

SAFE, PROTECTED CONNECTED?

Applying Aboriginal
understandings of
permanency and
attachment in
practice

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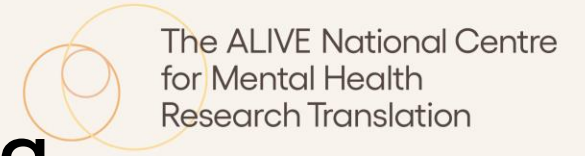
Acknowledgement of Country, Stolen Generations and lived experience

Most of us girls were **thinking white in the head but were feeling black inside**. We weren't black or white. We were a very lonely, lost and sad displaced group of people.

We were taught to think and act like a white person, but we didn't know how to think and act like an Aboriginal. **We didn't know anything about our culture...**

Confidential submission 617, NSW: woman removed at 8 years with her 3 sisters in the 1940s; placed in Cootamundra Girls' Home. (BTH Report, p 131)

Safe, protected, connected : The best interests of Aboriginal children and permanency planning in the NSW care and protection system



- PhD research, UTS Faculty of Law → socio-legal study
- Research question arose from 2010's permanency reforms:
 - What are Aboriginal community member understandings of the core legal and social concepts of 'the best interests of the child' and 'permanency' in decisions about children's care?
- Qualitative interviews and yarning circles with First Nations community members about family life, child rearing practices
- Thematic analyses – models of best interests, permanency and attachment emerged

Attachment | Cultural attachment: They're the stepping stones..."

Leila, Yarning Circle 7 (counsellor, grandmother): Aboriginal children: Brought to you by the world's greatest attachment scientists! ...

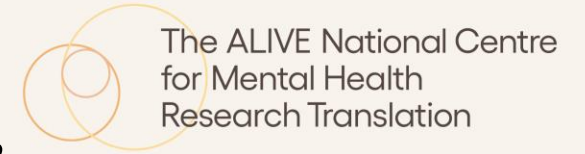
Because they're attached to ... their **mothers** and **fathers, aunts** and **uncles, grandparents**, their **brothers** and **sisters**, their **cousins**, their **landscape**, their **totems**, their **ancestors**...

Whereas... I don't (feel) it's the same for kids growing up in a nuclear family ... whatever their culture (is) ...

Culturally, (attachment is) the lifeline to your place in the world.

They're the **stepping stones**, those attachments, **to where you came from and where you're going to go**, in terms of when you pass away and go back there.

Attachment: He is attached to me, but he's also attached to his mum and he's also attached to my partner ... his dad... his Nan..."



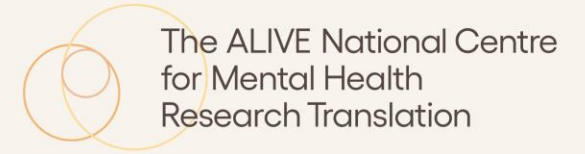
Karina, Yarning Circle 1 (part time informal carer of younger cousin): Like my little cousin, he loves his mum, but he was like "you're like my mum hey, because you do this, you do that!"

I was like "oh, I'm your cousin!" And he goes "but you're like my mum to me, so I've got two mums!" And I was like "all right then bub!"

He is attached to me, but he's also attached to his mum! And he's also attached to my partner ... his dad... his Nan.

It's... the same relationship with all of us, like he loves us all. [I]t's not any different to how he loves his mum, to how he loves us; 'cause it's all the same 'cause he's grown up with us for so long. So that's all he knows!

Attachment | Cultural attachment: Their relationships *are* culture!”



Nancy, Yarning Circle 10 (Mother and non-DCJ service provider): When you talk (on) Family Finding, placement ... it comes back to ... connection...

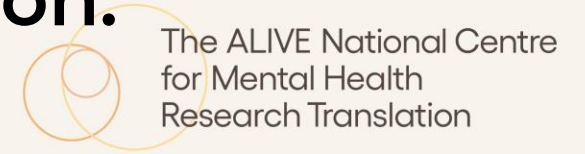
Lola (Mother and non-DCJ care sector service provider): And lots of *our* cultural plans, it's all focussed on increasing (family) visits ... The kids need to know who they are and where they fit within their family.

