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## **SESSION 01: The political transformation of health research**

### **‘They grew up in full knowledge of their backgrounds’: The generational implications of the dormitory system in Aboriginal communities**

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*Abstract. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the last of the mission dormitories in  
Aboriginal communities closed. After decades of experiencing institutional care, children  
were returned to the responsibility of their parents and families.*

*In 2000, the Senate referred an inquiry to its Legal and Constitutional References  
Committee in relation to the recommendations of the Human Rights and Equal  
Opportunity Commission Report, Bringing Them Home. The Senate asked the Committee  
to investigate ‘the adequacy and effectiveness of the Government’s response to the  
recommendations of the report’.*

*In reference to those children who were grown up in mission or community dormitories  
the Government submitted that such children ‘were not distanced from their families and  
grew up in full knowledge of their backgrounds’.*

*In this paper the author, present when one mission dormitory closed in 1973, describes  
some of the background to the establishing of these dormitories and their later  
dismantling. He argues for greater consideration of those who grew up in these  
dormitories and deeper appreciation of the generational implications for people’s health  
and wellbeing.*

#### **Introduction**

In March 2000 Senator John Herron presented a submission to the Senate Legal and  
Constitutional References Committee on behalf of the Federal Government.<sup>1</sup> It was titled:  
“Inquiry into the Stolen Generation”. In its critique of the report, Bringing Them Home, the  
submission proposed that those children who were placed in dormitory accommodation ‘were  
not distanced from their families and grew up in full knowledge of their backgrounds’.<sup>2</sup>  
Because ‘further contact between the child and his or her parents was not precluded’, the  
submission argued, such children could not be counted among those of ‘the stolen generation’.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I wish to give attention to those Aboriginal children who grew up in  
government and mission dormitories, spending large parts of their early lives separated from the  
care and attention of their parents and other family members.<sup>4</sup> I will focus specifically on one  
particular mission, Balgo Mission (WA), and briefly say something of its boys’ and girls’  
dormitories. This will provide a context for examining some of the social and generational  
health effects of this particular form of separation.<sup>5</sup>

While the *Bringing Them Home* report largely focused on those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were separated and taken away for the purposes of assimilation, little attention since then has been given to those who were placed in dormitories where both children and their families lived in the same community. In suggesting that the children who grew up in dormitories were also ‘separated’, I am not suggesting that their experiences were the same as those who were separated and relocated away from any contact with their families. As I hope to show in this paper, while there would appear to be some similarities, there are also significant differences.

### **Balgo Mission**

In 1950, missionary and Catholic priest, Fr Alphonse Bleischwitz, described the aims of Balgo mission:

The principal aim of the Mission, as of all religious missions to the primitive people, is to help these people become ideal Christians. The secondary, but important, aim is to endeavour to give them any positive good which our modern civilization is able to give them, and they on their side are able to absorb to the benefit of their general wellbeing ... We hope in the near future to have a school for the children, where they will be educated, both in religious and secular matters. Further, we intend to build dormitories for the girls and the boys.<sup>6</sup>

For the missionaries of those times, administering and maintaining a mission in a very remote and physically demanding semi-desert region of the Kimberley remained their first priority. While they differed in the emphasis they gave to adult Christian conversion, they were agreed on one thing: the importance of education and the training of the children.

Ronald and Catherine Berndt, who had contact with Balgo Mission from as early as 1957, noted ‘two comments that came into circulation early in the history of Aboriginal-European contact’:

“You can’t do much with the adults, you just have to concentrate on the children”; and, “the only way to do anything with the children is to get them away from the adults.”<sup>7</sup>

As the Berndts pointed out, not all dormitories in Aboriginal missions and settlements at that time were the same.<sup>8</sup> Some missions had chosen not to use them and preferred to work through families, while others focussed on the girls, protecting them ‘from cradle marriages’ and from getting pregnant.<sup>9</sup> While the missionaries maintained that local marriage laws were ‘carefully observed’, they sought to remove the right of older men to marry young girls.<sup>10</sup> Hence, at old Balgo Mission,

