



<http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au>

This is the Author's version of the paper published as:

**Author:** L. Zeldenryk and Yalmambirra

**Author Address:** yalmambirra@csu.edu.au

**Title:** A Study of Occupational Deprivation: Australia's Policy of Assimilation

**Year:** 2006

**Journal:** Australian Occupational Therapy Journal

**Volume:** 53

**Issue:** 1

**Pages:** 43-46

**Date:** March

**ISSN:** 0045-0766

**URL: Keywords:** Occupational Deprivation, Social Justice, Indigenous Australians.

**A Study of Occupational Deprivation:  
Australia's Policy of Assimilation**

Submitted to:

Australian Occupational Therapy Journal

by

Lynne Zeldenryk, Occupational Therapy Student, Charles Sturt University,  
Albury NSW Australia. 2640

Yalmambirra, Koorie Academic, Charles Sturt University, Albury NSW  
Australia. 2640



### **Keywords:**

Occupational deprivation, social justice, indigenous Australians.

*“I’ve heard it said that time heals all wounds. That may be true but wounds leave scars and these scars are reminders”* (Yalmambirra 2000, p.136).

Wilcock (2003) has recently reminded our profession of the importance of understanding the occupational experiences of the past, in order to recognise how historical events impact on the health of individuals and communities today. One area of Australia’s history we have found to be notably absent from occupational science literature is that of the forced removal of indigenous children from their families. However, we believe this period of Australian history holds many lessons for our profession and for occupational science. Hence, within this paper we aim to give a brief overview of Australia’s policy of assimilation of indigenous Australian’s and how enactment of this policy deprived indigenous youth of engagement in culturally significant occupations. We argue that this lack of engagement of culturally significant occupations is a clear example of occupational deprivation. Whiteford (2000, cited in Kang 2003, p.100) describes occupational deprivation as ‘a state of preclusion from engagement in occupations of necessity and/or meaning due to factors that stand outside the immediate control of the individual’.

Within this paper, we analyse how the forced removal of children from their families and communities, through the Commonwealth policy of assimilation, was indeed an external force of control which deprived indigenous children of culturally significant occupations.

This paper outlines our analysis of three aspects of occupational deprivation we believe resulted from children being forcibly removed from their families. (1) In, *the deprivation of a culturally significant social environment*, we discuss how indigenous children were denied

access to their families, and consequently prevented from learning their cultures and their associated roles and occupations. (2) In, *the deprivation of one's land and story*, we examine how children were prevented from engaging in occupations relating to the stories of their people, their land and their role within society (the Dreamings, the Dreamtime and/or the Dreaming). (3) In, *Deprivation of initiation processes*, we analyse how children were denied their rightful place in initiation processes, ceremonies, and occupations, leading to the preclusion of the establishment of culturally significant roles within their community. We will examine evidence of these significant forms of occupational deprivation in an attempt to gain some insight into an area of occupational justice which, so far, has been left untouched within occupational science literature.

### **A Dark Side of Australia's History**

From 1912 to 1962, it is estimated that two out of every three children of 'part descent' were removed from their families for a portion of their childhood as part of the Commonwealth policy of removal (Briskman 2003). This policy of assimilation instigated the removal of Indigenous children from their families, their communities and thus, all of the associated culturally meaningful practices and occupations of that community (Austin 1995).

Often these children were taken to institutions such as missions, where any seemingly 'black' acts of language were discouraged, often forcibly (Bringing Them Home 1997). In place of their traditional cultures, it would appear that children were instead educated in

Christian belief systems, forced to conform to vastly different gender roles and non-indigenous technology (McDonald 1995).

The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (1997), found that, for these children, the effects of being separated from their families and their cultures continue to be, 'multiple and profoundly disabling' (Bringing Them Home 1997, p.178). Given that these practices continued until forty years ago, it should be acknowledged by all Australian's that many indigenous peoples, past and present, have been affected by this infamous period of Australia's history. It is vital therefore, we believe, that an understanding of the issues, and their impacts on indigenous peoples, becomes a necessary tool which all practitioners working with indigenous peoples should utilise.

### **Deprivation of Culturally Significant Social Environment**

Our occupational experiences shape, and are shaped by, the culture in which we are living (Christiansen and Townsend 2004). Culture has been defined as 'a set of values and ideas which contains the distinctive way of life of a group of people and which tends to persist through time and is transmitted from generation to generation (Telling Our Story 1995, p 52 cited in Bringing Them Home 1997, p 218). Culture is also seen to give 'its individual members a sense of who they are and where they belong' (Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1995, p25, cited in Bringing Them Home 1997, p218).

