

Title: **Challenging Institutional Denial: Psychological Discourse, Therapeutic Culture and Public Inquiries**

Authors: Katie Wright

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Contact: Associate Professor Katie Wright  
[katie.wright@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:katie.wright@latrobe.edu.au)

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# Challenging Institutional Denial: Psychological Discourse, Therapeutic Culture and Public Inquiries

Katie Wright

## Abstract

The damaging effects of abuse in childhood were repeatedly emphasised in public hearings and in media coverage of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Testimony from earlier Australian inquiries, which documented widespread experiences of child maltreatment, particularly in institutions, also underscored the ongoing and often intergenerational impact of abuse. Taking institutional child abuse inquiries as a case study, this article examines how psychological and therapeutic concepts have been mobilised politically. It argues that therapeutically oriented and psychologically informed cultural narratives of childhood trauma and its ongoing effects have provided a framework for making sense of long-term experiences of adversity and suffering and have enriched attention to “the question of justice” for survivors of historical institutional child abuse.

## Keywords

Therapeutic culture; historical child abuse; institutional child abuse; psychological discourse; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

In 2001, a polemical essay written by social commentator and academic Robert Manne became a national bestseller.<sup>1</sup> “In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right” documented what Manne argued was an orchestrated political campaign to discredit the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s report on the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.<sup>2</sup> With the refusal to acknowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Manne, “In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right,” *Australian Quarterly Essay* 1 (2001), <https://www.quarterlyessay.com.au/essay/2001/04/in-denial>.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the*

the injustice and suffering caused by past policies resulting in child removal, the right, he argued, was in denial. Manne speculated about the motives driving historical denialism, but the essay was more concerned with refuting conservative attacks on the Stolen Generations report than an analysis of the key players' psyches. Nevertheless, by entitling his essay "In Denial", Manne invoked a highly popularised psychological concept to make a forceful social and political critique.

The language of psychology and therapy has gained considerable currency in Western cultures since the 1970s, reflecting what many scholars have argued has been a widespread process of psychologisation and a pervasive therapeutic turn.<sup>3</sup> This is captured in the concept of *therapeutic culture*, a construct that describes the social, cultural and political influence of psychology and, importantly, the diffusion of practices and beliefs typically associated with therapy and counselling. Therapeutic culture has been understood by critical scholars as a predominantly late modern, Western development, evident in a sensibility that privileges self over community and reflected in a shift from a culture of reticence and self-reliance to one of emotional expressiveness, vulnerability and help-seeking. It is commonly regarded as a cultural impulse that fosters narcissistic tendencies and encourages personal adjustment rather than social transformation in a depoliticised neoliberal era.<sup>4</sup> This is aptly captured in characterisations of "therapy"—the central metaphor of therapeutic culture—as a mechanism of social and personal regulation.<sup>5</sup>

Therapeutic culture is rarely understood as political or as an important component of social movements. Yet when this is acknowledged (as in the 1970s feminist rallying cry "the personal is political"), it is typically interpreted as counterproductive.<sup>6</sup> Therapeutic culture has thus been subject

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*National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> 3For an overview, see Katie Wright, *The Rise of the Therapeutic Society: Psychological Knowledge & the Contradictions of Cultural Change* (Washington, DC: New Academia, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Dana Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics: Rhetoric of Therapy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, a caricature but it accurately depicts the central critique.

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, "Liberation Therapeutics: Consciousness-raising as a Problem," *Society* 39, no. 3 (2002): 7–15; Cloud, *Control and Consolation*.

to longstanding and ongoing critique.<sup>7</sup> This includes recent debate about the therapeutic purposes of historical child abuse inquiries and, more broadly, the value of therapeutic framings in scholarship on transitional justice— a key framework used by scholars in the emerging interdisciplinary field of research on inquiries, apologies and redress.<sup>8</sup>

Critiques of therapeutic approaches to justice raise important questions about the focus on emotional and psychological harm in struggles for recognition and restitution, a focus that some critics argue deflects attention from structural issues and ultimately detracts from the project of social and political change. Without dismissing concerns about what Parker terms “therapeutic psychologisation”, this article offers an alternative interpretation.<sup>9</sup> An analysis of therapeutic culture as reflected in historical abuse inquiries, I suggest, can enrich both understandings of public inquiries as well as theorisation of the social and political significance of the therapeutic turn.