Children remained with their parents until they were five or six years of age. When they began school ... they moved into dormitories and lived in the dormitories right through their school age and afterwards until they married.<sup>11</sup>

By 1951 a girls’ dormitory had been established, and a boys’ dormitory by 1960.<sup>12</sup>

At Balgo Mission, and more so when it move to the present site of Wirrimanu in 1965, there was a clear social and physical separation of the dormitories from the camp where parents, grandparents and younger siblings (too young to enter the dormitories) lived. This did not prevent families from coming up to the central playground and meeting their children. After dinner at night, during film nights (projected onto a large outdoor screen), at church, and on other social occasions, children could have contact with their families. However, such contact was brief. Children were not fed, taught or nurtured by their families and older relations. They returned to sleep in the dormitories each night.

The Berndts noted that,

In the late 1950’s [Balgo] had no boys’ dormitory, and the girls’ dormitory was not rigidly policed but worked on an honour system: girls could come and go quite freely in the early evening, and on hot nights slept in the open beside the dormitories, looked after by the sisters in charge. Today [1972] both dormitories are operating, but only the boys are allowed to visit the Aboriginal camp; the girls meet their parents and other relatives in the central area in and around the church and the main institution buildings.<sup>13</sup>

In April 1973, and in the early months of my first time living at Balgo Mission, the dormitories were closed, and parents were told to resume responsibility for the care of their children.<sup>14</sup> For more than twenty years they had been told that non-Aboriginal people would take responsibility for them as the mission had arrogated to itself an authority and responsibility over the lives of their children. Today, most Wirrimanu adults, now in their 40s, 50s and 60s, spent a large part of their lives growing up in the Balgo Mission dormitories.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Effects of Separation**

The memories and effects of the dormitory experience have varied across families and communities. While it is not uncommon to hear people describe the dormitories as ‘prisons’, where they remember being locked in and ‘weren’t really free’, people also perceive there were benefits. While some have talked about the value of learning English and relating with non-Aboriginal people, others remember their separation from their families and how, if they tried to run away, they would be caught and sent back. One of the particular effects of the dormitory experience was its impact on key social and intra and intergenerational relationships.<sup>16</sup>

At the heart of key social relationships within desert communities lie values relating to *ngurra* (land), *walytja* (family), *tjukurrpa* (ancestral dreamtime). These values are gathered together, strengthened and passed onto later generations through a social process named as *kanyirninpa* (*holding*). This polysematic desert word and symbol captures the many ways in which critically important relationships are developed within and across generations, and also with deeply embedded land, family and the ancestral dreamtime meanings.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, the dormitory system provided an alternative and different experience of growing up, of *kanyirninpa*, being *held*. Not only did it separate young children from their mothers, but it also prevented both parents from feeding and caring for their children. It prevented them from ‘looking after’, teaching and ‘growing them up’. While it can be argued that the mission assumed a new *holding* relationship for the children, in that it took the responsibility to feed, clothe, house and educate them, it can also be argued that it violently interfered with a fundamentally important relationship that lay at the heart of Desert life, identity, health and wellbeing.

While Desert people, today, do not use the term ‘trauma’ to describe the dormitory experience, the description of their experience points to the various ways in which key relationships across and within generations have been seriously wounded. A married man, now around fifty-five years old and with four adult children, holds mixed views on his dormitory experience. He believed that he learned a lot during that period of time and that he experienced ‘good and strict laws’. He can now speak English, and has confidence to mix and work with non-Aboriginal people. While he has learned many skills in order to understand and live in a non-Aboriginal world, he recognised that what he missed most when he was in the dormitory was the company and support of his family.

I supposed to be learning from my father when I was ten... or nine... or eight... during the ceremonies they had in the camp with women folks and all. Well the man that do their dancing, well you’ll see the one little fella behind... that was when women do their dancing... same time... well I missed out that one.

