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Attachment and the (mis)apprehension of Aboriginal children: epistemic violence in child welfare interventions

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Child protection systems in Australia continue to disproportionately investigate Aboriginal families and intervene to remove Aboriginal children, applying non-Indigenous constructs and understandings of child development that contribute to these enduring inequities. Attachment theory is one such prevalent framework with significant applications in child protection. While constructions of attachment have attempted to grapple with diversity, its application in Australian child protection policy and practice reflects dominant socio-cultural perceptions as a foundation for decision making that misrepresents Aboriginal families and their children's developmental needs. We position this socio-legal application of attachment specifically, and developmental sciences more broadly, within a long history of settler-colonial intervention, providing a façade of scientific authority that perpetuates further harms on Aboriginal children, families and communities. We offer insights about a new frame for attachment that respects Aboriginal worldviews as part of structural transformations to address those harms.

Keywords: Aboriginal children; Aboriginal relational ontologies; attachment theory; child protection; child removal; epistemic violence; out-of-home care; self-determination; social and emotional wellbeing; Stolen Generations.

Introduction

There is a long history of settler-colonial surveillance, intervention and control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, HREOC, 1997), with life-long harms (Fernandez et al., 2017; Lima et al., 2018; Tune, 2016). Government policies have been implicated in contributing to the ongoing high rates of intervention by child welfare systems that disproportionately remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities.

Over time, the conceptual and theoretical bases of these systems of interventions have shifted in line with dominant discourses, including developmental psychological constructs such as attachment theory. This paper explores the application of attachment as a construct within Australia's settler-colonial child protection system, building on recent work regarding the socio-legal application of attachment theory, which has identified misunderstandings of current evidence (Forslund et al., 2022). We examine implications for Aboriginal children, families and communities, including the

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application of attachment theory in terms of settler-colonial policies of dominance and intentional harm. Finally, this paper argues the necessity for re-conceptualising attachment theory grounded in the cultural worldviews of Aboriginal peoples, and applied through processes that reflect their inherent right to collective self-determination, to improve its relevance for Aboriginal children, and to address the persistent harms and injustices from its misapplication in socio-legal contexts.

This paper is inspired by the advocacy and education provided by Elders, including Muruwari matriarch and Stolen Generations survivor Aunty Rita Wright, and is informed by the authors' various experience of contemporary child protection systems and practice, professionally and personally, including individual and systemic advocacy alongside Aboriginal families and communities. This work is led by Aboriginal scholars trained in Western psychological science (Ash Wright, Dr Paul Gray, and Belle Selkirk), contributing to the discipline of Indigenous Psychology, which challenges dominant discourses and provides space for new conceptualisations reflecting Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems (Dudgeon, 2020). The authors do not offer this within a homogenised notion of Aboriginal culture, rather as a cross-cultural perspective at the intersection of Western psychological and diverse Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

The context of settler-colonial interventions in Aboriginal children and families

Settler-colonial legal and policy settings have demonstrated a troubling preoccupation with Aboriginal children, understood as part of efforts to eradicate Aboriginal peoples in order to solidify the legitimacy of settler-colonial claims of a nation founded on the myth of 'terra nullius' (Libesman et al., 2022; Nakata, 2017). This included the forced transfer of Aboriginal children to non-Aboriginal families

and institutional care known as the Stolen Generations (HREOC, 1997). The negative lifetime and intergenerational outcomes of these policies have been clearly outlined (Fernandez et al., 2017; HREOC, 1997). The *Bringing Them Home* report identified that interventionist policies of forced child removal and disconnection inflicted 'multiple and profoundly disabling' intergenerational harms (HREOC, 1997, p. 154). Stolen Generations survivors' lived experience attests to the devastation that the vicious cycle of child removal wreaks on them and their descendants, with lives disproportionately affected by child removals, institutional abuse, domestic violence, substance use, mental and physical health problems, recidivism and poverty (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). In this way, the forced removal of Aboriginal children is implicated in the vertical transmission of trauma and harm to subsequent generations (Atkinson, 2002, 2013; Menzies, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Silburn et al., 2006). This may be through social, cultural, biological and psychological mechanisms (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018; Yehuda et al., 2018). However, it should be stressed this occurs alongside ongoing experiences of harm arising from direct experience of contemporary child protection systems' disproportionate surveillance of Aboriginal families and removal of Aboriginal children. Often, these impacts form the justification for future intervention and trauma associated with removal and disconnection, perpetuating a cycle of harm rather than healing.

Bringing Them Home's findings led to 54 detailed recommendations intended to support healing for survivors of the Stolen Generations and prevent repetition of those harms on subsequent generations. Yet only 13 of the 54 recommendations have been implemented (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, SNAICC, 2013). Recommendations critical to addressing

contemporary issues in child protection systems remain largely ignored (SNAICC, 2015), including Recommendations 42–53 relating to a social justice package for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, a national framework for self-determination and the implementation of national standards for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under state, territory or shared jurisdiction (HREOC, 1997). A significant barrier to the implementation of *Bringing Them Home's* recommendation for national standards legislation was lack of consensus among Australian governments for a cohesive legislative framework (Davis, 2019). Instead, child welfare remains the responsibility of individual states and territories with piecemeal developments in isolated jurisdictions (SNAICC, 2022).

Resistance and political activism by Aboriginal communities have led to legislation and policy settings intended to retain Aboriginal children within their families and communities (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, ATSICPP; Arney et al., 2015; Kee & Tilbury, 1999) consistent with their human rights.[1] However, implementation remains inadequate, including little effort to preserve families contributing to the ongoing gross over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, SCRGSP, 2023) and the increasing use of placements beyond the child's Aboriginal family, as well as the failure to meaningfully uphold cultural rights or connections critical to lifelong wellbeing (Commission for Children and Young People, CCYP, 2015; Davis, 2019; SNAICC, 2022). A generation after *Bringing Them Home* (Anderson & Tilton, 2017; HREOC, 1997), the commitment to address the ongoing forced removal of Aboriginal children remains largely empty rhetoric – 'Unfinished Business' (NSW Government, 2016; SNAICC, 2013, 2015) – while the

failure to act on these structural reforms, and ongoing imposition of demonstrably unfit systems and practices, continues to cause significant harm to children, families and communities. This is likely to further compound present wellbeing disparities, including physical, mental and emotional health (Davis, 2019; NSW Government, 2020).

