

Raising Children in the Nungā Aboriginal Way

This article provides a snapshot of some aspects of Aboriginal child rearing. It argues that Aboriginal child rearing practices that may be seen in a negative light by non-Aboriginal people are, in fact, effective means for preparing Aboriginal children to deal with the conditions they will encounter as adults. These findings have important implications for the decisions made by non-Aboriginal service professionals who work with Aboriginal families in urban environments.

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The following statement sums up some of the concerns of many Nunga Aboriginal mothers.

'You know, a government worker will come through the door and see that we haven't got very much and that I haven't got a sparkling clean toilet or a shiny kitchen. There's only four cups in the house and two or three knives. There's only five towels between 11 or 12 people. There's junk on the floor and chocolate and scribbles on the walls. Sometimes a panel in the wall will get broken when one of our relations gets drunk and goes silly. There might be bits and pieces of car in the yard and the grass will probably be long and dry. They might even hear me yelling at Wayne, "Get off the f'in' table or I'll knock your head off".

'These are the kinds of things that government workers will see and turn around and say that maybe I'm not a fit mother. Because they are only seeing things through their white culture, they will misinterpret the way I discipline the kids, and they won't notice that my kids are happy and loved and growing up in a way that they can look after themselves and do the right thing by their family. They know who they are and where they belong and that their family would stand by them through thick or thin. They know that I'll give my last cent for them and that if I lost them, my life would be destroyed. Now they are older, I know they can and will be there for me if I am sick and need them.

'I often wonder why me and my family have to be punished because we are poor; because the schools never taught my kids to read and write properly and nobody will give us a job? Why should I be punished because I do things differently to the way white people expect things to be done? Why do I have to worry that my son will get depressed in prison and take his own life? Why do teachers, police, welfare workers and doctors look down on me because of my Nunga culture? Why are my little girls called "nigger" or "black sluts" when they walk down the street?

'This is the 1990s and things have not changed, and in some ways they are getting worse. These are just some of the things I think about and feel need to change.'

These concerns are shared by 'Dorothy', a Nunga Aboriginal mother living in Adelaide. Her family lives on the poverty line, owning few possessions and sometimes having to subsist on bread or johnny cakes in the last few days before payday. Having the electricity or phone cut off is a normal part of life. Dorothy trained as an Aboriginal education worker but has never been offered a job. Often she supports not only her six children and three grandchildren but also her nieces and nephews, and their partners and children as well. Her husband died of a heart attack in

his late thirties and since then her boys, as they have grown older, have had dealings with the juvenile justice and prison system. She feels that these days the stakes are so much higher for her sons because, in prison, they encounter temptations with drugs, are prey to violence and, worst of all, to deep depression which she fears could lead to them taking their own lives.

Most of her friends and family understand this ongoing fear for as long as there is a child or spouse in custody. Referring to her imprisoned son, Dorothy recently exclaimed: 'If

anything happened to him, I'd go off my head. They'd have to take me away.' In addition to this, she is plagued by the threat that she and her daughter will lose custody of her two youngest grandchildren, as their white father is constantly threatening to seek custody, claiming that they are being neglected.

Despite such profound material poverty and worry, the family shuns pity and charity. They want respect and the right to live with dignity and self-determination, and Dorothy raised her children with these goals in mind. However, such child rearing practices are different from those of Anglo-Australians and are seen in a negative light by many non-Aboriginal authorities – often with devastating results.

Perceptions of Non-Aboriginal Service Providers

A problem for Aboriginal people around Australia is that they have very few representatives from their own communities working in government offices, delivering services to their own people, drafting policy or making decisions that impact upon their everyday lives. Aboriginal children and families are therefore dependent on informed, sensitised non-Aboriginal people. Such people are rare, so Aboriginal families are vulnerable to ethnocentric and, at times, racist judgements by non-Aboriginal workers (Dodson 1994; d'Souza 1993).

In schools this may result in children being socially and academically marginalised (Malin 1990). In the Family Court such negative perceptions may result in non-Aboriginal parents of Aboriginal children being more likely to receive custody of children than Aboriginal parents. In child protection agencies, it may result in Aboriginal parents being seen as neglectful of their children.