His example is particularly revealing. He did not describe stories that his father might have told him, or songs he might have taught him. Instead, he described an embodied form of knowledge that he could only receive in the physical and social company of his father and older men. Dancing upon the land, using his body, being in the company of others, men and women, all provided an important social and cultural context for learning about himself, his culture and heritage. This was an important means of discovering and strengthening his identity. Here were important foundations for cultural knowledge that was gendered, relational and intergenerational. Now, as an older man, he is looked on to lead and guide the community through difficult decisions and Law ceremonies, but such leadership and responsibility he can find difficult to sustain. There are times when he is very aware of his lack of critically important cultural knowledge.

What this man's story reveals is the importance and context of cultural knowledge that is handed down in the company of older others, from one generation to the next, but which also links together other key values around family, land and spirituality. While the content of this knowledge is important, equally important is the context by which this knowledge is obtained, and how it is then passed onto following generations.

When the dormitory system separated young people from the *holding* relationships of older people, it separated them from values and knowledge that were critical if they were to grow into the responsibilities that accompanied cultural identity. The dormitory system acted to undermine and erode critically important 'stabilising influences' within families, particularly described by the relationships and social meanings of *kanyirninpa*.<sup>18</sup> It provided its own particular form of intra and intergenerational trauma.

## Conclusion

When Senator Herron submitted to the Senate Committee that dormitory children 'were not distanced from their families and grew up in full knowledge of their backgrounds', he was likely articulating what many Australians have now come to believe: forcible separation did not have serious generational or health implications for those children who grew up in community and mission dormitories.

This 'belief' has been reinforced in several ways: The *Bringing Them Home* report largely focused on those Aboriginal children who were geographically separated away from their families and for the purposes of assimilation.<sup>19</sup> Since the publication of that report apologies for the removal of children have generally not referred to those who were separated from their families through their experience of living in dormitories.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, programs that have been developed to support those who were removed from their families have not included these dormitory children. The Urbis Keys Young *Evaluation of the Bringing Them Home and Indigenous Mental Health Programs*, for example, has noted that 'Link-Up services are for Aboriginal people who were 'separated from their families and communities', and Bringing Them Home services are for those 'who have been affected either directly or indirectly; by those practices'.<sup>21</sup> However, it makes no mention of those who also experienced separation through the dormitory experience and the effect of that experience upon their health and wellbeing.

While the Federal Government sought to challenge claims within the *Bringing Them Home* report, particularly whether the number of children separated was ever more than 10 percent, it is worth noting that the number, if it is to include those who grew up in dormitories, is possibly much larger than has been suggested.<sup>22</sup> There is some evidence, for example, that the WA child health survey may have actually underestimated the number of carers of 4-17 year olds who had been 'forcibly separated from their natural family'.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, it is important to remember the survey's findings. There continue to be serious intergenerational health implications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children whose carers experienced separation from their families.<sup>24</sup>

What can be problematic in these discussions around child separation is an implication or suggestion that there might be some similarity of experience between those who grew up in the mission dormitories and those taken away to other families, institutions and communities. It is important to stress that both situations cannot be simply considered as equivalent. While in both cases children experienced a wide range of family and cultural 'loss', at Balgo Mission, for example, parents and their children were always visible to each other, despite the presence and influence of social and physical 'fences' that served to separate them.

However, it does seem that the separation caused by the dormitory experience provided its own particular form of trauma. Not only did the early intervention by the Mission into the social fabric of Desert people reshape key marriage and family relationships, but it also affected key foundations upon which health, wellbeing and the social reproduction of a society were based. While children could see their families, and have some contact with them, that critical

relationship that held and nurtured both young and old became critically undermined and eroded. While present generations of adults believe that important elements of their culture have not been passed onto them, it is also important to remember that older generations have also suffered.

While this group of older people was not separated from their parents and families, they were prevented from growing up their children and grandchildren according to the values that had sustained them and earlier generations. It is likely that the return of their children to their care heightened more than a sense of loss. It reinforced what had been denied them. For decades they had been prevented from providing what was culturally important for their families, and to ensure the life and wellbeing of their children. They had received a very clear message from both Mission and Government that they were incapable of doing so. It is difficult to imagine how this generation coped with the sudden return of children to their care. Equally, it is difficult to imagine that their confidence or capability to grow up their children, particularly in the rapidly changing social world of the 1970s, was in any way enhanced by that process.