The intentional harms of contemporary child 'protection' policy

Despite repeated recommendations for healing-focused structural transformation, contemporary policy and practice settings remain broadly counterproductive with respect to intergenerational wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities. Children exposed to statutory out-of-home care experience poorer health, educational and socioeconomic outcomes, including higher rates of substance use and justice system involvement, forcible removal of their own children and premature death (Lima et al., 2018) with outcomes for Aboriginal children noted to be 'particularly poor' (Tune, 2016, p. 19). Taken together with studies of institutionalised children (Chugani et al., 2001) and research into border family separation (Bouza et al., 2018; Upchurch & Gibson, 2020), the literature provides insight into the profound impact of parental separation on cognitive, social and physical development (Waddoups et al., 2019; R. C. Waters & Gould, 2022). This established evidence raises critical questions about the logics underpinning child 'protection' structures, policies and practices that perpetuate such harms (Libesman et al., 2022). In the following section, this is explored though a number of lenses including institutionalised harm (Vivian & Halloran, 2022), epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

Vivian and Halloran (2022) observed that 'settler-colonisation's attempts to suppress Indigenous collective life has, over time, been

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[1]See (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; United Nations, UN, 2007).

embedded into the institutions of the nation state, ensuring policies ostensibly designed to address the inequitable health and wellbeing outcomes among Indigenous people perpetuate further harm' creating 'relations between Indigenous and the settler-colonial state that cause and reproduce systemic trauma' (p. 628). Rather than 'inadvertent' or 'unintended' outcomes, the foreseeable nature of the harms associated with these enduring public policy settings have seen them characterised as 'intentional' (Broom et al., 2023). As such, Broom and colleagues (2023) encourage analysis focused on 'the political and economic structures that underpin systems of (racialised, classed and gendered) harm, and on the actors who benefit from them' (p. 68). Further, these foreseeable and therefore 'intentional' harms are repositioned by governments to 'shift responsibility for social "problems" . . . away from the state and onto the individual' (Broom et al., 2023, p. 68).

Gorski outlined how persistent social inequalities are rationalised in terms of deficits located within disenfranchised individuals and communities while simultaneously discounting the socio-political context of those inequities, such that the policy focus is on 'fixing' disenfranchised people rather than addressing the systemic conditions that deny them social, political and economic equity (Gorski, 2011). Goenpul scholar Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson articulated how settler-colonial institutions pathologise Aboriginal individuals and communities as an ongoing tactic of colonial power, forcefully opposing Aboriginal resistance that refuses to cede enduring claims of sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). This includes justifications for ongoing intervention into the lives of Aboriginal children and the policing of their families as a core feature of settler-colonial dispossession (Libesman et al., 2022; Nakata, 2017; Vivian & Halloran, 2022). Indigenous scholars have particularly identified the imposition on Indigenous worldviews and cultural practices by settler-colonial child protection systems. For example, Māori

scholar Luke Fitzmaurice-Brown described the role of settler-colonial interventions into Māori families in undermining cultural practices, and importantly the subjugation of Māori ideas and ways of being (Fitzmaurice-Brown, 2022), as features that continue to characterise child protection systems despite contemporary reforms. Such processes continue to 'override Indigenous peoples' distinct worldviews' and impose a 'settler-colonial worldview that creates further disruption to Indigenous lives and ignores the systemic causes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage' (Vivian & Halloran, 2022, p. 634). Accordingly, Moreton-Robertson challenges settler-colonial frameworks and seeks to legitimise Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing from the perspective of Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013), informed by the body's inextricable connection with community, culture, Country and Ancestors as 'embodied socio-cultural and historically situated subjects of knowledge' (p. 335).

Psychology, colonisation and child protection

The field of psychology is not immune from the normalisation of settler-colonial perspectives and the subjugation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Dudgeon et al., 2020). Dudgeon and Walker (2015) argue that psychology 'colonises both directly through the imposition of universalising, individualistic constructions of human behaviour and indirectly through the negation of Aboriginal knowledges and practices' (p. 276). This 'negation of Aboriginal knowledges' reflects the concept of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988), corroborated by influential educationalists Professor Martin Nakata (1998) and Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney (1999, 2001), which refers to the delegitimisation of Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies as a form of systemic oppression (Wright, 2011). Bardi psychologist Professor Pat Dudgeon asserts that historic enquiry into

Aboriginal peoples has been 'influenced by the dominant evolutionary views of social Darwinism and social evolution', resulting in 'a long history of biopsychological explanations providing scientific legitimacy to dominant social values' (Dudgeon et al., 2014, p. 40). Walker (2022) likewise challenges individualised pathologising constructions of mental health within Western psychological discourse, emphasising the importance of recognising the validity of Indigenous constructions of wellbeing and ill-health in their own right. The encompassing discipline of Indigenous Psychology is part of ongoing First Nations resistance against the hegemony of settler-colonial psychological epistemologies (Dudgeon, 2020). Such protests herald a global resurgence of historically oppressed epistemologies as an act of Indigenous self-determination (Gregorčič, 2015; Korten, 2006) and cognitive justice (de Sousa Santos, 2007) in emancipatory response to epistemicide (Hall & Tandon, 2017).