However, there are indications that non-Aboriginal professionals are keen to make better decisions on behalf of their Aboriginal clients and so avoid the mistakes of the past, but there is little useful information available for them to base their decisions on. This paper provides some of that information. It does not contain a recipe for child rearing in

all Aboriginal homes, or even all Nunga homes. But it illustrates the ease with which certain different child rearing practices, despite their effectiveness in preparing children for adulthood, can be viewed negatively by people from other cultures.

The Study

This article describes the way Dorothy brings up her children and the reactions of non-Aboriginal parents to her child rearing practices. It presents a view of child rearing in a Nunga family in Adelaide, providing examples of a few of the principles and practices by which this family is raising its children to be skilful and motivated in ways felt to be necessary for survival in today's urban world.

Also presented are aspects of Anglo-Saxon middle-class culture that differ from Dorothy's Nunga culture – as personified in Anglo mother-of-four, Ann.

The article is drawn from a larger comparative study, and the data for both Dorothy and Ann are compilations of the data from two Nunga and two Anglo families in that original study (see accompanying boxed inset).

A respected method of determining the validity of results of qualitative research is to consult participants about proposed interpretations. There is a danger in merely presenting descriptions and explanations of 'difference' between social groups in that these can be used to reinforce stereotypes or to pigeon-hole people, and this in turn can lead to discrimination in social attitudes and public policy. Hartley and McDonald (1994:8) caution that 'how differences are interpreted and what is done with the information are crucial issues'. Service providers and others should be aware of this and use the information appropriately.

Dorothy's Child Rearing Goals

Along with many of her family and friends, Dorothy wanted independent, self-reliant children who remembered who they were in terms of family and their Nunga heritage, and their accompanying obligations to immediate family and kin. Kin to them was more than bloodline as sometimes friends and neighbours were more loyal and dependable than actual relatives.

Dorothy stated that it was important to her that the children learn to stand on their own two feet from as young an age as possible; that they are able to defend themselves when threatened; and that they develop an acumen that would prevent them from being exploited. She expected them to be emotionally and physically resilient, to be uncomplaining, to be able to laugh at themselves and not take themselves too seriously, and to know what they wanted and how to get it.

To counter-balance this independence, she hoped the children would always remember their family responsibilities, hold their heads up high and be proud of being Nunga. She expected that they would be able and willing to care for each other, particularly their younger kin; that they would know how to offer the physical assistance necessary to keep the very young fed, clothed, healthy and

safe while also being able to offer them love, affection and emotional and spiritual support. She believed that it is what is inside a person that counts, and material things such as a nice house and furniture are really not important. (See also Hamilton 1981; Harris 1984.)

Several vignettes, particularly those drawn from a family picnic outing video-taped as part of the participant observation in the larger study, illustrate the above principles and their practice.

A Tale of Two Picnics

What happened on Dorothy's and Ann's picnic outings encapsulates some of the most prominent differences in the ways that the two mothers raised their children.

For Dorothy's family picnic lunch we bought fish and chips, bread, a large bottle of coke and a neapolitan cake on the way to the picnic at the local seaside park. We swigged from the coke bottle, having forgotten cups, and didn't need plates as the bread or butchers paper from the fish and chips served as well.

Dorothy and Merridy ate first, feeding toddler Ruby, sitting between us on the rug, as she demanded. The other four children were off on the play equipment or chasing seagulls, not interested in eating so soon – despite Dorothy calling out to them to come and get their food. After about 11 minutes they had all come and fetched their chip sandwiches.

On watching this part of the video, Anglo mother, Ann, expressed frustration on Dorothy's behalf that her children didn't obey her for such a long time. Ann stated that if she had called her children to eat, she would have made sure they came.

Dorothy explained that she finds it far better to let the children come and help themselves to food, whether at picnics or at home. She explained that the children each know how much they want and what they want and they waste less if it is left up to them to serve themselves. It is also up to them as to whether they let the food get cold before they eat it or not.

Ann wondered if Dorothy had been aware of who had eaten what and worried that one

of the children might miss out eating and no one would notice.

Dorothy said that she is always aware of who has or has not eaten, and ensures that there is enough food left for the last child who comes to eat. At the picnic, though, she did not expect them to eat a great deal, believing that they were more interested in playing.

At Ann's family picnic, we bought chicken and chips, a home-made salad and fruit. There was a flask of cordial for the children and a thermos of tea for the adults. Everyone had their own paper plate and cup.

