

Factors affecting resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandmothers raising their grandchildren

Ms Meegan Kilcullen, Department of Psychology, James Cook University

Dr Anne Swinbourne, Lecturer, Department of Psychology, JCU;

Professor Yvonne Cadet-James, Chair of Indigenous Australian Studies,
School of Indigenous Australian Studies, JCU.

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There are currently 14 000 grandparent headed families in Australia and to date, exact numbers of Indigenous children in grandparental care is not available (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2008). However, Indigenous children are over seven times more likely to be in kinship, foster, or out-of-home residential care (AIHW, 2008). It is recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in out-of-home care and that there are not enough carers for these children (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007; Department of Child Safety, 2009). The shortfall of carers is compounded by historical policies that have had a negative impact upon the willingness of individuals to engage with government departments in order to become carers. While a significant number of Indigenous carers are taking on the responsibility of caring for children, there continues to be a shortfall between carer numbers and children in need of care. It is the case that 'once a carer, always a carer' is the norm for Indigenous carers.

Under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (AIHW, 2008; Child Protection Act, 1999; SNAICC, 2005) the first

priority for placing a child or young person in out-of-home placement is in kinship care. Kinship care maintains family and community connections and links to cultural heritage (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007). The number of children being placed in accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle varies across states (SNAICC, 2005) however the number of appropriate placements increases when considering placements which comply with any of the priorities. Despite kinship care being the preference for placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, there is limited research into the experiences of children and carers (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007). Given that the guidelines for the placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children mandates kinship care, it is essential to understand the environment into which they are being placed.

A study of out-of-home care in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community has outlined the needs of carers, placement workers and the children in care. Respondents included both Indigenous and non-Indigenous carers who provided care exclusively for Indigenous children. Participants in this study were canvassed from child protection agencies in Queensland and Western Australia. Experiences in relation to assessment, recruitment and retention, training of, and support were highlighted (Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005). Respondents reported many factors impacting upon the quality of experiences of care. These included quality of support, both emotional and functional, being able to manage contacts and conflict with birth families, and the need for respite from the caring role. The lack of carer numbers left those who were carers vulnerable to feelings of frustration and burnout due to the pressures of caring for children. Carers felt the burden of

responsibility of caring for those children in need when others were not able. Carers described the need for culturally appropriate support from both departmental workers and specialist services for themselves and the children. Frustration caused by the lack of material disadvantage such as low income, inadequate funding from government agencies was also apparent. They described difficulties in being able to provide the necessities for children due to financial stress. Funding and financial support was described as important to carers as it signified the importance of their position as carers of children in need. This issue is often reported by carers in other communities (see COTA, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2004; Goodman & Silverstein, 2002; Hayslip, Temple, Shore, & Henderson, 2006; Musil, Warner, Zauszniewski, Jeanblanc, & Kercher, 2006). Overall, carers wanted to feel valued and respected in their roles as carers.

Carers in this study also described the need for a holistic approach to support and services to carers and children (Higgins et al., 2005). This was demonstrated by the desire for services and supports to not only consider the provision of services to relieve symptoms of those in need, but also treatment of the cause of such need. Past government policies of removal, assimilation, and integration were described as having influenced the willingness and ability of individuals to become carers. The affects of transgenerational grief and loss were reported to be having a negative impact upon carers and their ability to take on children. An important outcome of this emotional distress is reported to have manifested in an aversion of interacting with the welfare system. Some carers were dealing with grief and loss resulting from their own

removal from parents as well as the grief and loss demonstrated by the current children being removed.

It is well recognised that Government policies since colonisation, such as removal from land, assimilation, mission isolation and the more recent 'Stolen Generation', have resulted in numerous mental and social health issues that span several generations (Mellor & Haebich, 2002; Wilson, 1997). Indigenous culture has traditionally transmitted knowledge orally. The cultural disconnection resulting from the removal of children and resulting stolen generations, has resulted in the degradation of Indigenous values and traditional knowledge leaving many Indigenous people dispossessed of social and cultural continuity. Breaking these links has created an interruption in transmission of knowledge, particularly basic parenting skills and thus affected parenting in the Indigenous community. Due to the loss of culture and identity, many have turned to alcohol and drug use and those with children are often rendered unable to care for their children. This may result in the care of the children falling to the grandmothers as a result of family violence, and parental incarceration and mental health problems, as with non-Indigenous families (Fitzpatrick, 2004; Hammill, 2001).