To develop this argument, the article begins by examining three national inquiries that preceded and, in many ways, laid the foundation for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

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<sup>7</sup> Katie Wright, “Theorizing Therapeutic Culture: Past Influences, Future Directions,” *Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 4 (2008): 321–36.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of transitional justice was originally used to theorise moves towards justice and democracy in states in transition but is increasingly being applied to justice responses in other contexts. Its application in established Western democracies is contested but these debates are beyond the scope of this paper. For critiques of the therapeutic in transitional justice processes, see, for example, Simon Robins, “Challenging the Therapeutic Ethic: A Victim-centred Evaluation of Transitional Justice Process in Timor-Leste,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6, no. 1 (2012): 83–105; for a key critique of the influence of a therapeutic ethos in international policy relating to war and disaster, see Vanessa Pupavac, “Therapeutic Governance: Psycho-social Intervention and Trauma Risk Management,” *Disasters* 25, no. 4 (2001): 358–72; for broader foundational critiques of therapeutic culture, see Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978); James Nolan, *The Therapeutic State: Justifying Government at Century’s End* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); for critiques of therapeutic dimensions of abuse inquiries, see Carol Brennan, “Trials and Contestations: Ireland’s Ryan Commission,” in *Apologies and the Legacy of Abuse of Children in “Care”*, ed. Johanna Sköld and Shurlee Swain (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 55–69; Carol Brennan, “When Apology Is Not Enough: Ireland’s Ryan Commission,” *ExpressO* (2012), [https://works.bepress.com/carol\\_brennan/1/](https://works.bepress.com/carol_brennan/1/).

<sup>9</sup> Ian Parker, “Foreword,” in Ole Jacob Madsen, *The Therapeutic Turn: How Psychology Altered Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

(hereafter, the Royal Commission). Through an analysis of these inquiries as one kind of justice response to demands from survivors for recognition and redress, the article shows that psychological discourse and a therapeutic ethos have been central to the ways in which harm and injustice have been conceptualised.<sup>10</sup> This, in turn, suggests an alternate reading of the effects of therapeutic culture, one that sees it not simply as individualising and depoliticising, as many critics claim, but rather one that acknowledges its social and political power. The article concludes by underscoring the importance of notions of psychological harm for the establishment of the Royal Commission and the development of its empathetic trauma-informed approach.<sup>11</sup>

### **Reckoning with past wrongs: Australian inquiries into historical child abuse**

During the 1990s and into the 2000s, the widespread experiences of intergenerational trauma resulting from past policies and practices associated with the removal of Indigenous children from their families became a subject of intense public and political scrutiny.<sup>12</sup> The facing of past wrongs was subsequently also extended to children subjected to other forms of systemic violence and abuse. Reflecting the strong public inquiry culture of Australia, this led to a series of state and Commonwealth investigations.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Anne-Marie McAlinden, "An Inconvenient Truth: Barriers to Truth Recovery in the Aftermath of Institutional Child Abuse in Ireland," *Legal Studies* 33, no. 2 (2013): 189–214; Anne-Marie McAlinden and Bronwyn Naylor, "Reframing Public Inquiries as 'Procedural Justice' for Victims of Institutional Child Abuse: Towards a Hybrid Model of Justice," *Sydney Law Review* 38 (2016): 277–309; Kathleen Daly, *Redressing Institutional Abuse of Children* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Johanna Sköld, "The Truth About Abuse? A Comparative Approach to Inquiry Narratives on Historical Institutional Child Abuse," *History of Education* 45, no 4 (2016): 492–509.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the Royal Commission's trauma-informed approach, see Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report*, Vol. 1: *Our Inquiry* (Sydney: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005); Joy Damousi, "History Matters: The Politics of Grief and Injury in Australian History," *Australian Historical Studies* 33, no. 118 (2002): 100–12; Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, "Memory and History in Twenty-first Century Australia: A Survey of the Field," *Memory Studies* 6, no. 3 (2013): 370–83.