Dorothy noticed, on the video, how the two older children sat near Ann, watching intently, as she unpacked the lunch and spread it out onto plates arranged on the rug. The younger children were off on the play equipment within sight and hearing of those of us sitting on the blanket. The two older children began to squabble, provoked by 11-year-old David, who kept teasing his younger sister by hitting her on the head with his paper plate.

Dorothy felt that the two older children were playing up because they were hungry and impatient to eat the food that was being arranged on the plates in front of them. She felt that Ann seemed to want everything to be 'just right', even at a picnic, worrying about plates and so many different types of food, and she conjectured that Ann probably wasn't enjoying herself.

Ann commented that she wished she could have been able to relax as much as Dorothy and enjoy her picnic. She said that now, a few years later, she would probably relax more and worry less about the logistics of who sat where and who ate what. However, she does like the family to all sit and eat together at mealtimes. This way, when the children were small, she could ensure that they ate a balanced selection of food, but it was also a good time for family talk.

During the half hour or so that Dorothy and Merridy were sitting on the blanket eating and watching the children playing, toddler Ruby crawled behind the block of toilets, out of our sight, and then full circle back to the rug.

Ann, on watching this, said that she felt that this was risky because it left Ruby vulnerable to some mishap. However,

THE LARGER, ETHNOGRAPHIC

The picture presented in the accompanying article is a small but significant part of a larger, comparative, ethnographic study examining the implications of different ways of child rearing for children as they adapt to life in classrooms (Malin 1989). The study (Agius, Campbell and Malin, forthcoming) shows how two Nunga families, while very different from one another in size and background, have retained a distinct Aboriginal culture in a large Australian urban environment, several generations after their ancestors had been dispossessed of their traditional lands.

The culture of these families differs from that of Anglo-Saxon Australians and shares some values and practices with the cultures of two Arnhem Land communities, as they were described by anthropologists in the

1960s and 70s (Hamilton 1981; Harris 1984).

The study demonstrates how this urban culture continues to adapt to city living and is helping people to survive in some fairly depressed economic and social conditions. Because of the space constraints we can only offer a glimpse of this picture here.

Data were gathered by Anglo author, Merridy Malin, by participant observation, supplemented by video and audio recordings, interview and discussion, over a period of some four years in two Nunga Aboriginal families and two Anglo-Saxon Australian families (Malin 1989).

It should be noted that in the article the two Nunga families are represented by Dorothy and family, and the two Anglo families are represented by Ann and family.

Dorothy knew that Stella, Jason, Wayne and Kaiya, between them, would be keeping an eye on Ruby and ensuring that she was safe when she was out of Dorothy's line of vision. A little later, three-year-old Kaiya went into the women's toilet, having ascertained by herself that it was the appropriate one. When she hadn't come back out again after about five minutes, Dorothy directed one of the other children to go in and see if she was all right.

On watching the videotape of this, Ann commented that she didn't allow her children to use public toilets, believing that these days they are not hygienic or safe.

At one stage, toddler Ruby tottered over towards the merry-go-round and, as she got closer, Dorothy called out to seven-year-old Jason to stop the wheel. He did so and then told Ruby to move away from it, which she did.

Ann explained how she would never trust a child in a situation such as this, saying that if she'd been in a similar situation she would have run over and grabbed Ruby herself. Dorothy explained how her children are used to carrying such responsibilities and are in fact very capable of supervising and protecting children younger than themselves. The data in Table 1(g) confirm Dorothy's judgement.

Ann observed from the video that although Dorothy's children often failed to comply with her directives, in an emergency they responded to her direction immediately. Dorothy explained that they did what she asked when her voice changed; they could tell from the tone of her voice if it was an emergency.

An example of the independence of Dorothy's children in not always doing what Dorothy wanted is evident in the following vignette. It occurred on the picnic when everyone was down on the water's edge, some distance from the car. Dorothy had discovered that Ruby's nappy needed changing.

Dorothy said to Stella (aged ten), 'Stella, go up to the car and get a nappy.' Stella shook her head very slightly. Kaiya (aged three) interjected, 'Not me Ma.' Dorothy added, 'It's in the back of the car there.' Stella then stated strongly, 'I don't want to. Tell Jason.' Kaiya interjected again, 'Not me Ma.' Then she and Stella walked away. Dorothy remained staring

impassively out to sea until Jason walked out of the water, whereupon she called out to him, 'Jason, go to the car and get a kimby!' Jason ran towards the car without saying anything, to fetch it.