The responsibility that rests with these grandmothers takes a great emotional and physical toll and has been termed 'Granny Burnout' (Hammill, 2001). The Indigenous Elders, particularly the grandmother carers, or grannies, are at greatest risk of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems that deliver their children's children to their care. However, in amongst the health statistics, there is an almost invisible yet resilient group that are being fatigued by the burdens left to them by the historical imbalance

of justice, transgenerational transfer of that trauma, manifesting in their children's inability to cope.

While the difficulties of grandparents raising grandchildren are becoming well documented (see Council Of The Ageing (COTA), 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2004; Hammill, 2001; Orb & Davey, 2005), it is important to identify those grandparents who are functioning well in their role as carers. As the grannies provide a link to their traditional culture, supporting these women is crucial to improve the health of the Indigenous community by addressing and interrupting the intergenerational transfer of trauma and distress. The appropriateness of support is augmented when those in the kinship carer role identify factors affecting the delivery of optimum parenting. This may in turn facilitate the development of appropriate and self-determined interventions. Beneficial flow-on from supporting these women will be manifested in enabling all grandparents to foster the growth of 'healthier' grandchildren.

Aim of Current Study

The aim of this study was to describe the experiences of urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandmother carers raising their grandchildren. Specifically, utilising a positive psychology framework (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), this study aims to identify the strengths of these carers.

Method

This study was conducted in 2006 in Townsville which has an Indigenous population of approximately 5.6% (ABS, 2006), some 3.3% above the Indigenous national population distribution. A qualitative research method was used, with analysis conducted via a grounded theory framework (Glaser 1978; Glaser & Strauss 1967). Interviews were transcribed and analysis was conducted by hand. Approval from the James Cook University Human Ethics Committee was obtained.

Participants

A purposive sample of urban Indigenous grandmothers who reported coping well in their role was sought. A deliberate sampling method was used to identify those women who were coping well in their roles as grandmothers in order to identify factors that facilitated their functioning. The sample was comprised of 7 Indigenous grandmother carers who had, or have had informal or formal custody of their grandchildren or great-grandchildren. Three grandmothers identified as Aboriginal decent, three identified as Aboriginal/South Sea Island decent, while two grandmothers identified as Aboriginal/Torres Strait Island decent. The participant's ages ranged from 46 to 61 years ($M=56.14$ years, $SD=5.34$), the total number of grandchildren for each grandmother ranging between 1 to 46 grandchildren, with the number of grandchildren or great-grandchildren currently in their care ranging between 1 to 4. Three grandmothers were married, three were not married, and one was widowed.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted by the principal author using a yarning, informal style of interview in keeping with recommended methods of engaging with Indigenous participants (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). Each interview was approximately 60 minutes in length. Interviews were conducted at participant's home, workplace, and outdoor locations. In order to validate findings, each grandmother was given the opportunity to comment on, verify or amend the interpretation of interview data. All participants expressed agreement with the analysis and no amendments were suggested. Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Results

The grandmothers discussed their strength and resilience in terms of support provided via socio-cultural factors and personal agency. The ten following themes emerged from the interviews describing the factors that allowed them to cope in everyday life.

Sociocultural Factors

Socio-cultural factors include support from social networks, kinship structure, traditional adoption, employment and spiritual belief.

Social Network

All grandmothers described the importance of establishing and maintaining effective community support networks. Support was gained by forming reciprocal bonds within the local community. Nina noted “it’s not what you know but who you know and how to access what we have within our own community”. She also acknowledged reciprocity by adding “it’s a give and take” relationship. Indeed, survival was equated with having a thriving social support network. Grandmothers proved to be resourceful and persistent in maintaining and strengthening community support networks. Nina described “when it comes to social outings, my daughter, my granddaughter’s mum doesn’t have a vehicle, so, if it means I have to do two or three runs to make sure our outing’s a success, so be it, and I do it”. This was “not as a payback” for raising the granddaughter, but was done to strengthen the social and family network. Creating social support networks allowed the grandmothers to effectively support their grandchildren by providing sources of respite and was acknowledged when commenting, “I know the few friends that I’ve got, we meet. That’s how we coped, we kept one another, we kept propping one another up.”