The reclamation, reconstitution and articulation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Aboriginal ways of living, doing and being are central to Indigenous Psychology (Dudgeon & Bray, 2023). In Australia, Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) is a prominent discourse and framework (Dudgeon et al., 2022; Gee et al., 2014), which challenges Western biomedical constructions of physical and mental health by articulating the world's oldest continuing knowledge of holistic relational wellbeing. SEWB is positioned within a broader 'Indigenous turn' – or return – to therapeutic epistemologies grounded in eco-centric wisdom traditions (Dudgeon & Bray, 2023). The Indigenous turn rejects the oppressions of settler-colonial epistemologies and the limitations of positivistic science, which posits 'a unified and fixed reality that can be objectively observed and measured by impartial scientists' (Dudgeon et al., 2020, p. 14), instead privileging place-based, situated Indigenous worldviews and knowledges. Aboriginal psychologists are at the forefront of this

paradigmatic shift, which centres self-determination and epistemic justice with the view to revealing knowledge, decolonising, rebalancing power and ultimately supporting healing (Dudgeon et al., 2020) from the ongoing assault of colonisation. However, Walker (2022) warns that the ongoing control of mental health systems by settler-colonial governments, directly or indirectly through funding processes, threatens the realisation of improved systems for Indigenous peoples, further emphasising the importance of self-determination in system design, not merely participation in service delivery (HREOC, 1997).

Attachment theory as a vehicle of epistemic violence

Contemporary socio-legal applications of attachment within child protection systems and their impact on Aboriginal children, families and communities represent an important exemplar of normalisation of non-Indigenous epistemes that contribute to experiences of harm. Attachment theory has been prominently applied in various socio-legal contexts, including child protection and family law (Forslund et al., 2022; Wise & Connolly, 2014), influencing policy, decision-making processes and programme design, and reflecting science's propensity to endorse dominant social values under the façade of scientific authority (Crittenden & Baim, 2017; Crittenden et al., 2013; Forslund et al., 2022). However, its imposition on Aboriginal children and families by child protection systems has been criticised (Indigenous Psychological Services, IPS, 2022; Ryan, 2011; Yeo, 2003). The emergence of attachment theory broadly coincided with the 'formal' end of Australia's assimilation era and provided an opportunity to recast overtly racist settler-colonial interventions in the lives of Aboriginal children and families through 'normalised' or 'universal' claims about child development. Reflecting Dudgeon and Walker's (2015) observation of the colonising application of Western psychological concepts,

an audit of Western Australia's child protection system identified that 'a great risk in uncritically applying non-Indigenous paradigms such as attachment is that we colonise the knowledge systems around child-rearing already present within Aboriginal cultures', highlighting the 'need to scrutinise the fundamental design of child protection systems, their decision making frameworks and their position within a broader set of colonising structures' (IPS, 2022, p. 47). This includes re-examining theoretical frameworks such as attachment theory on which they are based, as we explore in the following section.

Western attachment theory emerged from the idea that an individual's motivation to establish close relationships with caring others is present from infancy, as a function of evolutionary adaptation (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby reasoned (1969, 1982) that the drive to seek physical and emotional proximity to attachment figures evolved in response to natural dependence on caregivers for protection that occurs in infancy. Infants who maintain proximity to supportive attachment figures increase their chances of survival with implications for subsequent generations through positive attachment-related traits. This built on Harlow's (1959) seminal animal studies in which monkeys prioritised proximity to symbolic attachment figures able to provide tactile comfort over other sources of food and nourishment. Thus, proximity to attachment figures seemed to serve a fundamental developmental function of providing a critical sense of security, especially during the early years. Ainsworth extended this work by categorising attachment through a laboratory-induced 'Strange Situation' task, which involved briefly separating infants from their mothers as a test of their attachment relationship (Ainsworth et al., 1979; van Rosmalen et al., 2015). Ainsworth and colleagues (1979) interpreted variations in infant responses to reflect the quality of infants' foundational relational experiences with their primary caregiver, which they hypothesised had the potential to impact future psychological functioning (Groh et al., 2017).

Childhood experiences with attachment figures are understood to form an individual's internal working model of attachment (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008), informing expectations about future attachment interactions (T. E. A. Waters et al., 2017). Experiences throughout life are continuously integrated into this internal model, influencing attitudes to future social experiences in a cumulative manner (Fraley, 2019). Availability of attachment figures can promote feelings of security and support to assist management of threatening situations and negative affect (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Individuals develop mental representations of attachment figures in a manner that is non-contingent on the physical proximity of the supportive figure. Thus, the role of attachments extends beyond childhood to include romantic partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), religious deities and the spirits of deceased Ancestors (Cherniak et al., 2021; Granqvist & Shaver, 2020).

Proximity to supportive others provides a range of psychological benefits across the lifecourse (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Correspondingly, abundant literature supports the association of threats to attachment security with psychopathology (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995; Panksepp & Watt, 2011; Pascuzzo et al., 2015). Underpinning this accumulated evidence is the notion that proximity to attachment figures can promote capacity to tolerate negative affect and improve psychological health. While attachment theory has developed since Bowlby (1969, 1982) and Ainsworth's (1979) pioneering work (Duschinsky et al., 2020), its universality claim continues to influence developmental psychology (Mesman et al., 2017), underpinning attachment research from a theoretical, methodological and critical perspective (Farnfield & Holmes, 2014; Spies & Duschinsky, 2021).

Cross-cultural differences in attachment were highlighted by Rothbaum and colleagues'

(2000) seminal review, which found that the three core hypotheses – sensitivity, competence and secure base – are culturally specific, and this subsequently developed to include 'normativity' (van Ijzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). Moreover, awareness of the cultural specificity of attachment behaviours predated Ainsworth's 1994 observation that culture-related differences in the environment undoubtedly affect how attachment organisation is expressed (Ainsworth & Marvin, 1995). Challenges associated with cultural biases and the cross-cultural application of attachment theory continue to critique attachment research and translation to practice (Keller, 2016, 2018, 2020; Mesman, 2021; van Ijzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). While research has demonstrated some cross-cultural convergence, for example in valuing sensitive or responsive caregiving, cultural differences have also been noted (Mesman, van Ijzendoorn, et al., 2016). Importantly, Super and Harkness (2002) have argued that culture plays a critical role in organising the developmental niche through a range of behavioural, relational and structural influences, with direct and indirect impacts that shape the relationships of various developmental variables. Given the central position of attachment in seeking to explain relational organisation between children and their communities, navigating this interaction of culture, organisation of the developmental environment and observed behaviours and outcomes is critical. This suggests a need to focus on the function and outcome of parenting behaviours and caregiver relationships, rather than the specific behaviours themselves, which are dependent on broader cultural beliefs and factors.