While the deliberations and final report of the 2000 Senate Committee did not acknowledge the generational implications of those who had been forcibly separated and 'grown up' in mission and government dormitories, it would seem that the health needs of this group, their parents and their children, now require more serious understanding and attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, *Healing: A Legacy of Generations. The Report of the Inquiry into the Federal Government's Implementation of the Recommendations Made by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in Bringing Them Home* (Canberra: Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, November 2000), 3.

<sup>2</sup> John Herron, *Inquiry into the Stolen Generation*, Federal Government Submission, Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee (Canberra: Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, March 2000), 3. National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Canberra: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Herron, 3.

<sup>4</sup> McCoy, B (in press), "They Weren't Separated": Missions, dormitories, and generational health, *Health and History*.

<sup>5</sup> Some of this work was based on research work in the Kutjungka region between 2001-04 for a PhD. See: Brian F. McCoy, "*Kanyirninpa: Health, Masculinity and Wellbeing of Desert Aboriginal Men*", PhD thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2004, available at <http://eprints.infodiv.unimelb.edu.au/archive/00001886/>.

<sup>6</sup> Alphonse Bleischwitz, "Pallottine Mission, Hall's Creek", *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, year ended 30<sup>th</sup> June, 1950 (Perth: Department of Indigenous Affairs), 62.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine H. Berndt and Ronald M. Berndt, "Aborigines", in *Socialisation in Australia*, edited by F.J. Hunt. (Sydney, Angus and Robertson: 1972), 132. See also: WEH Stanner, *Some Aspects of Aboriginal Health*. IN *Better Health for Aborigines?* Edited by Basil S. Hetzel, Malcolm Dobbin, Lorna Lippmann & Elizabeth Eggleston. (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1974), 'the reason why we established some settlements was that we thought it gave us the best chance of working on the children. We supposed we could do nothing with the adults', p7.

<sup>8</sup> However, in WA, similar situations existed also at Warburton and Mt Margaret Missions. See William Grayden, *Adam and Atoms* (Perth: Frank Daniels, 1957), 30. There were also dormitories in other States eg. Yarrabah and Palm Island (Qld), and Hermannsburg (NT): 'Under various guises of compulsion, parents handed over children between the ages of five and ten', Andrew Marcus, *Governing Savages*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 80.

<sup>9</sup> Berndt and Berndt, 133.