The competence of Dorothy's four older children at looking after young Ruby during the picnic was evident in their intermittent but continual and spontaneous offers to her of food or drink. They would also carry her away from perceived danger, and they often played with her or cuddled her.

By contrast, at Ann's picnic, toddler Sophie never sought food or assistance from her siblings, and they never offered it to her. She knowingly went to her mother for what she wanted.

There were a number of minor factors about Dorothy's picnic which Ann said she felt uncomfortable with. For example, she would have preferred the children's faces and noses to be wiped more often; she was dismayed at what she perceived to be their unnutritious food; and she said she would have reprimanded Jason for swigging from the baby's bottle and then throwing it back into the basket. Ann also said that she would not have let the children go for a swim in the middle of winter and expressed concern that they had no towels with which to dry themselves and that they boarded the car while sandy and wet.

Dorothy said that she allowed her children to swim because she believed that if it was too cold for them they would not go in. She felt that they were old enough to decide such things for themselves. When four-year-old Wayne came out of the water and said to Dorothy shivering, 'Freezin' Mum. It's freezin' out there!' She replied, 'Yeah, go for another swim, then.' Dorothy referred to this as an 'action replay', explaining that she often did this when the children stated the obvious for attention. This was one way in which her children learned to accept the consequences of their own decisions by being allowed to make decisions about actions – actions that would not be permitted in Ann's family.

One final occurrence during Dorothy's picnic that discomfited Ann involved the matter of teasing.

Stella (aged ten) was in a particularly skitish mood, teasing everyone who came near her. We were all walking up the sandhill from the ocean towards the car park. Dorothy was carrying Ruby. Merridy carried the camera. Kaiya (aged three) was trotting along slightly in front of us when Stella threw a stick just past her calling out to her, 'LOOK OUT KAIYA!' Kaiya turned around and said indignantly, 'STELLA!' Dorothy chuckled. Stella then ran after Kaiya singing out, 'I'm gonna put the big bitey on you!' Kaiya began to run and Stella pursued her, thrusting a piece of seaweed into Kaiya's face. Kaiya screamed, turned around and ran back to Dorothy who was still chuckling at the two of them. Kaiya tried to cling onto Dorothy's leg crying, 'MUMMY!' Dorothy kept walking. Stella thrust the seaweed at Kaiya one more time, yelling, 'YAH!' Then she threw it away and Kaiya relaxed and resumed walking up the hill. Within a few seconds, Stella moved directly behind Kaiya and began nudging her on the buttocks with her foot saying, 'Nice, init?' Kaiya replied with 'Yes!' Stella nudged her again saying, 'Nice, ana?' Kaiya yelled, 'YES!' Stella continued, punctuating each nudge with 'Ana?', to be followed by Kaiya's exasperated, 'Yes!' until they were trotting several metres ahead of the rest of us. When Kaiya had almost reached the top of the hill, she fell down on her side exhausted and moaning. Stella immediately ran back to Merridy to ask for the car keys. Dorothy walked past the prostrate, moaning Kaiya up to the car park. Stella ran ahead also, then Kaiya struggled to her feet and plodded the final steps up to the car park. She was obviously very tired and chanted, 'Erna, ernna, ernna!' to herself with each step until she reached the top. She then turned around and said to Merridy grinning, 'I beat you!'

Ann said that she thought Stella was being unduly cruel in teasing little Kaiya in this way, and that she would have intervened to stop it. Dorothy viewed the incident differently, feeling that it was up to Stella and Kaiya to sort it out for themselves. She believed that Kaiya had not been unduly troubled by the incident. Dorothy was too busy to be worrying about such minor incidents and, within certain limits, the children had to learn to fend for themselves.

When teasing between siblings occurred on Ann's picnic – that is, when David kept hitting his sister Rachel on the head with a paper plate, when he took her plate from her, and thrust his hand at her chin, Ann quietly but forcefully admonished him and demanded that he stop teasing his sister. David argued that he wasn't teasing her. Ann kept up the admonition, talking under her breath, and David eventually capitulated.

On seeing this, Dorothy commented that it reminded her of people she had seen in supermarkets telling their children off in that same way, under their breath, because they don't like to be seen doing it in public. Dorothy stated that if the kids play up in public she delights in telling them off straight, in a loud voice, knowing that it would shame them into submission. She felt that Ann must have been feeling very self-conscious in view of the video-camera. Ann explained that she does not believe in shouting at her children, but tries to explain to them what they are doing wrong.