Nina noted “as an Indigenous grandmother...social outings...it’s all about family”. Family gatherings constituted the main social outlet for most of the grandmothers. However, others also described community gatherings and social events as providing a cornerstone for their social support. Rose described being heavily involved with organising and attending community events such as NAIDOC week. Taking her grandchild to these events provided a way to reinforcing cultural links and “when they’re around [child’s family from a different cultural group], we always make sure she identifies”.

Continuity and maintenance of cultural connections allowed the grandmother to fulfil her cultural obligations, expectations and requirements.

Five grandmothers demonstrated the ability to contact support services such as psychological, medical, and legal advice when required.

Psychological services were sought for themselves but also for others in the family. The grandmothers described the importance of having access to multiple sources medical support, such as the hospital, local medical centre and Indigenous medical centres, when medical services were required. A grandmother described access to psychological help in helping cope with her grandchildren's anger, "after my therapist... the doctor, psychiatrist/psychologist , she said, they're angry, they can't express their feelings". Another grandmother described being able to access medical care, "I take the both of them to [Indigenous medical centre] when they get sick, yeah. If I can't get to [Indigenous medical centre], I'll take them to the Healthlink [local medical centre], because it's closer. So, if I can't ring up to [Indigenous medical centre] to come and pick us up, well that's what I'll do, I'll just go straight to Healthlink. Or otherwise, if it's on the weekend, [granddaughter]'s the main one that gets sick, I'll take her to the hospital".

For some, the experience of a harsh childhood created a disconnection in the family structure. Wariness of the family was developed due to a problematic childhood and helping behaviours were viewed as dependent upon a positive or negative outcome for the potential support giver. Possible isolation resulting from the disconnection from familial support was reduced by the development of social networks outside the family and in particular with other women also raising their grandchildren. However, it was acknowledged

that successfully managing difficult situations was rarely achieved alone. Alice described never taking her problems to the family, but instead, gathering support from friends in the same situation. For example, she noted “[you won’t cope] if you don’t talk to somebody, a friend...it’s never the family”. Thus, strength was gained from the mutual exchange of coping strategies and diversion and distraction from the problems at hand in the company of grandmothers also raising their grandchildren.

Kinship Structure

All but one woman in this study described their greatest source of strength as that provided by the support of the family structure. They described the extended family as the greatest source of social support and central to the provision of quality child care. Edith commented “we do it the traditional way....the Aboriginal way, childrearing and that sort of thing”. The traditional way of raising children was described as a “communal system”, where support is given by all members of the extended family. She noted, “it’s...nothing new, because...when you’re reared up in a semi-tribal way like I was reared up, I had ...my grandmother, my father’s mother was full-blood and she had a lot to do with our child rearing”. These women were viewed as the custodians of cultural traditions and “overall supervisors” of the following generations. They ensured that child rearing was “being done in that proper traditional way”. Edith described her grandmother being removed to Palm Island and still maintaining the position as matriarch of the family. The matriarch is important to the family group as “she’s the one that the young

ones take instruction from". She also noted, "you're not born with [childcare] skills, they're a learned skill...they're learned from.... the grandmother in particular. She's the one that...instructs you, even with how to raise boys".

In this sample, women in single parent situations had the support of the family, enabling them to raise the children the "Aboriginal way" and in a stable environment. The oldest son was given the role as the head of the family, while uncle/brothers support the women financially and also with the discipline of the children. When discipline was needed for grandchildren, Lesley commented, "I called on an uncle/brother to discipline them...he took her in for a year to discipline". This sharing of responsibility across members of the family was described as in keeping with the traditional way of child rearing within the Indigenous community.

As noted, support for these women was derived from a "communal" way of life with "women stepping in and supporting another woman" (Edith). This was also reflected by another grandmother's comment that "Yeah, they're [sisters] a big support...yeah, I've got other sisters there and they just step into the role of taking care of grandchildren."