Christiansen and Townsend (2004, p146) state that, 'communities develop a sense of communication and emotional support... as members generate shared beliefs, traditions and goals through shared occupations'. Within indigenous cultures, the whole community is regarded as family, whereby parenting roles are shared between the members (Bringing Them Home 1997; Briskman 2003). Within imposed institutions such as missions and

reserves, the majority of children had their ties with their families forcibly removed (Bringing Them Home 1997). The children were deprived of the social contact and love of family. As one person recalls;

*“We had no-one to guide us. I felt so isolated, alienated...none of that family bonding, nurturing – nothing”* (Confidential evidence 248, cited in Bringing Them Home 1997, p184).

This deprivation of social contact with families and communities is also inextricably linked with the loss of security and psychological well-being of children (Bringing Them Home 1997). In explaining the case of a client who was forcibly removed, and later diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, a psychologist stated that:

*“The most significant pain for him has been the loss of family and the separation from his own kin...he feels that throughout his life he has had no anchor, no resting place, no relationship he could rely on or trust”* (Bringing Them Home 1997, case example, p197).

### **Spiritual Deprivation of One’s Land and Story (Dreamings)**

According to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) (1998), indigenous peoples identity is directly linked to the land one was conceived in, born in, and survived in. The land is both a physical environment and a map of the spiritual story of a people (ATSIC 1998) and an environment that was both a source of economy and identity (Coutts 1981). This spiritual relationship began when the ancestral beings created the land and the community through their journeys (ATSIC 1998). As Deborah Bird Rose (1995 cited in ATSIC 1998, p45) stated,

*“The Australian continent is criss-crossed with the tracks of the Dreamings...leaving parts and essences of themselves. To know the country is to know the story of how it came into being...how the human owners of that land came into being.”*

Children taken away from their communities and lands were deprived of knowledge of the source of their existence (Briskman 2003). In this way, we would argue that these children suffered spiritual deprivation, whereby their sense of being and belonging was destroyed (Kang 2003). As one woman who was removed from her community recalled,

*“We had no identity with the land, no identity with a certain people”* (Confidential evidence 289, Bringing Them Home, p203).

The land also revealed the law and detailed what occupations the community were to do to protect their environment, their ancestry and their survival (ATSIC 1998). The land revealed the social and spiritual tasks which were required. ATSIC (1998, p42) states, ‘connection between a clan and its land involves both rights and duties, rights to use the land and its products and duties to tend the land through the performance of ceremonies’.

In this way, the environment compelled the community and its individuals towards certain occupations for survival of the community and its culture (Yalmambirra 2000). Children removed from their peoples and their lands were deprived of this education, and therefore were not given the knowledge that the land and they were connected; they knew not of their beginnings, of their cultures, or of how to survive.

## **Deprivation of Initiation Processes**



Traditionally, education was gained through the elders, those who were given specific knowledge by other elders before them (Ilyatjari 1998). This knowledge encompassed the all the environments and in due cause all would come to know the land intimately (Yalmambirra 2000). This knowledge was not revealed abruptly, but rather, passed on at appropriate times to an individual over the life course through initiation ceremonies (Bell 1998). In this way, the indigenous concept of time was not revealed through clocks, days or calendars, but rather through events, ceremonies and initiation processes (Yalmambirra 2000). Wisdom was not held through years spent on earth, but rather, through the ascertaining of gender-specific acts and occupations (Coutts 1981).

Ritual initiation processes were vital to the development of a community and to the role a child would play within it (Bell 1998). Individuals acquired knowledge of their cultural heritage, explanations of the universe, rules of society and the role which they held within their community through initiation ceremonies.

Initiation was the source of ones identity within their community and the environment (Bringing Them Home 1997). In this way, knowledge gained through initiation served to define the occupational roles the child would hold.

Through the cultural practice of initiation, children were taught how to make culturally specific equipment which would aid in sustaining them during traditional practices such as hunting and gathering (Craven 1999), and the communication of their Dreaming throughout their life (Coutts 1981). The technologies of indigenous communities allowed for a specific purpose and function, with utilised materials available to them from the surrounding environment (Ferraro 1995). It would appear that in this way, the environment, person, task and occupation were all interrelated. Within our discipline of occupational therapy, these technologies are regarded as community technology, or everyday technology used to meet individual needs.

For the children who were taken away from their communities, this intricate knowledge of their cultures, learnt through phases of initiation, did not occur. The children were not taught how to live with the environment, nor how to source specific technology for survival. It is a well established belief within occupational therapy that what we 'do' as humans considerably impacts on who we are to 'become' (Wilcock 1999). For the children who were forcibly removed, we believe that, having missed out on, or 'doing', culturally significant occupations has impacted on who they have become (Briskman 2003).

In place of traditional occupations, children learnt non-indigenous skills and associated technologies, such as writing, sewing, cleaning, stock-work, and gardening (McDonald 1995). It is interesting to note that whilst these occupations may be central to non-indigenous culture, none hold value in terms of an indigenous child's survival within their own culture. Instead, these occupations further served to alienate many of them from their cultures, lands and peoples (Lewis 1997). In the majority of cases, with devastating effects.