STUDY OF CHILD REARING

All the findings have been corroborated by a number of informed people from both cultural groups, including the family members studied. They are consistent with the findings of other studies of Aboriginal families, both urban and remote area (Barwick 1974; Hamilton 1981; Harris 1984).

The four families were originally selected because they were equivalent in size, each cultural group being represented by a two child and a four-five child family respectively, with the children in the same age range. The breadwinners in the Anglo families were in professional and blue collar employment respectively, while in the Nunga families one parent was in para-professional employment and the other received a pension.

Nunga authors Katho Campbell and

Laura Agius acted as major informants in the study and have collaborated with Merridy Malin in the interpretations presented in the accompanying article. All the examples given actually happened within the four families and were recorded either on videotape or audiotape in conjunction with fieldnotes, or were retold after the fact by the participants themselves.

Dorothy and her family live in Adelaide. Their ancestry is similar to that of many Nungas, being Ngarrindjeri, Narrunga, Adnymathana, and European. Dorothy is bi-dialectal in dialects of Aboriginal English and standard Australian English.

To ensure confidentiality, all the personal names in this article, except those of the authors, are pseudonyms.

Other Vignettes

A further five vignettes demonstrate both indirect and direct tactics used by Dorothy to influence her children's behaviour, and illustrate how the children take responsibility for protecting the young.

In the first episode, during the picnic described above, Dorothy succeeded through selective attention to draw her older daughter's attention away from a minor discomfort onto the antics of her younger siblings.

Stella had a reddish lump on her knee, probably from a minor jelly-fish sting. She had pointed it out to her mother a few minutes earlier, saying, 'It doesn't hurt or anything.' This time, she thrust it in front of Dorothy, exclaiming, 'Look at it!' Dorothy's attention was focused on 14-month-old Ruby at the water's edge. Dorothy called out to Ruby, 'Hey-la! Bee Bee, lala!' Stella, still holding her knee towards her mother, rubbed it and added, 'It feels funny, Mum!' Dorothy made no comment, but maintained her focus on Ruby and the boys, who were now dunking

themselves in the sea. Stella turned and looked out at the boys, then smiled and exclaimed loudly, 'Look, Jason's in the water!' She glanced at Dorothy, who was still watching seaward, then at Ruby. Then she ran down to Ruby, squatted down in front of her and started to play with her with exaggerated head movements and gestures. She removed a piece of chewing gum from her own mouth, rolled it into a ball, and put it into Ruby's mouth. She then stood and ran into the water.

The second episode, which occurred at home, shows Dorothy again relying on indirect means to elicit her oldest daughter's compliance. Stella, in turn, is confronted with the consequences of her actions and reminded by her little brother of her responsibility to others.

Dorothy asked Stella (aged ten), 'You gonna run up and get a loaf of bread. That'd be for sandwiches for you (for lunch) tomorrow then. And two Fruit Box.' Stella retorted with a slight pout, 'Mum, I'm not going up there.' Dorothy replied, 'Oh, I don't care. You go without your lunch then.' Wayne (aged

four), who was standing nearby, frowned and said, 'Can I walk up?' (It was his lunch and Fruit Box that was involved in this negotiation, as well). Dorothy responded, 'Get my matches from the table and I'll cut you a piece of cake. In the bedroom, go on!' Wayne replied, still with furrowed brow, 'I don't get anything!' Dorothy, trying to dissuade him from wanting to go to the shop, replied, 'You're going to get a piece of cake. Hurry up!' Wayne whined, 'I want some.' Dorothy replied, 'You go and get the matches for me then. Go on!' Wayne, thinking about his potential Fruit Box, walked out of the room exclaiming, 'Kill Stella! She never got none!' Stella, who was sitting at the table nearby, then commented, 'I'll run up store directly.'

Teasing and scaring were very direct ways by which Dorothy controlled her children when they were in situations that she could see were dangerous or inappropriate but which they themselves could not see. She said that it was also a way to toughen them emotionally so they would be better able to deal with the adversity they so often face outside the home. The fearful creatures she summoned were from movies and real life such as Kujo, Boopa and Freddy Kruegger, Mrs Gaddy's ghost (from a storybook), mamu (a Pitjantjatjara harmful spirit being), policemen, and Goonya's (Narungga and Kurna for white skinned person) or 'whitefellas'. She used this tactic in the following way.