One of the hard things is ... you hear caseworkers say “But when there's contact, they're (the Aboriginal family) not doing cultural stuff!” ...

Why is it (that) for our kids, our contact has to be when they do their cultural (support)? They should be having family time, like everybody else (in care)! Not doing their Life Story book...

Their relationships *are* culture! Far out! Yeah definitely.

Attachment, Aboriginal children and assimilation: “She’s not attached; she doesn’t care!”



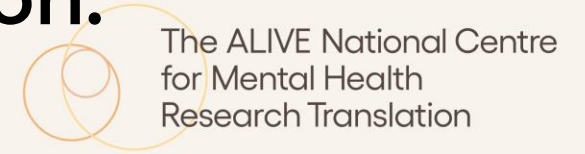
Lola, Yarning Circle 10: Even around attachment (and) Aboriginal people ... We're having these kids not go home, 'cause (the Department's) saying they're bonded and attached to the carers ... and I'm like "No! It doesn't work like that." It's really frustrating...

Nancy: So a child gets removed and his mum sits there and doesn't say anything.. and then she's judged by DCJ workers as "She's not attached, she doesn't care!" ...

But if she gets up yelling, screaming ... jumping around and throwing things ... making threats, then "She's aggressive and she's a risk" ...

Lola: It's how they look at resistance, like our families are resisting... in whatever (ways) they can, but then that's used *against* them.

Attachment, Aboriginal children and assimilation: Loss of Mob and cultural disconnection



Marcy, Yarning Circle 7 (Mother, community worker, 3rd generation in family removed): I started connecting with my family when 20, then ... 30s and now 40s, so... **I didn't have any connection... when I was little...** I think ... Oh I'm crying... **the things that I missed out on was learning about culture... And... part of my identity, of who I am.**

And sometimes... it is a little **difficult** when people would... talk about (**cultural**) stuff and **I've got no understanding around it...**

I'm not saying that it would have been ideal for me to be within my family, because of the trauma that happened... I know my grandmother ... she was removed from *her* family. So, I think it was quite hard for her ... through the **removal of her and her siblings,** and (their) **not being together,** she made choices... So, **she was removed, then her children were removed.**

Permanency planning - background

...systematic process of carrying out, in a **brief, time-limited period**, a **set of goal-directed activities** designed to help children live in **safe families** that offer ... a **sense of belonging and legal, lifetime family ties**.

Maluccio, Anthony N et al,
'Beyond PP' (1980) 59(9)
Child Welfare 515

- PP primary **intent** under US *Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act 1980* (42 USC 622) (the 'AACWA') and intensive resourcing, agency and caseworker training and casework practice were directed at **safe reunification** of children with parents, i.e.:
 1. Reunification.
 2. Extended family (kinship) placement.
 3. OOHC.
- **Informed by attachment theory**
- PP **originally** meant to emphasise **wrap-around family support** services.

Legal permanence

Participant views on legal notions of permanence:

Lola, Yarning Circle 10: In the **Western world, stability** might be you stay (in a **placement**) for the next **18 years**... But for lots of **our kids**, [it] is **being amongst your community ... your family and learning culture.**"

- Child /young person's stability ↔ taking rightful place in family.
- Being safe, amongst extended family, community and culture is crucial – legal orders irrelevant.
- Legal placement / breakdown / lack of placement monitoring all pose substantial risk to kids' long-term, overall safety, stability.
- Adoption, changing family name unsuitable for Mob; severs family & cultural ties, takes away name (key to identity, interconnection).