<sup>13</sup> Shurlee Swain, "Beyond Child Migration: Inquiries, Apologies and the Implications for the Writing of a Transnational Child Welfare History," *History Australia* 13, no. 1 (2016): 139–52; Denise Cuthbert and Marian Quartly, "Forced Child Removal and the Politics of National

While there were complex social, cultural and political factors involved, the wider context in which historical child abuse emerged as a social problem may be briefly summarised as follows: during the 1960s, there was a (re)discovery of child abuse and recognition that the family home could be a dangerous place for children; in the 1970s, in the context of second-wave feminism, concern broadened from a focus on physical abuse to also include sexual abuse; during the 1980s, institutional abuse was conceptualised as a social problem that warranted a political response; and in the 1990s, there was increasing attention to the ongoing effects of abuse that took place in the past, a form of injustice now commonly referred to as “historical abuse”.<sup>14</sup>

Shifting societal concerns with the maltreatment of children clearly has a multifaceted history, explication of which is beyond the scope of this article. For present purposes, however, it will suffice to note that the establishment of official inquiries has been a key government response to demands from individuals, survivor advocacy groups and the media that historical abuse be investigated. The activism of two major victim groups, care leavers and survivors of clergy sexual assault, has been critical.<sup>15</sup> As Daly notes, official inquiries are one kind of justice mechanism for institutional child abuse; others include criminal prosecution, civil litigation and redress schemes.<sup>16</sup>

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Apologies in Australia,” *The American Indian Quarterly* 37, no. 1–2 (2013): 178–202.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Corby, Alan Doig, and Vicky Roberts, *Public Inquiries into Abuse of Children in Residential Care* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001); Kathleen Daly, “Conceptualising Responses to Institutional Abuse of Children,” *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 26, no. 1 (2014): 5–29; Johanna Sköld and Shurlee Swain, ed., *Apologies and the Legacy of Abuse of Children in “Care”: International Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Katie Wright, “Remaking Collective Knowledge: An Analysis of the Complex and Multiple Effects of Inquiries into Historical Institutional Child Abuse,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 74 (2017): 10–22.

<sup>15</sup> Joanna Penglase, *Orphans of the Living: Growing up in “Care” in Twentieth Century Australia* (Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2005); Jacqueline Z. Wilson and Frank Golding, “Contested Memories: Caring about the Past – Or Past Caring?” in *Apologies and the Legacy of Abuse of Children in “Care”*, eds. Johanna Sköld and Shurlee Swain (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 27–41. Katie Wright and Shurlee Swain, “Speaking the Unspeakable, Naming the Unnamable: The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 42, no. 2 (2018): 139–152.

<sup>16</sup> Daly, *Redressing Institutional Abuse of Children*, 2.

Inquiries are important because they have given victims and survivors a public voice and played a significant role in determining other justice responses, such as redress. They have also shaped public understandings of abuse and its effects and provided recommendations for social policy reform to better protect children. In the United Kingdom, from 1945 to 1999, there were more than eighty public inquiries into institutional child abuse, with all but two conducted from the 1970s onwards.<sup>17</sup> As Swain has shown, the pattern in Australia has been somewhat different. There is a long history of inquiries into allegations of child abuse, particularly in institutional settings, but it was not until the 1990s that inquiries began to focus on the testimony of victims and survivors.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which began in 1995, provided an important victim-centred model for inquiries into the historical abuse of children in Australia and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> A key component of the TRC mechanism—used in international law to investigate gross human rights violations—is individual testimony.<sup>19</sup> To operate, TRCs require the cooperation of victims and perpetrators, although the latter may be compelled to participate rather than doing so voluntarily. Crucially, there is an expectation that the process will be therapeutic and promote healing for victims, communities and the wider society.<sup>20</sup> While approaches taken in child abuse inquiries have differed from the TRC model, there has been a similar focus since the 1990s on the testimony of victims and survivors. As Swain notes, this challenged institutional denial of abuse and fundamentally changed inquiry outcomes.<sup>21</sup>

With this in mind, the focus of analysis in this article is on three national inquiries that are central to the history of institutional child abuse in Australia.<sup>22</sup> Reports from each of these inquiries acknowledged that past

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<sup>17</sup> Corby, Doig, and Roberts, *Public Inquiries into Abuse*.

<sup>18</sup> Johanna Sköld, “Apology Politics: Transnational Features,” in *Apologies and the Legacy of Abuse of Children in “Care”*, eds. Johanna Sköld and Shurlee Swain (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 15–17.

<sup>19</sup> Alfred Allan and Marietjie Allan, “The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a Therapeutic Tool,” *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 18, no. 4 (2000): 459–77.