Reflections on attachment theory in child protection systems and practice

Attachment theory is reflected in contemporary child protection system design across Australian jurisdictions; however, it is often misapplied. This is particularly problematic from the perspective of Aboriginal communities, where constructions of attachment further subjugate Indigenous Knowledge Systems and form the basis of ongoing disruption of Aboriginal families.

Misapplication of attachment theory and evidence

Critiques of Western attachment theory have noted the role of social and cultural factors that may affect how attachment is conceptualised and observed (Keller, 2016, 2018, 2020; Mesman, 2021; van Ijzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). This challenge of scientific research as cultural practice is acknowledged by contemporary attachment theorists who state that 'Scientific practice is of course always shaped by social values to an extent, but popularised accounts of attachment theory have been especially vulnerable to presenting social values as scientific facts, as exemplified by value-judgements about the roles of mothers and fathers' (Forslund et al., 2022, p. 22). Forslund and colleagues (2022) elucidate how socio-legal applications of attachment are beset by misunderstandings, including the persistence of outdated theoretical claims about the presence of a 'primary' attachment figure, and the lack of validity and sensitivity of attachment measures in individual assessments. To the contrary, they indicate consensus around three central principles of attachment research relevant to socio-legal contexts: 'the need for familiar, non-abusive and non-neglecting caregivers, continuity of good-enough care, and a network of attachment relationships' (Forslund et al., 2022, p. 36). Further, Forslund and colleagues (2022) note broad consensus on the protective influence of attachment networks, and the importance of preserving and maintaining relationships with attachment figures. Nevertheless, they conclude that applications of attachment routinely extend beyond this evidence-based consensus.

White and colleagues (2020) examine how over-extended socio-legal applications of attachment, grounded in claims of a moral

imperative for intervention in families, entrench cultural biases, with significant consequences for affected families. This includes the prioritisation of 'permanency' and the imposition of short timeframes for judicial decision making in legislation and policy (Conley-Wright et al., 2023). This urgency to finalise legal orders reflects applications of attachment theory that focus on the need to act quickly to secure formative relationships. However, this framing of permanency centres legal rather than relational frameworks, and often overlooks the enduring presence of parents and family members providing ongoing relational permanency and connection. It also ignores systems issues such as access to supports needed to achieve preservation or restoration goals (Davis, 2019), or that 'support' offered by child protection systems is often characterised by surveillance, scrutiny, judgement and other punitive and oppressive practices that compound trauma and undermine parenting capacity. White and colleagues (2020) observed that attachment theory 'seems to be used with an evangelical enthusiasm in the "diagnosis" of damaging or abusive parenting, but its radical and primal focus on enduring love is not informing the way the system routinely operates for children living away from their family' (p. 58). Rather, the pursuit of a 'forever family' within child protection systems reflects an oversimplification of attachment theory, disregarding its foundation of 'wondrous, hydraulic, enduring love: love brought forth even in the most inauspicious of circumstances' through which 'the complexities and nuances of the concepts are hidden by simplification, and the moral components are subsumed into political and organisational priorities' (White et al., 2020, p. 124).

Where relational connections have been disrupted, the responsibility of child protection systems for this disruption are obfuscated. Psychological frameworks including attachment theory are employed to manufacture apparently authoritative justifications for ongoing disconnection and harm. For example, recent legislative reforms in New South Wales have elevated to a 'primary consideration' the stability and security of current care arrangements when determining whether to grant leave to file to vary or rescind orders (Care and Protection Amendment Act, 2018). Consequently, other considerations such as whether children are adequately supported to enjoy enduring connections to their family, community and culture are unlikely to be prioritised as highly. These design features have been criticised as particularly concerning for Aboriginal children who are disproportionately likely to experience forced removals and cultural disconnect as a result (Cripps & Laurens, 2016; Whittaker & Libesman, 2018).

Lack of culturally appropriate assessment and underinvestment in family supports

Given the priority afforded Western constructions of attachment in decision making, important cultural connections are routinely severed for Aboriginal families and kin who continue to be excluded from opportunities to care for their children. This includes the imposition of assessment tools and practices that are not culturally valid or appropriate for use with Aboriginal families, and other exclusionary practices that overlook or discourage Aboriginal families from providing kinship care or ongoing connection through supported contact arrangements, further contributing to the disconnection of Aboriginal children from their family, community and culture (Davis, 2019). Significant underinvestment in effective, culturally-informed family supports to preserve families or achieve restoration and other discriminatory funding practices also contribute to such separations (SNAICC, 2022). This is despite child development experts challenging contemporary child welfare systems to accommodate different cultural standpoints in policy and programmes, particularly with respect to valuing supportive relationships, noting that 'in many cultures, reliance upon a

network of kin to help raise children is expected. Child welfare systems can support these connections, rather than basing policy and practice on the assumption that a single parent or set of parents will meet all of the child's needs' (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016, p. 13). This aligns with the concept of 'received sensitivity', which challenges attachment assessments focused on specific interactions with individual caregivers, instead capturing the holistic experience of sensitive care experienced by a child from their caregiving network in cultural contexts where simultaneous multiple caregiving is the norm, and individual caregiver assessments may otherwise bias outcome measures (Mesman, Minter, et al., 2016).