This support was available to all women, in all circumstances. It was the role of any woman who had the capacity to assist another woman during times of need to offer such support. For Ivy, this included the support from her granddaughter who "helps me a lot in the house". This support is provided by the grandchildren as a sign of respect and genuine concern for their grandmother. In addition, when a mother was struggling to raise a child, women of the grandmother's generation (grandmother, aunties) were called upon to take the child in order to support the mother. Support of the family

and in particular female relatives reinforced the strength of those caring for the next generations.

Traditional Adoption

Traditional adoption was made explicit as a source of strength by a grandmother of Torres Strait Islander descent. Nina described traditional adoption as the giving of a child to the grandmother to raise, not as an “assumption...but more of a cultural thing”. For Nina, this meant raising a grandchild as a matter of cultural tradition within functioning families rather than assuming fault within the parent of the child requiring the removal of that child from dysfunction. This was done in order to keep the grandmother “young at heart and mind...the emotional side, the physical side...I can’t mention enough about the mind, because it keeps them [grandmothers] active”. It was understood that the child goes to the grandmother on a long term basis, in order to “keep [the grandmothers] active”. After the child has stayed with the grandmother for a few years, they were returned to the parental home and another grandchild is sent to be with the grandmother. The grandmother was viewed as a mentor and custodian of knowledge to the family. The child was there not only to keep the grandmother active, but also to be taught “emotions, sensitivity and respect [for elders in the family]...at a young age”. It was expected that this knowledge, and humanitarian skills developed would be passed along to other children by the child upon return to the parental home. While women of Aboriginal descent did not operate in the

same cultural paradigm of traditional adoption, these grandmothers also enjoyed the support of their families when required or if procured.

Employment

In this sample, four grandmothers were currently employed.

Grandmothers who were employed described gaining a great deal of strength and support from their employment roles. All of those employed were actively involved in helping others in the Indigenous community. Employment was viewed as supportive not only due to being out in the workforce and interacting with colleagues, but also working in the community strengthened the grandmothers as it provided an opportunity to support others in need.

Lesley commented “this job makes me go into houses and homes and look at the community”. The positions of employment held by some grandmothers offered a source of knowledge for addressing their own issues raising their grandchildren. Nina noted differences across time in legal obligations pertaining to disciplining children. For example, laws regarding corporal punishment (smacking) of children had changed since the grandmothers raised their own children and were raised themselves. Disciplinary measures taken by the grandmothers were influenced, and softened, by this information.

Awareness of these changes was heightened through access to information through their employment as community support staff. Rose also noted “where I work, a different way of thinking...change and things like that, and it all does influence you”. She also described her employment as providing respite for her, “I’m pretty much an independent sort of person. I think, the

time that I get to myself is when I go [out of town on business] I'm there for work... it's just a bit of time away, it's like respite, you know, you just need that little bit of time away, as grandparents. And I think it's a role that with any parents, you can't get away from...personal space [is crucial for coping]".

Spiritual belief

Spiritual belief was described as a source of strength and was linked with cultural connection to traditions and ceremonies. Edith described herself being reconnected with her culture through participation in traditions and ceremonies. These cultural practices ceased around the late 1950's and early 1960's and recommenced in 1995. Prior to her reconnection with her cultural heritage in 1995, she commented "I coped". She stated, "I've just come back from the women's ceremonies in [state] and they just made me a senior Elder of the women's group over there. You know, that's a privilege...you're senior elder women who carry out law and different things like that, for women's business, you know. So, I was really privileged I thought. So...I think that's where my strength comes from. I mean, before 1995 [reconnection with ritual and ceremony], I coped. I coped. And I think it was my belief, and, my belief in myself that carried me through...plus other people around me."

Faith and Christianity was also described as a mainstay of support for four of the seven grandmothers. Faith was described as underpinning coping especially for those less connected to family and was equated with survival during times of adversity and beyond. Alice described herself "always [having] that faith and I think that if I didn't have...I wouldn't have survived... I don't go

to church a lot, but you don't have to go to church to have faith...I used to talk to myself, talk to God and say 'oh God, please help me, I need to get through this. How do I do it?'

