

# Cultural Dispossession Experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

## Executive Summary

This chapter explores elements of culture<sup>1</sup> and ways in which destruction of culture have occurred.<sup>2</sup> Cultural Dispossession should be understood within the context of white colonial-settler history.<sup>3</sup> The colonial experience in Australia has impacted Aboriginal culture, in particular ‘language, land, resources, political autonomy, religious freedom and, often, personal autonomy’<sup>4</sup> that may have a direct and adverse impact on Aboriginal people’s health, as well as social and economic wellbeing.<sup>5</sup>

Dudgeon et al (2010) summarise key aspects of colonisation, observing:

Since the arrival of white people in Australia in 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced displacement, been the targets of genocidal policies and practices, had families destroyed through the forcible removal of children, and continue to face the stresses of living in a world that systematically devalues their culture and people. Such experiences have profound effects on health, mental health and social and emotional wellbeing, for individuals, families and communities.<sup>6</sup>

The Commonwealth Office for the Arts in its 2013 *Culture and Closing the Gap* fact sheet recognised that ‘the strengthening of Indigenous culture is a strategy to reduce disadvantage in itself ... Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities know and articulate the many benefits of keeping culture strong’.<sup>7</sup> The Office for the Arts cites studies which establish that:

- ‘Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures contain natural protective and wellbeing factors such as kinship networks; and language, culture and cultural identity have been found to be key protective factors that predict resilience in children.’<sup>8</sup>
- ‘Connection to land, family, culture and spirituality can protect against ill health and serious psychological distress.’<sup>9</sup>

In relation to strengthening communities, The Healing Foundation states:

According to Caruana nurturing a sense of ‘cultural distinctiveness’ is integral for spiritual, emotional, [and] social health and wellbeing and is also an important part of strengthening communities. This can be facilitated through the recovery of language and traditions, art, dance, stories, traditional food and medicines.<sup>10</sup>

The Healing Foundation further observes that:

[h]ealing is a complex and often lengthy process; a journey rather than an event. Healing models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to reflect their unique history, culture and family and community structure, and holistic world view.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The researchers and experts involved in the development of this chapter wish to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain strong connections to their culture despite the detrimental impact of colonisation. It is also acknowledged that this chapter does not go into detail in relation to all elements of Aboriginal Culture and there are other aspects of culture which are very significant, including but not limited to Aboriginal Lore and Protocols for Legal Business, Sorry Business, the Marker of Maturity and Celebrations, Stories, Songlines and Knowledge in relation to caring for Country, Food, Medicine and Cultural Ceremonies.

<sup>2</sup> Through violence and dispossession, displacement to missions, stations and reserves and systemic child removals.

<sup>3</sup> Pat Dudgeon et al, 'Aboriginal Social, Cultural and Historical Contexts' (2010) in Pad Dudgeon, Helen Milroy and Roz Walker (eds), [\*Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice\*](#) (Telethon Institute for Child Health Research/Kulunga Research Network, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2010) 3.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Archibald, *Decolonization and Healing: Indigenous Experiences in the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Greenland* (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2006), quoted in Chris Cunneen 'Sentencing, Punishment and Indigenous People in Australia' (2018) 3 *Journal of Global Indigeneity* 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Dudgeon et al (n 3) 18.

<sup>7</sup> Office for the Arts (Cth), [\*Culture and Closing the Gap\*](#) (Fact Sheet, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2013) 1–2.

<sup>8</sup> Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health Queensland, *Key Directions for a Social, Emotional, Cultural and Spiritual Wellbeing Population Health Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in Queensland* (Report, 2009) cited in Office for the Arts (Cth), [\*Culture and Closing the Gap\*](#) (n 38) 2.

<sup>9</sup> Australian Indigenous Doctor's Association, [\*AIDA Submission to the National Preventative Health Taskforce\*](#) (11 February 2009); Kerrie Kelly et al, [\*Living on the Edge: Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Risk and Protective Factors for Serious Psychological Distress among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People\*](#) (Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health Discussion Paper Series No 10, December 2009) cited in Office for the Arts (Cth), [\*Culture and Closing the Gap\*](#) (n 38) 2.

<sup>10</sup> Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, [\*Traditional Healing\*](#) (Web Page).

<sup>11</sup> Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, [\*Promising Practice\*](#) (Web Page).