After Ruby (at this stage aged two) had repeatedly ignored Dorothy's calls for her to come inside out of the dark, Dorothy called out, 'Ruby, quick! Old Kujo's right behind you. I can see him right behind you! Quick! Run! Run!' Ruby rushed up the back steps and through the door as Dorothy continued, 'Quick he's behind you! Quick! Quick! As Ruby was running inside she was calling out, 'Run! Run!' As she came closer to Dorothy, Dorothy continued, 'Oh, come here quick!', and she grabbed Ruby, cuddled her, and swung her around onto her lap, smiling.

The final two vignettes typify the kind of skills that Dorothy's children could bring to bear as part of their accepted responsibility for protecting their younger siblings.

Dorothy and the children were visiting three-year-old Kaiya in hospital, the first occasion she had been away from home overnight. Ten-year-old Stella comforted Kaiya when she was crying about them leaving her there for another night. 'And you come out tomorrow, ina? You see Daddy, Papa, Nanna.' Some time later she said, 'And when Mum go home, Mum'll tell Dad, inay? And Mum and Stella and Jason and Ruby and Wayne come up and see you tomorrow, anay?' And a few minutes later she added, 'Kaiya, Auntie Elsie (the school bus driver) love you!'

Dorothy recalled another family moment. 'Jason (then aged three) heard his grandpa saying to the crying Wayne (then a baby), "Go on, you want a bloody hiding you do!" Jason, not picking up on the humour, came into the room and put his hands on his hips and said to Dad, "You leave him alone Papa. He's only a little baby." Jason then came and stood between baby and Dad, and patted baby on the arm and said, "It's all right, Wayne, I'm here. Your big brother's here and Papa won't hit you cause I'll kick his guts in." Everybody

Table 1. The competencies of independence and affiliation and the practices fostering them*

	Dorothy	Ann
Independence		
(a) Amount of parent nurturance of independence		
non-intervention in conflict between children	53%	23%
non-response to child's whining and complaining	63%	15%
non-response to child's seeking of attention	44%	31%
acceptance of child's reprimanding, contradiction and attempts to rationalise to adult	71%	25%
(b) Parent acts encouraging a form of equality between their children and themselves		
	Frequency	Frequency
demands for space	33	4
question tags: 'ana', 'isn't it', etc	72	26
parent 'look at ...!' exclamations	31	5
Subtotal	136	35
(c) Child demonstrations of independence		
non-compliance	41	29
child giving directives to adult	38	9
'look at ...' oriented away from self	41	4
Subtotal	120	42
TOTAL	156	77
Dependence		
(d) Child demonstrations of lack of independence		
whining	23	82
drawing attention to self	72	158
seeking assistance from adult	93	148
telling tales	16	20
Subtotal	204	408
(e) Overt encouragement of child by parent operating against independence		
Subtotal	565	1323
TOTAL	769	1731
Affiliation		
(f) Parent acts encouraging an affiliative orientation in children		
overt encouragement of children to care for young children	22	35
overt encouragement of 'concern for others' (not younger children)	34	50
kin-related acts (e.g. talking about kin)	45	3
(g) Child acts evidencing affiliative orientation		
acts of social concern and nurturance	97	23
(h) Child acts evidencing lack of affiliation		
acts of negligence to a young sibling	-2	-7
TOTAL	196	104
* Counted across six recorded hours of daily activity (including a picnic) for each of the four groups, as represented by Dorothy and Ann.		

instinctively knew not to laugh because it came from his heart. He really meant it.'

Interpretations

Table 1 provides data from six recorded hours of daily life, including the picnics, in the four families studied in the larger study. As described in the accompanying boxed inset, Dorothy is a compilation of two Nunga families, and Ann is a compilation of two Anglo families.

The table shows that all of Dorothy's goals were met. It also shows that Ann's child rearing practices were different and would not so effectively meet Dorothy's goals. It can be seen that consistently those practices, values and child behaviour reflecting independence and affiliation (or social concern) occurred more frequently in Dorothy's family than in Ann's family, and those encouraging dependency occurred less frequently.