The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, found that the removal of children from their communities has contributed to significant psychological and physical health problems within the indigenous community today (Bringing Them Home 1997). The Bringing Them Home Report (1997, p549) quotes the Aboriginal Mental Health Unit (AMHU) in providing the following statement:

*“Presenting issues arise predominantly from the removal and disruption of the strong bonds of family and kinship...we believe that it has been the single most significant factor in emotional and mental health problems”.*

For others, lack of initiation and knowledge of their own culture prevented them from returning home when they were older (Bringing Them Home 1997). Those who did return home, often they had no established roles within the community and took much longer to pass through initiation. As one person recalled,

*“When I came back...it took me 40 odd years before I became a man in my own eoples eyes, through Aboriginal law. Whereas I should have went through that when I was about 12 years of age”* (Confidential evidence 179, cited in Bringing Them Home 1997, p203).

## **Conclusion**

In order to understand the impacts of occupational deprivation on indigenous children, a greater understanding of this period of Australian history is needed by those within the discipline of Occupational Therapy. This is crucial, in order to fully understand and comprehend what the children were deprived of, and consequently, the cultures which they lost, or that were never given in the first place; cultures which were theirs by rights of birth. What we may learn from this understanding is that these children were denied a range of culturally significant occupations, and a genuine identity within their community.

We believe further investigation by those within the discipline of Occupational Therapy, into the impact of the removal of indigenous children from their families is clearly warranted. Whilst a range of perspectives exist as to the nature of the relationship between specific events in Australia's history and the current health status of indigenous Australians today, we feel an analysis of the narrative evidence points strongly to a negative causal relationship. In other words, levels of wellness in Aboriginal communities today are inextricably linked with the past.

Hence, it is vital that further investigation is undertaken which explores the experiences of families who lost children, and the impact of the loss of significant sibling, parental and family roles. In regards to our clinical practice, it could be argued that there is a great need to encourage indigenous peoples into the profession in order for culturally relevant practices to emerge.

Finally as Gail Whiteford (2003) recently noted, occupational therapists have been notably absent in commentary on social injustices and the impact on the health of Australians. In our view, now is the time for those engaged in the discipline of occupational therapy to bring their understanding of the issues to the light of day, and contribute to those issues in partnership with Indigenous peoples.

## References

ATSIC 1998, *As a matter of fact: Answering the myths and misconceptions about indigenous Australians*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Canberra.

Austin, T 1995, 'Introduction', *Between two worlds - The Commonwealth government and the removal of Aboriginal children of part descent in the Northern Territory*, R McDonald (ed.), Australian Archives, IAD Press, Alice Springs.

Bell, D 1998, 'Aboriginal women's religion: A shifting law of the land', *Traditional Aboriginal society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. MCMILLAN EDUCATION, South Yarra, Victoria.

Bringing Them Home: *Report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*, April 1997, Sterling Press.

Briskman, L 2003, *The black grapevine: Aboriginal activism and the stolen generations*, The Federation Press, Sydney.

Christiansen, C & Townsend, E 2004, 'The occupational nature of communities', *Introduction to occupation: The art and science of living*, CH Christiansen & EA Townsend (eds.), Prentice Hall, New Jersey.

Craven, R 1999, 'Encounters in time: Archaeology, anthropology', *Teaching Aboriginal studies*, R Craven (ed.), Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Coutts, PJF 1981, *Readings in Victorian pre-history, Volume 2: The Victorian aborigines*, Victorian Archaeological Survey, Ministry for Conservation, Victoria.

Ferraro, G 1995, *Cultural anthropology: An applied perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. West Publishing Company, Minnesota.

Ilyatjari, N 1998, 'Traditional Aboriginal Learning: How I learned as a Pitjantjatjara child', *Traditional Aboriginal society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. MCMILLAN EDUCATION, South Yarra, Victoria.

Kang, C 2003, 'A psychospiritual integration frame of reference for occupational therapy. Part 1: Conceptual foundations', *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, vol. 50, pp.92-103.

Lewis, D 1997, *A shared history: Aborigines and white Australians in the Victoria River District, Northern Territory*, Timber Creek Community Government Council, Darwin.

McDonald, R 1995, *Between two worlds: The Commonwealth government and the removal of Aboriginal children of part descent in the Northern Territory*, IAD Press, Alice Springs.

Whiteford, G 2003, 'The occupational issues of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia', *OT Australia national conference and exhibition delegate handbook*, Sofitel Hotel, Melbourne, pp. 83-84.

Wilcock, AA 1999, 'Reflections on doing, being and becoming', *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, vol.16, pp.1-22.

Wilcock, AA 2003, 'Making sense of what people do: Historical perspectives', *Journal of Occupational Science*, vol.10, pp.4-6.

Yalmambirra 2000, 'Black time...White time...My time...Your time', *Journal of Occupational Science*, vol. 7, pp.133-137.