Physical permanence

Bruce, Yarning Circle 8
(grandfather, educator):
“Learning about our
connection to country,
to each other and the
natural world ...
understanding **we have a**
belonging and a **place.**”



Relational/emotional permanence

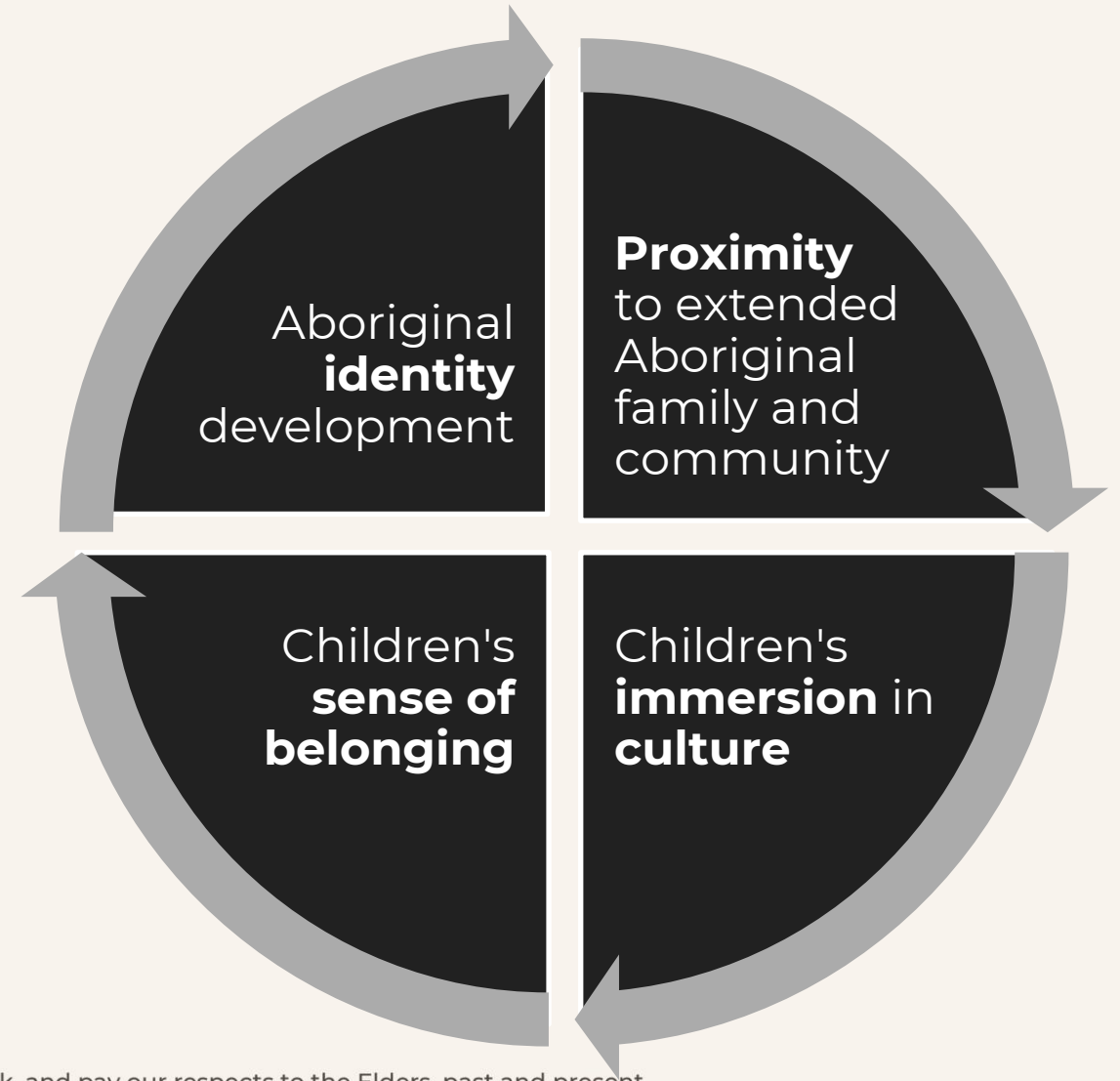
Gracie Lee, Interview 4
(grandmother,
counsellor). 'That **sense
of belonging... that
comes from within.** Like
"I belong in Nan's house"
or "I belong in Auntie's
house ..."'