<sup>20</sup> Allan and Allan, “The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”

<sup>21</sup> Shurlee Swain, *History of Australian Inquiries Reviewing Institutions Providing Care for Children* (Sydney: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2014); Sköld, “Apology Politics.”

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*; Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record: Report on Child Migration* (Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, 2001); Australian Senate

policies brutalised children, and they all underscored the ongoing and often intergenerational legacy of maltreatment, particularly its psychological impact and the ripple effects of such harm on people's lives. All three reports stressed the need for people to have opportunities to tell their stories, and for victims to receive formal apologies, reparations and support, including psychological counselling.

While there were therapeutic dimensions to the inquiries and the need for sensitivity was clearly recognised, the inquiries themselves were not intended to simply have therapeutic outcomes to remedy injustice. Their reports, however, did include recommendations that were explicitly therapeutic, and, more generally, reflected an increasing professional and public acceptance that abuse and maltreatment in childhood often result in ongoing trauma—an understanding fostered by various branches of psychology. The growing legitimacy of psychological knowledge in the wider culture from the late twentieth century, alongside the embrace of a therapeutic ethos, have been an important factor in victims and survivors gaining a public voice. Psychology, broadly defined,<sup>23</sup> has provided a framework to make sense of experiences of trauma and the language with which to articulate it.<sup>24</sup> Before examining in more detail the ways in which therapeutic culture has been implicated in societal recognition of institutional abuse, the background and findings of the three major inquiries that helped lay the foundation for the Royal Commission are briefly outlined.

### ***Bringing them home***

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Community Affairs References Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians Who Experienced Institutional or Out-of-home Care as Children* (Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, 2004). There have also been important state-based inquiries but, for the purpose of this article, the focus is on national investigations.

<sup>23</sup> The broadly defined use of the “psychology” encompasses recognition of the ways in which allied and connected strands of knowledge from psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry have been taken up socially and culturally as “psychological”. For a discussion of the historical development of this process, see Katie Wright, “Inventing the ‘Normal’ Child: Psychology, Delinquency, and the Promise of Early Intervention,” *History of the Human Sciences* 30, no. 5 (2017): 50.

<sup>24</sup> Shurlee Swain, “Giving Voice to Narratives of Institutional Sex Abuse,” *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 41, no 2 (2015): 289–304; Katie Wright, “Speaking out: Representations of Childhood and Sexual Abuse in the Media, Memoir and Public Inquiries,” *Red Feather Journal: An International Journal of Children in Popular Culture* 7, no. 2 (2016): 17–30; Wright, *The Rise of the Therapeutic Society*, 217–22.



In 1994, Robert Tickner, then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, delivered the opening address at a conference organised by Indigenous Australians entitled “Going Home”.<sup>25</sup> The conference brought together people from across Australia to share experiences and find ways of bringing to light the history and effects of past policies and practices resulting in the separation of Indigenous children from their families. At the conference, the minister revealed that “no issue had so haunted him as this one”, and he announced that he would discuss with the Attorney-General the establishment of an inquiry into past practices of child removal.<sup>26</sup> The matter was referred to the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and, following an extensive inquiry, the commission handed down its report.

*Bringing Them Home*, as the report of the inquiry was called, estimated that between ten and thirty per cent of Australian Indigenous children had been separated from their families between 1910 and 1970.<sup>27</sup> Successive government policies were adopted and legislation enacted in relation to child removal for a range of reasons, from attempts at assimilation and racial merging, to protectionist policies of various kinds. Prior to the inquiry, there was scant knowledge of this aspect of Aboriginal history among the wider Australian population. *Bringing Them Home* changed that.

While historical details in the report have been debated, it nevertheless exposed both the history of child removal and its impact. Drawing on testimony from more than 500 people, it revealed widespread suffering that had resulted not only from the laws, policies and practices relating to the separation of Indigenous children from their families, but from the abuse experienced by many children in institutions in which they were placed after being removed. The opening paragraphs of the report noted that

much of its subject matter is so personal and intimate that ordinarily it would not be discussed ... For individuals, their removal as children and the abuse they experienced at the hands of the authorities or their delegates have permanently scarred their lives. The harm continues in later generations, affecting their children and grandchildren.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Manne, “In Denial,” 4.

<sup>26</sup> Manne, “In Denial,” 4.

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*, 3.