Alarmingly, relational interventions grounded in Western attachment theory are being touted by non-Indigenous services as potential solutions to structural, systemic and institutionalised harms (Schraner, 2016), despite no evaluation of their cultural appropriateness for Indigenous peoples globally (Australian Institute of Family Studies, AIFS, 2016; Choate & Tortorelli, 2022) and theoretical concerns raised by Aboriginal psychologists (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015; IPS, 2022). Such models emphasise dyadic relationships rather than broader networks of connectedness to people, place and culture. For instance, a German model of out-of-home care (Individueller Jugendhilfe Service e.V., IJS, 2022) informed by social pedagogy (Kirkwood et al., 2019), which forges dyadic attachment relationships between vulnerable children and professional salaried carers, has received substantial government funding (Department of Communities and Justice, DCJ, 2021, p. 84; Schraner, 2016), despite explicit caution against the application of Western attachment theory in Indigenous child protection contexts (Chaffin et al., 2006; Choate et al., 2019; Choate & Tortorelli, 2022; IPS, 2022). The significant investment in interventions that centre Western conceptualisations contravenes longstanding recommendations to empower and invest in Aboriginal families and communities to bring up their own children (Dodson, 1997; HREOC, 1997). Further, the prevalence of socio-economic marginalisation and disadvantage as a social determinant of child protection intervention, as well as its impact on parenting sensitivity and attachment relationships (Cyr et al., 2010; Mesman, van Ijzendoorn, et al., 2016), emphasises the need to invest in Aboriginal families and communities, including through the social justice package recommended by *Bringing Them Home* (Recommendation 42), rather than current approaches that predominantly direct investment towards non-Indigenous services and caregivers (Davis, 2019; SNAICC, 2022).

Ignoring the role of socioeconomic factors

Research recognises the impact of socio-demographic factors including family income on beliefs about parenting sensitivity (Mesman, van Ijzendoorn, et al., 2016). Meta-analytic research regarding the negative impact of maltreatment on attachment has noted the similar impact of accumulation of socioeconomic risks on attachment disorganisation (Cyr et al., 2010). However, governments fail to apply these insights and drive investment towards addressing socioeconomic risks and support for families. To the contrary, attachment discourse is often invoked to justify policies that impose and extend statutory interventions of disconnection, namely the dismemberment of families and the use of permanent 'out-of-home care' placements (Choate & Tortorelli, 2022; Davis, 2019; Libesman et al., 2022). Given the risks associated with disruption of attachment relationships, stronger standards of evidence are necessary when applying psychological constructs like attachment, including the potential for enhanced caregiver–child relationships (Forslund et al., 2022; van Ijzendoorn et al., 2018). The importance of providing meaningful support to caregivers is noted throughout attachment theory discourses (Forslund et al.

2022). Similarly, the need to value caregivers and invest in healing supports has long been raised as a challenge facing contemporary child protection systems, including discriminatory underinvestment in Aboriginal communities and family supports (SNAICC, 2022).

Western expertise is privileged through assessment, reporting and decision making

Courts also find attachment constructs persuasive, relying on the assessment of 'experts' regarding the quality of attachment relationships and associated issues to inform their decisions about the best interests of children (Forslund et al., 2022), including about Aboriginal children. This includes the establishment of clinical assessment institutions (for example, the NSW Children's Court Clinic) providing access to social work, psychology and psychiatry expertise to inform the Children's Court through independent assessment of parents and other caregivers, as well as the needs of children. However, Aboriginal community expertise and knowledges are marginalised through these processes, despite the history of harm towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians recognised within social work and psychology professions (Australian Association of Social Workers, AASW, 2004; Carey et al., 2017). This privileging of Western knowledge systems and expertise presents significant risks to Aboriginal children and families, particularly within court processes. This contrasts with the highly regarded *Indian Child Welfare Act 1978* (US), which includes provisions that privilege qualified witnesses, valuing knowledge of the prevailing cultural expectations of the child's Indigenous community. While there have been efforts to include the voices and expertise of Aboriginal people within assessment processes in Australia, practice remains inconsistent and largely tokenistic, lacking the necessary mandate to safeguard the interests of Aboriginal children.

Attachment theory as an extension of settler-colonial control and intervention

Together, these findings demonstrate how attachment theory and evidence is both misunderstood and misapplied in contemporary socio-legal settings and used to impose settler-colonial cultural perspectives in justifying deleterious interventions in Aboriginal families, compounding past harmful policies. The long history of settler-colonial judgement of Aboriginal families, and the conflation of structural issues that undermine family function and police the outcomes of those harms as family deficit, despite being out of the control of families, reflect ongoing processes of settler-colonial control and intervention (Choate et al., 2020; Choate et al., 2019; Choate & Tortorelli, 2022; Libesman et al., 2022; Vivian & Halloran, 2022). Within this policy context, attachment theory discourse has been weaponised by settler-colonial child protection systems to legitimise the severing of familial and cultural bonds of Aboriginal children in favour of 'new' (settler-colonial determined) legal relationships created through the action of the child protection system. That is, rather than reinforcing the preservation and continuity of cultural connections within Aboriginal relational worldviews through prevention, family preservation and reunification approaches, attachment theory provides a modern basis for the renewal of well-worn policies of harm inflicted on Aboriginal peoples, thereby perpetuating settler-colonial processes of intervention, control and assimilation. Indeed, in our experience, such policies continue to transfer the risks and harms onto Aboriginal young people that child protection systems claim to serve, with many forced to grapple with the sense of disconnection, loss and longing without appropriate support, and to find and develop their identity and family and cultural connections alone, including through 'self-placement', which presents its own risks and challenges.

Indigenous healing frameworks emphasise elements of self-determination,

reconnection and restoration of community and cultural processes (LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2017; Milroy et al., 2014), elements that continue to be undermined by contemporary child protection systems and practice, despite those systems co-opting the language of self-determination and healing. Similarly, contemporary child protection systems invoke concepts related to attachment theory in a way that creates a public façade of relationally informed practice with respect to Aboriginal children and families (Beaufils, 2023), while consistently severing culturally grounded connections to family, kin, community and Country, and prioritising the construction of new connections beyond the child's community and culture. Such processes impose a developmental niche for Aboriginal children that centres Western cultural values and relational frameworks, while simultaneously interrupting and devaluing contrasting Aboriginal values and frameworks, extending the assimilationist approach that characterised the Stolen Generations. In this vein, Indigenous academics assert that 'to make Indigenous child welfare decisions without regard to historical and current social injustices such as the marginalisation of Indigenous women, the degradation of Indigenous cultures, and the misappropriation and imposition of Euro-Western worldviews and practices onto Indigenous peoples is to further these injustices' (Carriere & Richardson, 2009, p. 58). Addressing this injustice requires transformed systems and practices that centre Aboriginal relational ontologies.