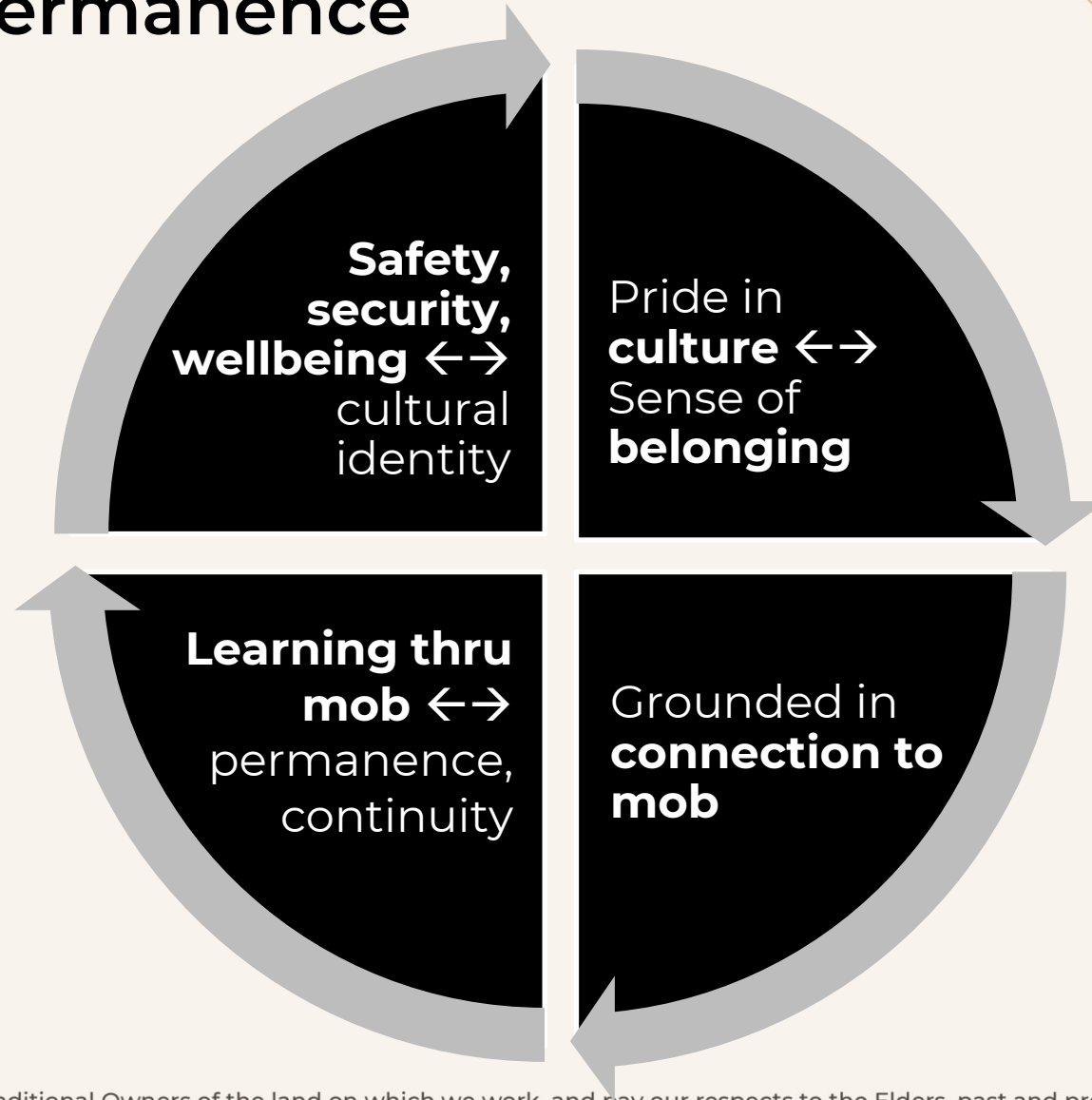
Cultural permanence: 'Strong in your roots ... about who you are and where you come from'

Nancy, Yarning Circle 10: (It's) about belonging ... It's really about knowing who you are and... where you're from, knowing your place in that family...