Many grandmothers described praying to God, offering prayers for grandchildren and adult children and themselves in order to gain knowledge of how to deal with hardships. Nina described encouraging her grandchild to pray for her mother and sisters as a way to keep a connection between them even though they were absent from the family home.

Lesley described Christianity as providing support for her throughout her life. Her belief in God underpinned her compassion for others and "going that extra mile". She described gaining strength from her religious beliefs and values, and particularly while providing the grandchildren with a stable environment in which to grow up. She noted that religious teachings state that the children should be raised by their parents, however, she provides her support regardless as that is also the Christian way.

Agency

Internal factors influencing the agency of grandmothers include acceptance, self-reliance, facilitators, problem-solving and flexibility.

Acceptance

An overarching factor strengthening the grandmothers was acceptance of life and all situations presented to them. When asked about her experience

raising her grandchildren, Marjorie responded “there’s really no great big deal with it”, and Nina commented “I love it”. This sentiment was echoed by all of the grandmothers. Grandmothers described being able to accept and understand the limitations of being able to help the children in all situations. This allowed them to be able to concentrate on those aspects of the children’s lives that where assistance was possible. Marjorie noted “I can’t help them with that [not being able to feel love for the mother]” but explained that this may change for the child as time passed.

The grandmothers accepted fault within themselves and the grandchildren without being paralysed by the need to be perfect, “but, that’s how it is. You’ve gotta teach kids right from wrong, you know. And you also gotta have discipline on yourself, so you can do it for your grandchildren.” Many women described their grandchildren as “not perfect” but as “normal kids” who do normal things. As Lesley noted “you’ve gotta look beyond” and accept that the child is operating in the social environment beyond their influence, “At the end of the day, I mean, I know where I’ve come from. I know where I’m going to be, and I know where I’m at now, but what I’m trying to do is make my children’s life and their path a little bit smoother“. They trusted that their previous teachings of principles and values to the grandchildren would guide their decisions.

Self-Reliance

Developing self-reliance allowed these women to provide effective parenting to their grandchildren. Such strategies used to increase their self-

reliance included positive self-talk, and gaining access to support from a variety of sources. Particularly for those who did not access family or social support, positive self-talk was described as being a mechanism which provided motivation and strength. Utilising this mechanism allowed the women to access knowledge from previous experiences in order to find ways of dealing with current situations. Alice described talking with herself to gain knowledge and provide the basis for action in the present and was accessed during times of crisis or adversity. She described herself saying “you’ve gotta keep going, you’ve got your kids, God’s with you, just keep going girl”.

Facilitators of Family Healing

Facilitating healing within the family and transmission of knowledge across the generations was demonstrated by all grandmothers. Grandmothers saw themselves as the teachers of skills on a practical level and also teaching values and principles, and described gaining strength from teaching the next generation. The women felt the responsibility of their role as grandmother encompassed transmission of values and principles to the grandchildren in order for them to understand their place in a larger societal structure. Respect for elders and truth in word and deed were taught as the most valuable assets for the grandchildren.

Problem-solving Skills

Women in this study demonstrated a range of problem-solving skills and proved to be resourceful and persistent in their efforts. Both direct and indirect problem-solving strategies were used. Direct or proactive strategies such as drawing upon previous experiences and using alternative strategies were employed by the grandmothers. Problem-solving skills were demonstrated in day-to-day practicalities such as controlling finances and confronting difficult situations head-on. Situations were described where the grandmothers tackled the problem in a forthright manner in order to solve it efficiently. These situations were especially apparent when dealing with the parents of the grandchild, but also with the grandchild. Rose described “taking a more proactive approach” when dealing with previously unspoken topics. She also described keeping an open mind and being open to new ideas and the points of view of others. Alice described being in a difficult situation with a parent of her grandchild and going directly to the parent to solve the problem. Edith also described her problem-solving as direct and stated “I go straight to them, we sit down and we sort it out”.