Grief, loss and brutality were dominant themes. The report noted that some children were removed “in the absence of the parent but sometimes even by taking the child from the mother’s arms”.<sup>29</sup> While positive outcomes were acknowledged for some, it revealed a litany of abuse and neglect suffered by many others. For example, following separation from their families, it was common for children to be taught to reject their Aboriginality. Many were told that their families were dead or had rejected them. Some had their names changed and were punished for speaking their own language. The provision of food, clothing and housing was grossly inadequate, and education was thoroughly deficient. Children placed in work by authorities were frequently not paid wages. Excessive physical punishment was common, and many witnesses testified to being sexually abused. While sexual abuse was not a dominant focus at the time, the recording of testimony about this would, in subsequent inquiries, paint a picture of the sexual abuse of children as endemic in the institutions that were ostensibly set up to care for them.

The difficulty of assessing the manifold effects of separation and, for many, subsequent abuse, was acknowledged. The report stressed that for most witnesses, these effects had been multiple and profoundly disabling. Reflecting what had become, by the late twentieth century, a widespread acceptance of the value of psychological support, it was noted that no counselling was ever provided to children or their families. The report drew on psychological theories of attachment, with child and adolescent psychiatrists providing evidence in relation to the ongoing effects of separation. It also examined the consequences of being placed into institutions and noted that the psychological and social effects “persist into adulthood”.<sup>30</sup>

From risk-taking behaviours and delinquency, to alienation, lack of self-worth and depression, the inquiry found that a range of mental health problems had resulted from past laws and practices of separation and subsequent institutionalisation. It was also noted that for many, giving evidence was extremely traumatic, and psychological support was required. An Indigenous social worker had been appointed to the inquiry’s staff, and

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<sup>29</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> 30 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*, 163.

an Indigenous psychologist provided counselling for witnesses. Yet despite the difficulties experienced in reliving the pain of past events, *Bringing Them Home* stated that most people who had provided testimony welcomed the opportunity to be heard and that “giving testimony had contributed to their healing”.<sup>31</sup> As a letter of thanks from one witness documented, “Everyone I have spoken to has said it is like the world has been lifted off their shoulders, because at last we have been heard. For me I have grown stronger and now am able to move forward”.<sup>32</sup>

A key recommendation of the inquiry was the establishment of an archive for the preservation of Indigenous stories. The report noted that “the primary need is to enable people to tell their stories, to have them recorded appropriately and to enable the survivors to receive counselling and compensation”.<sup>33</sup> The federal government responded to the *Bringing Them Home* report with a sixty-three million dollar package to assist with indexing and preserving files, the provision of family support and parenting programs, and establishing projects for culture and language maintenance and oral histories. Ongoing funding to promote social and economic well-being was also provided.<sup>34</sup> Another key recommendation was that reparations for forcible removal should include the issuing by all Australian parliaments of formal apologies.<sup>35</sup> Although some states responded, the then prime minister, John Howard, “steadfastly refused to apologize formally”, choosing instead to provide a statement of regret.<sup>36</sup> The Commonwealth government was criticised for not making a formal apology, for failing to acknowledge human rights violations, and for not paying compensation to victims.

### ***Lost innocents***

A similar story of suffering emerged in a subsequent inquiry, which examined unaccompanied child migration. While estimates vary, an accepted figure is that around 6,500 children from Britain and more than

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<sup>31</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Daly, *Redressing Institutional Abuse of Children*.

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*.

<sup>36</sup> Melissa Nobles, *The Politics of Official Apologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 97.

300 children from Malta were sent to Australia under approved child migrant schemes during the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> Child migration from Britain was a practice that, in its longer historical context, was developed to remedy social problems perceived to be associated with orphaned and poor children, while providing, in its racialised aspirations, “good white stock” for the colonies and dominions.<sup>38</sup> As Sherington has argued, a “narrative of rescue and regeneration in the Empire” sustained child migration programs in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup>

Yet what became clear through a 2001 Senate inquiry was that, for many who arrived in Australia under child migration schemes, the promise of a better life soon gave way to the reality of severe deprivation, with many children placed in what was described as barrack-style institutions isolated from the broader community. The Commonwealth Government, as legislated guardian, transferred its responsibility of “care” to state governments, which in turn transferred responsibility to other agencies, such as children’s homes.<sup>40</sup>

As with the removal of Indigenous children, until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, little was known about the operation of child migrant schemes and the effects of the schemes on those involved.<sup>41</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s, however, a number of books were published on the subject, television programs were broadcast and government reports were produced.<sup>42</sup> Attention to this issue was also fuelled by international

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<sup>37</sup> Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Revisited* (Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, 2009), 62, 119.