As the table shows, Dorothy's children were actually nurturant or affiliative much more frequently than Ann's children (g), even though Ann's children were encouraged more frequently than Dorothy's to be caring of others (f). This implies that there were other more effective means for socialising children into caring type behaviour. The overt ways by which all the parents directed their children included reprimands, directives, rationalisations, questioning and occasional punishment. However, these occurred less than half as often in Dorothy's family (e).

This would give rise to the general Anglo perception that the Nunga children were undisciplined. However, apart from using teasing and scaring, which were quite overt and invasive and not used by the Anglo parents at all for control purposes, Dorothy relied primarily on more indirect and subtle measures for socialising her children. Non-intervention or selective attention in child affairs, as illustrated in the vignettes above, was a common strategy used by Dorothy (a).

Another way in which Dorothy indirectly exerted influence and control over the children was through 'loaded' conversation or story-telling meant to communicate a particular value-laden message. In this way, she would communicate to everyone present how, for example, when you were in need 'one aunty would give you her second-to-last dollar, whereas this other aunty, who was loaded with money, would always say that she had none to spare'.

Dorothy also relied on the children to imitate her actions, which they did much of the time from when they were very young. In this way, they gave the impression that they did not try to separate themselves from adults and adult actions to the extent that the children in Ann's family did. This was partly demonstrated in the ways that the children and Dorothy shared similar tastes in music, and how they were all mutually appreciative of each other's humour regardless of how corny the child's joke or how obscure the adult's. Dorothy's children directed her to do things (c), admonished her, and talked to her in ways similar to how she spoke to them.

So despite the overall very real power adults had over children in Dorothy's family with regard to matters outside a child's capability or knowledge, there was an apparent

equality between them. It is perhaps this sense of equality that prevented the generation-gap between adults and children experienced by Ann's family. This gap was evident in the ways that Ann's children emphasised their childishness to adults by, for example, feigning ignorance and helplessness, and by childlike profanities – such as calling strawberries 'bosom', saying 'shit', and showing off by stuffing their mouths with food to overflowing. These kinds of attention-seeking displays were rare in Dorothy's family.

Consistent with Dorothy's stress on independence was her belief that to a large extent the children should be able to regulate certain aspects of their own lives including their access to food, decisions about what they wore, and about when and where they slept. Regarding food, the children were able to help themselves to the fridge as needed. They also had access to virtually any object in the house, excluding the bank book and other official documents. For example, they learned to use the sharp knife for spreading margarine on bread and cutting oranges and the like by the time they were about three.

Summary

Nunga families are as different from each other as any family differs from another, and individuals within the same family are as different from each other as any human being differs from another. Nevertheless, there are some things that bind Nunga families together and certain shared outlooks on life that are different from the ways and views of non-Aboriginal people. This article has identified and described several of those aspects that differentiate the two cultural groups – aspects that could lend themselves to misinterpretation, or that could remain hidden from outsiders.

In summary, the Aboriginal children in Dorothy's family were encouraged to be independent, self-regulating and self-reliant – characteristics that have been observed in other Aboriginal families elsewhere in Australia (Hamilton 1981; Harris 1984). Children began to learn to be competent at looking after their younger kin from when they were very young. Dorothy trusted that they were capable and provided them with the opportunity to practise this, and the children demonstrated that they were able to honour her trust. Dorothy relied on some of the same overt techniques for disciplining her children as Ann, but to a far lesser extent. She also used a number of indirect means such as selective attention, non-intervention, modelling and loaded conversation. In addition, teasing and scaring were a means of helping the children to become emotionally resilient, in order to prepare them for the exploitation and racism that she anticipated they would encounter.

Unfortunately, the successes of families such as Dorothy's in raising children competent in the ways they consider important could be misconstrued by outsiders from a different culture, with different values, and with a tradition of different practices. Ann's perception that Dorothy's children were not being adequately supervised, that they were non-compliant, that they teased in a cruel

way, and so on, precluded her from seeing them as nurturant, self-sufficient, and resourceful.

Such perceptions, often compounded by the family's visible poverty, detract from, or obscure, the real achievements of parents with definite and deeply held aspirations for their children.

It is hoped that this article's descriptions and interpretations of the Nunga-Aboriginal way of raising children will contribute to a better understanding of priorities and practices different from those of other cultures, and provide non-Aboriginal professionals with an alternative explanation for some cases that are presented as 'problems' in children's and family services. More generally, it is hoped that the study will enable non-Aboriginal Australians to become more aware of issues facing many Aboriginal Australians.

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