Aboriginal relational ontologies

Throughout this paper we have argued that a contributing factor in the disproportionate removal of Aboriginal children is the failure of settler-colonial child protection systems to understand Aboriginal family relationships (Ryan, 2011; Scrine et al., 2020; Yeo, 2003). The following section explores how

Aboriginal relational ontologies support developmental and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal children. Aboriginal cultures are spiritual, ecological and diverse, upheld by a kinship system based on a collective sense of identity, responsibility and care that extends beyond parental or even human relationships to include flora, fauna, the physical environment and spiritual connections (Kingsley et al., 2013; Salmon et al., 2019). From an early age, Aboriginal peoples' sense of belonging develops through connections with others by way of kinship, ritual and spiritual relationships of reciprocity and obligation, which transcend Western notions of biological or familial ties (DCJ, 2018; Lohoar et al., 2014). This extensive relational framework provides a rich foundation of safety and security for development and lifelong social and emotional wellbeing (Dudgeon et al., 2022; Gee et al., 2014).

Just as Western attachment theory conceptualises attachment as an evolutionary mechanism to provide a sense of safety and security necessary for development, Aboriginal relational ontologies, such as those expressed through Social and Emotional Wellbeing frameworks (SEWB; Dudgeon et al., 2022; Gee et al., 2014), outline the necessary connections that comprise the 'developmental niche' (Super & Harkness, 2002) for Aboriginal children. This includes connections to mind and emotions, body and behaviours, family and kin, community, culture, Country and Ancestors, positioned within the context of historical, social and political determinants as part of a complex multidimensional and relational conceptualisation of holistic wellbeing. Such cultural constructs regularly face challenges when applied cross-culturally, including concepts of kinship (Beaufils, 2023), creating conflicting goals and practice imperatives. Often, this reflects the 'normalisation' of dominant cultural constructs through which distinct approaches tend to be (mis)understood and (mis)applied.

Although limited, there has been some exploration of Aboriginal childrearing practices, the development of relational bonds and engagement with the environment while maintaining a sense of safety and security. A study exploring the first year of life in remote northern Australian communities observed Aboriginal families' belief in children's ability to make their own decisions, and how they acted to support children's autonomy (Kruske et al., 2012). Yolŋu reflections on child development also emphasised a sense of autonomy, in that people could not be forced to act, irrespective of age (Armstrong et al., 2022). Additionally, studies of Anangu, Yapa, Nunga and Anbarra childrearing practices observed that caregivers actively sought to model collectivist social values for children (Hamilton, 1981; Malin et al., 1996; Warrki Jarrinjaku Aboriginal Child Rearing Strategy, ACRS, 2002). Such collectivist values within Aboriginal communities (Lohoar et al., 2014) may include a focus on 'interdependence, group cohesion, spiritual connectedness, traditional links to the land, community loyalty, and interassistance' (Yeo, 2003, p. 298). This reflects a function of attachment to provide the basis for developing social competence (Rothbaum et al., 2000; Yeo, 2003).

Within these cultural contexts, different strategies for promoting safety and security have been suggested as framing responsiveness. Non-Indigenous scholarship has considered whether Aboriginal childrearing may seek to anticipate needs and minimise distress pre-emptively, rather than by responding to children's distress signals (Yeo, 2003). This may include guided engagement with the social and physical environment, with caregivers proactively carrying infants (Yeo, 2003). Combined with distributed networks of care that include extensive kin structures and older siblings or relatives (Atkinson & Swain, 1999; Malin et al., 1996; Tavecchio & van IJzendoorn, 1987; Yeo, 2003), the developmental niche for Aboriginal children, particularly in infancy, could be characterised as the continuous presence of relational figures and supported engagement with the environment that pre-emptively responds to stressors that may challenge children's sense of safety and security. These childrearing practices include the communication of collectivist social values and relational worldviews, supporting the development of internal representations of connections that extend beyond 'primary' or immediate family members to include extended kinship networks, as well as emphasising kinship to the natural world (Country) and spiritual connections (Ancestors), which provide the foundation for one's sense of safety, identity and belonging across the lifecourse.

In this way, Aboriginal relational ontologies commencing prior to birth and continuing across the lifecourse provide the function outlined by attachment theory for safety and security necessary for development. However, these relational ontologies extend beyond child–caregiver relationships to include holistic networks of caregivers and kin, as well as Country and Ancestors, into the *Everywhen*, in keeping with Aboriginal concepts of time, place and the eternal nature of spirit (McGrath et al., 2023). This reflects the specific sociocultural worldview of Aboriginal communities, which differs in important ways from other communities, including Western cultural perspectives. However, Aboriginal childrearing practices may be misinterpreted within settler-colonial child protection systems oriented towards Western perspectives and practices. Privileging children's autonomy over other factors may be assessed as aberrant or neglectful caregiving, because sensitivity and responsiveness may be expressed differently through non-interventionist ways (Kruske et al., 2012). From this perspective, community cultural values play a significant role in the expression and interpretation of sensitive and responsive caregiving (Zaidman-Mograbi et al., 2020) and other attachment-related behaviours, and must be considered in their appropriate context.