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- <sup>10</sup> E.A. Worms, "Observations on the Mission Field of the Pallottine Fathers in North-West Australia," in *Diprotodon to Detribalization: Studies of Change Among Australian Aborigines*, edited by Arnold R. Pilling and Richard A. Waterman (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1970), 371.
- <sup>11</sup> Joseph Kearney, "Our Aboriginal Apostolate", in *Kimberley Journal, a Source Book*, Volume 1, compiled by Peter Willis, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1974 (Wirrimanu: Kutjungka Catholic Parish Archives), 2.
- <sup>12</sup> "Ten girls are in the dormitory, but there are 25 children altogether permanently living at the Mission. Another 10 to 15 are still with their parents leading a nomadic life." Alphonse Bleischwitz, "Balgo Mission – Pallottine (Roman Catholic) Order", *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, year ended 30<sup>th</sup> June 1951 (Perth: Department of Indigenous Affairs), 27.
- <sup>13</sup> Berndt and Berndt, "Aborigines", 134. Allie Evans came to Balgo in 1951 and lived in the girls' dormitory with 28 girls. See Francis Byrne, *A Hard Road: Brother Frank Nissl, 1888-1980, A Life of Service to the Aborigines of the Kimberleys*. (Nedlands: Tara House, 1989), 96.
- Caroline Gye (a pseudonym for Ida Mann) described the mission and dormitory in *The Cockney and the Crocodile* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 93. Mann's visit, as an ophthalmologist, was in 1953.
- <sup>14</sup> At that time there were 47 boys in the dormitory, aged between 5 and 15. Initially, only the younger boys and girls returned to their families; they would come to the dormitories in the morning to shower and change their clothes for school and then, after school, change before returning home, Personal Records, 1973. Nine of those boys, more than 20%, have since died, at an average age of 38.
- <sup>15</sup> In the recently revised second edition of *From Patrons to Partners And the Separated Children of the Kimberley: a History of the Catholic Church in the Kimberley* (2005) there is no mention of the children who were brought up in the Catholic Church mission dormitories of the Kimberley, such as at Beagle Bay, Balgo, La Grange and Kalumburu.
- <sup>16</sup> See Fred R. Myers, "A Broken Code: Pintupi Political Theory and Temporary Social Life", *Mankind* 12, no. 4 (1980): 312. Also, Myers, "Ideology and Experience", 81.
- <sup>17</sup> This social and cultural linkage reflects a process similar to that between self-continuity and cultural continuity researched by Michael Chandler et al. with Native North Americans. M.J. Chandler & C. Lalonde, 1998, Cultural Continuity as Hedge Against Suicide in Canada's First Nations, *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 35, 191-219; M.J. Chandler, C.E. Lalonde, B.W. Sokol & D. Hallett, *Personal Persistence, Identity Development, and Suicide: A Study of Native and Non-Native North American Adolescents*, Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, Editor W. F. Overton, 2003.
- <sup>18</sup> See William Grayden, *Adam and Atoms* (Perth, WA: Frank Daniels, 1957): He argued in relation to children being separated from their mothers that they 'would be perplexed to the extreme and would be without a single stabilising influence on which to orient themselves to a new way of life thrust so inhumanely upon them', 32.
- <sup>19</sup> However, even within that report reference is made to separation that occurred through mission dormitories. For example, see p. 104.
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, the recently re-edited *From Patrons to Partners, A History of the Catholic Church in the Kimberley* where there is specific reference, and apology, to 'The Separated Children of the Kimberley'. There is no mention of those who were separated from their families through living in the mission dormitories. (Second edition, University of Notre Dame Australia Press, Fremantle, 2005).
- <sup>21</sup> A. Wilczynski, K. Reed-Gilbert, K. Milward, B. Tayler, J. Fear & J. Schwartzkoff, *Evaluation of Bringing Them Home and Indigenous Mental Health Programs*. Report prepared by Urbis Keys Young for the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (Canberra: Department of Health and Aging, 2007).
- <sup>22</sup> See John Herron, *Inquiry into the Stolen Generation*, Federal Government Submission, Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee (Canberra: Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, March 2000), ii.
- <sup>23</sup> It would seem that some of those who grew up in dormitories have not been included in these figures. The survey found carers of **110** children in the Wunan (Kununurra) ATSIC region had been forcibly separated. This region includes Balgo. As the Balgo girls' dormitory was first established by 1951, young women went through the dormitory over more than two decades before it closed in 1973. While the exact

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number of young women who went through the dormitories is not clear, and if it was to include those who came from the outlying cattle stations, the number would need to lie +50. These women are now aged around 40-70 years and a large number of them have children currently aged between 4-17 years. It is also possible that by the wording of the questionnaire some may have **not** considered that either they or their parents were *taken away* from their natural families (as the practice became normalized), or that they or their parents were *forced to move* from traditional country (as they lived largely within their traditional country). S.R. Zubrick, S.R. Silburn, D.M. Lawrence, F.G. Mitrou, R.B. Dalby, E.M. Blair, J. Griffin, H. Milroy, J.A. De Maio, A. Cox, J. Li, *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People*: (Perth, Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2005). Summary of Findings from Volume Two of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey. Wunan (Kununurra) ATSIC Region. In addition, the questions were not specific viz. 'Aboriginal carers were asked whether they were taken away from their natural family by a mission, the government or welfare. Respondents were not asked to identify which of these entities took them, where or when they were taken or under what circumstances this took place. The only information collected was whether they were taken away.' (469).

<sup>24</sup> S.R. Zubrick, S.R. Silburn, D.M. Lawrence, F.G. Mitrou, R.B. Dalby, E.M. Blair, J. Griffin, H. Milroy, J.A. De Maio, A. Cox, J. Li, *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: Forced Separation from Natural Family, Forced Relocation from Traditional Country or Homeland, and Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People: Additional Notes* (Perth, Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2005).