I think if you're **strong in your own roots** and your own foundations about who you are and where you come from, whether it's from good, bad or otherwise ... (you can say) **"I know who I am and I know where I come from."**



Reconceptualising permanence: Dimensions of permanence



Cultural permanence: 'Strong in your roots ... about who you are and where you come from'

Myra, Interview 2 (grandmother, counsellor): I think **knowing who your mob is** (is crucial)...

I've seen a lot of people who say they *think* they're Aboriginal and ... and they're trying to find out. But they have *no idea* and they're *adults*. So ... when they were children, they've lost all... the connections, the families.

I think **the ones who know who they are, know their culture, know their mob, have got this ... connection. They've got this sense of... identity, they've got their family...** They've got *everything*, really. ...

But then... I think the ones who *haven't* got their identity and... *don't* know, they've missed out."

Permanence - Care Sharing: The way we look after our children... it's not just one person"

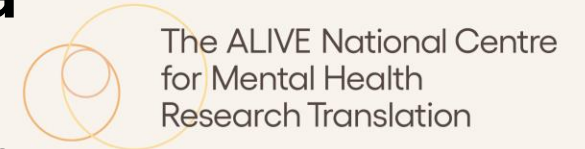
Annie, Yarning Circle 1 (mother, community worker): **The way we look after our people, our children... it's not just one person.** You know I was **brought up** in a **stable home** ... **But it wasn't just mum and dad...** I think in a lot of Aboriginal communities, that's the way that we are ...

We all play a certain part in a child's life.

Bronwyn (grandmother, community worker): If it's my son's child (who's in need), I won't necessarily tell him to run to dad... I'll say "here, **go and tell aunty!**"...

Annie: It's whoever's there eh!

Case study – Jed’s story: It *is* permanency in a way, but it’s shared round...”



Bronwyn, Yarning Circle 1: His (Jed’s) dad’s side of the family was non-Aboriginal, so he wasn’t really gettin’ that culture at that beginning. But now he’s with two Aboriginal people. Plus, he’s getting it from the extended family and the immediate family. So he’s connected to all of us ... he’s seeing all his family ... his biological dad ... all of his grandmothers. ...

[I]n the beginning ... he wasn’t getting the safety and the proper health care and the stuff like that; but now he’s getting everything, so it’s really good ...

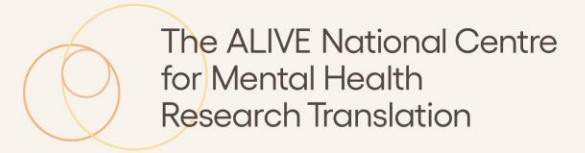
Karina: To me culture’s like everything. So it’d be probably very important for him. If I didn’t know where my family was from I’d probably feel lost ... It’s good that they’re doing this.

Annie: It’s your identity; it’s who you are and where you’re from.

Acknowledgements

- Community members who participated in the research
- Community organisations that supported the research, helped with recruitment
- Supervisors Prof. Karen O’Connell and Prof. Terri Libesman
- Aunty Bev Eaton and Sonia Kennedy
- UTS Faculty of Law and Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research

Resources



- **Thesis link:** <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/10453/161122>
(Contains links to literature on attachment theory, permanency planning etc)
- **Stolen Generations-related info:**
 - <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/stolen-generations>
 - <https://healingfoundation.org.au/who-are-the-stolen-generations/>
 - Make Healing Happen report (2021) re experiences, impact, demographics & needs - <https://healingfoundation.org.au/make-healing-happen/> (in revision)
 - Videos - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6oQ4JoAj6o>
 - Lola Edwards' story - <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/awaye/alberts-gift-part-1---lolas-story/3670106> and <https://humanrights.gov.au/node/16536>
- **National Inquiry - Bringing Them Home Report**
 - Interactive map - <https://bth.humanrights.gov.au/our-stories/map>
 - BTH Report - <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997>
 - Link-Up book - <https://aiatsis.library.link/portal/In-the-best-interest-of-the-child--stolen/TaF29zD76X8/>