Towards Aboriginal collective self-determined constructions and applications of attachment

International literature attests to cross-cultural differences in attachment relationships (Choate et al., 2020; Choate et al., 2019, 2022; Neckoway et al., 2003), while the above analysis outlines various functional similarities as well as points of incongruence between dominant Western discourses of attachment and Aboriginal models of connectedness and wellbeing (Dudgeon et al., 2022; Gee et al., 2014). The extensive range and scope of connections included in Aboriginal SEWB models contrast with narrower assumptions of family and permanency privileged by settler-colonial child protection systems, perpetuating poor outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

Addressing these entrenched inequities and harms requires an end to privileging Western cultural frames and their inappropriate imposition on Aboriginal communities, and the establishment and equal valuing of Aboriginal conceptualisations of attachment and child development when making decisions about Aboriginal children and their futures. Grounded in Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Dudgeon & Bray, 2023; Dudgeon et al., 2020), this paper argues for the necessity of collective self-determined models of Aboriginal attachment relationships. Such re-visioning should not only be 'by' and 'for' Indigenous peoples, but 'of' Indigenous peoples – grounded in their own knowledge systems as part of decolonising child protection systems (Fitzmaurice-Brown, 2023) and re-asserting Indigenous Knowledge Systems, including in psychology (Dudgeon & Bray, 2023). Such models would likely acknowledge the importance of connections to community, culture, Country and Ancestors in establishing a sense of safety and security for child development, and in framing the foundations of lifelong safety and belonging critical for social and emotional wellbeing, including physical, mental and emotional wellness, consistent with the multidimensionality of the Aboriginal model of SEWB (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021). Valuing such diverse connections and working to preserve and restore them with child, family and community supports and Indigenous healing practices may be integral to breaking the reciprocal and mutually reinforcing cycles of intergenerational trauma and child removal, as depicted by the Healing Snake in Figure 1.

Epistemic self-determination

This paper lastly turns to the critical role of self-determination in transforming contemporary settler-colonial child welfare systems, including the knowledge and legal systems on which they are based. As elucidated above, that these systems fail structurally and functionally to value, preserve and strengthen key relational networks of Aboriginal children to their families and kin, communities and Country is neither a new (HREOC, 1997) nor an isolated finding (CCYP, 2015; Davis, 2019; IPS, 2022; SNAICC, 2022). Aboriginal scholars have observed that settler-colonial policies have long centred on political claims about Aboriginal children and childhoods, and who gets to make claims about their interests (Nakata, 2017). Nakata frames such debates as central to the Australian nation, both through past policies of forced removals and control that reflect settler-colonial imperatives to 'realise a white nation on black land', as well as future framing given that 'the struggle over who best represents the interests, welfare and love of Aboriginal and Islander children is equally a struggle over who gets to imagine, and who gets to remake, the Australian nation itself' (Nakata, 2017, p. 398).

Yet Aboriginal bubs belong to Aboriginal communities, and the right to raise them and shape our own futures is a critical aspect of sovereignty and self-determination (United Nations, UN, 2007). While there is agreement on the need for 'progressive systems transformation that has Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Figure 1. The Healing Snake. A graphical representation of a map led by Aunty Rita Wright for disrupting persistent cycles of harm and reclaiming Aboriginal conceptualisations of attachment and belonging, in order to shift to positive cycles of Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB; as described by Gee et al., 2014), grounded in Aboriginal worldviews. Maternal/paternal separation is a Western psychological construct interchangeable with maternal/paternal deprivation, family separation and child removal when discussing disrupted attachment relationships. Aboriginal attachment security, or an equivalent term, is yet to be articulated by Aboriginal communities as part of their reclamation of self-determination and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Infographic by Lauren Cammack.

Islander self-determination at its centre' (Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services), 2021, p. 28), the contribution of this and other similar critiques is to emphasise that this transformation must include the assumptions, knowledges and evidence that underpin those systems, reimagining them on the basis of Aboriginal ways of being and knowing, led by Aboriginal communities themselves (Fitzmaurice-Brown, 2023). Internationally, there is considerable consistency in Indigenous advocacy regarding the transformation of child welfare systems to address ongoing injustice and harm (Gray, 2021). Processes of Indigenous autonomy and collective self-governance are central to reconceptualising these systems to reflect Indigenous worldviews and knowledges. This includes re-visioning psychological models of development that provide a theoretical basis for socio-legal decision making including 'attachment' or developmental relational ontologies and caregiving from the standpoints

of Indigenous communities, similar to the collective and iterative process of developing the SEWB model (Gee et al., 2014; National Aboriginal Health Strategic Working Party, NAHSWP, 1989; Swan & Raphael, 1995).

Aboriginal children explore their complex socio-political environment through a sense of safety and belonging provided by diverse networks of connections (Ryan, 2011; Scrine et al., 2020; Warrki Jarrinjaku Aboriginal Child Rearing Strategy, ACRS, 2002). Nowhere is the importance of such connections more evident than when they are interrupted through state intervention, which continues to sever connections to family, kin, community and Country and perpetuate poor outcomes. The dominant child protection discourse subverts the impact of past and recurrent 'intentional harms' on Aboriginal peoples by psychopathologising their survivorship and stigmatising cultural differences in family relationships (Dudgeon et al., 2020) without regard for the structural factors that affect

contemporary Aboriginal society. It pathologises Aboriginal individuals, families and communities as a tactic to justify the ongoing imposition of settler-colonial systems that continue to perpetuate social and epistemic violence against them (Vivian & Halloran, 2022), undermining Aboriginal community efforts towards healing. This disruption of Indigenous healing approaches and practices grounded in cultural worldviews and distributed systems of connectedness (HREOC, 1997; Tujague & Ryan, 2021) reveals the foreseeable harms to the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children, families and communities through such policies as intentional.

A broader focus is needed in child protection that understands the complexity of Aboriginal attachment relationships and values relationality and its associated sense of safety and security through Aboriginal children's connections to family and kin, community and Country, consistent with their own cultural worldview as expressed through models like SEWB (Dudgeon et al., 2022; Gee et al., 2014). This would provide a holistic, multifaceted approach to child development, which privileges culturally informed considerations of the nature of caregiver–child interactions and community-based networks of care within Aboriginal theories of development, and acknowledges the intergenerational implications of the social, economic, historical and political context of families and communities.