Many of the grandmothers reported drawing upon their previous experiences raising their own children and their parent’s methods as a means of dealing with raising their grandchildren. In particular, the women recalled the way they were parented and made conscious efforts to either emulate or improve upon past parenting practices. For those women who felt their own childhood was not optimal, efforts were made to improve upon the past. For example, Alice describes authority figures in her life, such as parent, grandparent and teachers, as “cruel” and making a conscious decision early in her life – “I’m wasn’t going to be like [them]”. Sometimes, the effect of their

childhood was implicitly manifested. Marjorie noted when asked if she had been influenced by her childhood, “no, no”, but then added “I’ve been thinking about it ...like, when we were growing up we didn’t have much” and then went on to add “I don’t want my grandkids to be brought up that way”. Others described being less strict upon their grandchildren, less so than they were on their own children. Rose commented “I probably draw upon improving how I was parented... [my] parents were very strict...I tend to take an approach where I talk about anything and everything”. As a proactive strategy providing strength, grandmothers described being able to find alternative routes to solve problems. When difficulties arose, if the way of dealing with the problem was unsuccessful, then another way was found.

Avoidance strategies such as distraction and diversion were also utilised by the women to help cope with raising their grandchildren. Though not widely used, diversionary tactics were engaged by gathering around them women in similar situations. Before going on an outing away from the grandchildren, a conscious decision was made not to discuss family problems. Grandmothers described this strategy as providing strength and after such outings, the grandmothers described being more able to deal with the problems of raising their grandchildren.

Flexibility

Grandmothers described being flexible in their approach to raising their grandchildren. The most fundamental changes were evident when dealing with the traditional way of raising children and grandchildren. When the

traditions were no longer viewed as relevant to this generation, the grandmothers were able to selectively make changes. Changes in thinking were seen in relation to marriage practices, such as arranged marriage. This practice was viewed as no longer appropriate for this generation and therefore able to be changed or discarded. The grandmothers acknowledge the changing social context and gaining strength from being able to adapt to the changes and provide adaptive responses.

The grandmothers also demonstrated flexibility in their responses with regards to providing guidance to their grandchildren. From simple comments such as “you allow for things like that” (Ivy), to more complex rationalities such as “they have to develop their own personalities, their own principles and their own style of how they want to cope with it.....we can only just advise her...and it’s up to her to whether she wants to honour those principles....[I] might not agree....it may be alien to us but we have to just watch it and support it if it need to be supported” (Edith describing allowing self-development of her granddaughter even in times where she did not agree). The flexibility of responses allowed the grandmothers to deal with the changes in their grandchildren.

Discussion

The study results provide important insights into the experiences of urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandmothers raising their grandchildren. While areas of difficulty are acknowledged for grandmothers raising their grandchildren, this study focused on the areas of strength

identified by these grandmothers. A positive psychology framework was applied which advocates identifying and amplifying strengths in order to develop and maintain positive psychological well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Successful life functioning may be best understood when considering the interplay between individual, environment, society, and culture.

Areas of difficulties for custodial grandparents are well documented and acknowledged in the literature (COTA, Backhouse, 2006; 2003; Dunne & Kettler, 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2004; Hammill, 2001; Hayslip et al., 2006; Higgins et al., 2005; Musil et al., 2006; Orb & Davey, 2005; Pruchno, 1999; Standing, Musil, & Warner, 2007). Similar to the findings of previous research the current grandmothers described difficulties regarding legal, financial, parenting and social issues. Effects of the legal aspect of custody flowed on to the financial situation of the grandmothers. Those who made custodial arrangements based upon mutual trust tended to benefit from some financial support from the parents. However, consideration of the parental financial situation was made before grandmothers made application for government benefits. Some described not making application due to the effect it would have upon the parent's financial situation, even when the parent did not have the child. Grandmothers who were raising the grandchildren due to parent's inability to cope tended to make application for financial assistance. It was noted by all grandmothers that raising the grandchildren presented financial strain at some point. However, those grandmothers on government pensions or allowances reported experiencing difficulties on a week-to-week basis, particularly having problems providing basic necessities for the grandchildren.

