom & Choate, 2017). This entrenched misunderstanding, especially within services intervening in the lives of vulnerable Aboriginal families, can only add to the trauma parents experience and make it even more difficult for them to engage with the support services they may need.

Conclusion

The findings from the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* community engagement processes provide evidence of distinct, contemporary Nyoongar/Aboriginal values and priorities with regard to child rearing among urban dwelling Nyoongar/Aboriginal people in the Perth metropolitan area.

While it is important to avoid generalisations about Aboriginal child rearing, this research project is seeking to enhance the understanding among policy makers and service providers of positive and unique Aboriginal practices, values and beliefs. The project is being directed and controlled by the Aboriginal community to ensure that the research is advancing respect for Aboriginal knowledge, while applying that knowledge to help address and mitigate the damaging effects of misguided systems and policies. A lack of understanding is a fundamental obstacle to effective and appropriate policies, service design and the uptake of programmes by many Aboriginal people. This results in low rates of service utilisation, and therefore many missed opportunities to work with families to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children.

While there is a need for change in order to address the disadvantage faced by many Aboriginal children, this firstly requires a better understanding of Aboriginal worldviews, values and priorities. This, in turn, requires evidence and understanding of those differences, as articulated by Aboriginal people. Only then can policies, resources and services directed to Aboriginal children and families begin to be culturally appropriate and/or aligned with peoples' actual needs, values and priorities. While the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* project is not advocating a one-size-fits-all approach, it is working to achieve far greater understanding by government departments about the values and priorities across the Nyoongar/Aboriginal community of urban Perth with regard to their children.

Ultimately, alternative and more positive ways of viewing Aboriginal parenting require a far better understanding of Aboriginal priorities and practices with regard to raising children and recognition of the differences (not deficiencies) to non-Aboriginal beliefs and practices. This must be the starting point for the development of any Aboriginal child and family policy and the design of services that aim to respond appropriately to the specific needs of Aboriginal children and their families.

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