Western models of attachment both reflect and reinforce Western constructions of family, with responsibility and legal authority for children generally seen as vested in their parents. Settler-colonial child protection laws and systems are imbued with these Western cultural constructions of childhood, family, community and child development, and reproduce them through their operation. However, such constructions contrast with our cultural experiences in Aboriginal communities, with distributed networks of relationships and obligations with respect to children, including particularly grandmothers (Dudgeon & Bray,

2019). The proposed re-assertion of Indigenous knowledges and worldviews, including about child development and relationships that engender a sense of safety and belonging as a foundation for that development, should be understood as part of broader political processes of reclaiming Indigenous Legal Frameworks and self-governance, including both the basis of legal decision making about the safety and wellbeing of the community's children and the processes through which such authority is exercised (Friedland & Napoleon, 2015). This includes recognising law and its application as a dynamic, collaborative and inherently cultural process through which communities govern themselves, constructing meaning and order within that cultural context (Napoleon, 2007). This goes to the heart of persistent calls for child protection system transformation grounded in self-determination and self-governance for Aboriginal peoples (Davis, 2019; HREOC, 1997). Further, consistent with this broader political project of reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowing and being, the collective nature of these knowledges should be grounded in Indigenous legal frameworks, subject to the authority and the processes of the communities to whom they belong, to protect them from extraction, appropriation and misapplication (Napoleon, 2009).

Aboriginal scholars have articulated cultural connection within child protection systems as a process of 'culturally connecting', through relationships with family and community, reflecting multifaceted conceptualisations of SEWB (Krakouer et al., 2023). This process is part of the ongoing resistance of Aboriginal communities to continuing settler-colonial intervention and dismemberment of families through child protection systems that disrupt the cultural structures that organise the developmental environment for Aboriginal children. Restoring these connections to family, community and Country should not be conditional upon healing; rather healing is likely to be conditional upon their restoration (Anderson

& Tilton, 2017; LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2017; Milroy et al., 2014). In this way, conceptualising and restoring Aboriginal attachment security from the perspective of Aboriginal peoples is critical to reasserting Aboriginal governance and resistance of colonialism, breaking the traumatic cycle of child removal and disconnection (see Figure 1) and promoting the wellbeing of individuals and communities (Dudgeon et al., 2022; Gee et al., 2014). Distinct from the adaptation of existing Western developmental frameworks, this requires transformation of systems and practice to end the unwarranted privileging of settler-colonial knowledge systems and centre Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing, along with mechanisms and actions for the transmission of cultural knowledge, practice and identity (Krakouer et al., 2023). Similarly, evidence presented by 'experts' based on knowledge systems and assessment frameworks that are not culturally grounded or adequately validated by Aboriginal knowledge holders should be treated with considerable suspicion. Thus, evidence regarding Aboriginal families must include adequate cultural expertise, authority and validity – as collectively determined by Aboriginal communities themselves – to be considered reliable for socio-legal decision making.

Reimagining of the conceptual underpinnings of child protection structures, policies and practice to value Aboriginal worldviews and reassert Indigenous Legal Frameworks is critical to efforts to transform child protections systems grounded on self-determination (Gray, 2021; Vivian & Halloran, 2022). Self-determination within child protection systems, including how policy challenges are understood and responded to, is a critical element of effective Indigenous policy. International evidence emphasises that self-determination as a policy setting is associated with improved outcomes, including breaking entrenched disparities and cycles of harm (Cornell & Kalt, 2010). The SEWB model includes a key foundation of self-determination and the importance of the political determinants of wellbeing. This has been comprehensively expanded upon by Professor Daryle Rigney and colleagues (2022) demonstrating the growing evidence for self-determination in promoting the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal individuals and communities, as well as the ways structural disempowerment and the denial of self-determination undermine health and wellbeing. Chandler and Lalonde (2008) particularly identified that wellbeing of Indigenous youth was closely related to community features including the exercise of self-government in social services, access and enjoyment of traditional lands, and the preservation of cultural traditions and practices.

Aboriginal healing models emphasise self-determination, family relationships and cultural ties, as well as community connections and resilience in developing identity, belonging, wellbeing and healing (Milroy et al., 2014), consistent with broader Indigenous healing frames (LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2017). Thus, restoring key relational connections disrupted through historic and ongoing policy settings is essential for healing, grounded in Aboriginal relational ontologies. As outlined above, these approaches extend beyond individual caregiver–child relationships or even distributed networks of care to include relationships with community and Country, as part of restoring cultural and relational continuity (Milroy et al., 2014). Failure to do so is likely to see the present negative and compounding cycle of intergenerational trauma and child removal continue.

Conclusion

Contemporary child protection systems increasingly rely on developmental science to underpin socio-legal policy and practice. Attachment theory is a particularly dominant example, influencing key primary policy frameworks such as permanency, as well as playing a significant role in assessment and decision-making practice. In addition to many

applications reflecting outdated or overstated aspects of attachment theory and evidence (Forslund et al., 2022), we argue that contemporary framings privilege and assert Western cultural understandings and applications of childrearing practices and emerging social competence, and do not adequately understand or value Aboriginal relational ontologies that serve a similar developmental purpose of promoting safety, security, exploration and learning of the physical and social environment in early life and beyond. This epistemic violence and suppression of Aboriginal worldviews and relational ontologies perpetuates settler-colonial policies of control and intervention in Aboriginal families (Libesman et al., 2022; Vivian & Halloran, 2022), contributing to cycles of intergenerational harm and undermining the foundations of healing.

We argue for the development and implementation of Aboriginal constructions of attachment, by, for, and of Aboriginal communities, reflecting the broader relational worldviews and values of diverse Aboriginal peoples, including the sense of security critical to development that is afforded by connections to family and kin, community, Country, Ancestors and culture. Further, contemporary child protection processes must be urgently updated, including the development of culturally valid assessment tools that focus on healing processes and outcomes, and greater involvement of relevant Aboriginal expertise in child protection decision making. This is a necessary part of 'transforming' child protection systems by and for Aboriginal communities, grounded on self-determination, and reclaiming Indigenous Legal Frameworks, ensuring that their conceptual foundations reflect the cultural values, knowledges and perspectives of the communities they serve.

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Ethical standards

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Ash Wright has declared no conflicts of interest.

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This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors. Ethics approval for the manuscript, which is part of a broader study, has been given in accordance with the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of NSW (Project 1729/20).

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