Grandmothers who were employed reported less financial difficulties and not being eligible for governmental financial support. These experiences are clearly reflected by other in the carer role across different communities (see COTA 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2004; Higgins et al., 2005)

Grandmothers in this study acknowledged difficulties in raising the children however did not describe these issues as overwhelming or insurmountable. Difficulties raising their grandchildren appeared to be mediated by psychosocial factors that facilitated support to, and resilience of, the grandmothers. In fact, these grandmothers appear to be protected from being overwhelmed by daily problems by their connection to culture and their acceptance of life. Moreover, grandmothers were keen to advance the view that raising their grandchildren was not out of the ordinary or exceptional, but rather just a normal part of life. These findings support other reports which describe protection of psychological well-being through adherence to cultural norms and expectations (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002; Pruchno, 1999).

When asked how she was coping with raising her grandchildren, one grandmother stated “I love it”. They reported acceptance of life situations as providing the mechanism for being able to positively reframe these events and find the meaning within. Even though they had experienced negative life events, such as the loss of spouses, a harsh childhood or a lack of financial support, they remained optimistic and accepting of life’s events. As one grandmother described her situation raising her grandchildren, “there’s no great big deal with it”. These comments may reflect the experience of positive psychological functioning due to adherence to cultural norms. For these Aboriginal grandmothers, “doing it the Aboriginal way” was stated to be a

source of strength. Similarly, the practice of traditional adoption was culturally appropriate for grandmothers of Torres Strait Island descent. They stated that they gained strength from operating within these cultural frameworks. Both traditional adoption and the “Aboriginal way” meant grandmothers were supported by their family groups, and thus socially connected. The kinship structure provided stability for family members during times of adversity such as when marriages broke down. The kinship structure allowed for roles, such as grandmother, to be fulfilled by other members of the family who identified as grandmother. Grandmothers stated that this provided family members with clear role definition pertaining to their responsibilities during these times. Grandmothers also described the extended family network and kinship structure as providing support. Social issues regarding the grandchildren were also dealt with by the extended family. Discipline issues in single-mother families were passed on to uncle/brothers to contend with. This was described as the culturally normative and appropriate way of dealing with family issues. Grandmothers reported that meeting cultural expectations and being grounded in culture and tradition allowed them to be more socially integrated.

Historically, the indigenous community has experienced disconnection from their culture as a result of government policies (Wilson, 1997). However, within this cultural context grandmothers continued to demonstrate resilience and psychological well-being. Maintaining cultural connection provides a context in which to understand and make meaning of one’s life course and circumstances. One grandmother stated that she only “coped” with her life situation prior to her reconnection to culture through participation in traditional ceremonies. She stated that since her reconnection to her culture the source

of her strength came from a sense of meaning and balanced view of life. Overall, the strengths and experiences described in this study go some way to contributing to understanding the factors that facilitate resilience and positive psychological functioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander grandmothers raising their grandchildren (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007; Mason, Falloon, Gibbons, Spence, & Scott, 2002). As the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (AIHW, 2008; Child Protection Act, 1999) places priority on kinship placement of children in care it is essential to understand the psychosocial mechanisms that allow grandparents carers to develop and maintain well-functioning placements

Summary and Conclusion

The results of this study provide an insight into the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandmothers who are raising, or have raised their grandchildren. In particular, this study highlights the view that positive psychological functioning for these grandmothers was gained through the strengths provided by interplay between cultural connection and personal agency. Grandmother's agency was demonstrated by self-reliance, developing and strengthening problem-solving skills, being facilitators of healing within the extended family, flexibility when responding to difficult situations, and acceptance of life situations. Socio-cultural factors including participating in traditional adoption, developing and maintaining kinship structures and social networks, participation in employment, and maintaining spiritual beliefs. Grandmothers stated that together these psychosocial factors

positively affected their psychological well-being through increasing optimism and provide meaning to their lives.

Overall, this study has contributed to knowledge regarding the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandparent carers by providing a snapshot of their experiences raising their grandchildren. As older Indigenous women who are caring for their grandchildren provide a link between generations through their connectedness to traditional knowledge and support mechanisms, supporting these women may be crucial to the improvement of the health and well-being of the Indigenous community. Beneficial flow-on from this support may be manifested in enabling grandparents to foster the growth of 'healthier' children. As noted by one grandmother, "it's a balancing act between culture, tradition, custom, as opposed to Western ways".

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