<sup>38</sup> Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Lost Innocents*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Geoffrey Sherington, “Contrasting Narratives in the History of Twentieth-century British Child Migration to Australia: An Interpretive Essay,” *History Australia* 9, no. 2 (2012): 27–47.

<sup>40</sup> Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee, “Prologue,” *Lost Innocents*.

<sup>41</sup> Australian Senate, *Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Revisited* (Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, 2009), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Australian Senate, *Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Revisited*, 2–3. Australian Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare, *Children in Institutional and Other Forms of Care: A National Perspective* (Canberra: Government Publishing Service, 1985); John Usher, *A Report to the Minister for Health and Community Services, the Hon. John Hannaford from the Committee Established to Review Substitute Care Services in NSW* (Sydney: The Committee, 1992).

developments, notably the advocacy of British social worker Margaret Humphreys, who established the Child Migrants Trust, and through a House of Commons inquiry into the welfare of former British child migrants.<sup>43</sup> This report, as well as growing calls in Australia for a national investigation, put pressure on the government to act.

The Australian government initially opposed the establishment of an inquiry, arguing that the issue of child migration had already been extensively covered by the British report and Australia's response to it. In addition, it noted that statements of regret had been made, that former child migrants had been provided with financial assistance for travel to the United Kingdom, with help in accessing their records, and with the provision of counselling services that were not available to the general public. But the objections of the then conservative coalition government were muted by the release of a damning state report on the abuse of children in Queensland institutions.<sup>44</sup> In 2000, at the initiation of a Democrat senator, Andrew Murray, a former child migrant himself, the Australian Senate referred the issue of child migration to the Community Affairs References Committee.<sup>45</sup>

The committee's report, *Lost Innocents*, was tabled in Parliament in 2001. It examined the issue of unassisted child migration to Australia under approved schemes during the twentieth century, with particular reference to the role and responsibility of Australian governments. The committee received 99 confidential submissions and 153 public submissions, many of which, it noted, contained "the most appalling stories of abuse and torment".<sup>46</sup> While positive experiences were documented, the report underscored the profoundly negative experiences of child migration:

Evidence to the Committee indicated the disturbing extent of physical, sexual and psychological abuse that was inflicted upon child migrants over a number of years ... indiscriminate physical assaults using specially made weapons, sexual abuse including sodomy and rape,

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<sup>43</sup> United Kingdom House of Commons Health Committee, *The Welfare of Former British Child Migrants. Third Report* (London: House of Commons, 1998); Sherington, "Contrasting Narratives".

<sup>44</sup> Leneen Forde, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions* (Brisbane: The Commission, 1999).

<sup>45</sup> Australian Senate, *Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Revisited*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Australian Senate, *Lost Innocents*, 5.

psychological and other forms of emotional abuse including depersonalisation, arduous and exploitative work regimes, limited educational opportunity, inadequate food and clothing, and poor after care.<sup>47</sup>

The report revealed that it was common for children's names to be changed, for them to be lied to about their parents and for letters from parents not to be passed on. The consequences of "living such negative experiences led some child migrants into a life of family and relationship breakdown and domestic violence, of crime and violence, and of substance abuse".<sup>48</sup> Other identified effects were depression and anxiety disorders, explosive anger, alcohol and drug abuse, problems of trust, crime, high levels of suicide, problems of identity, and lack of self-esteem and confidence. Indeed, widespread and long-term negative social and psychological consequences of child migration schemes were documented, and the need for counselling for former child migrants was emphasised. Along with recommendations that former child migrants be given access to specialised tracing services and counselling, the report stressed the importance of the development of programs to assist with reconnection with relatives, as well as the need for formal apologies from federal and state governments and agencies involved in child migrant schemes. In 2002, the government responded with a package that included financial assistance to the Child Migrants' Trust, funding for family tracing and travel to reunite with family members, the establishment of state-initiated memorials and the provision of counselling and health services. Formal apologies were issued by two states. However, as with its response to the Bringing Them Home report, the conservative federal coalition government opted merely for a statement of regret.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Forgotten Australians***

The report of the committee of inquiry that investigated the experiences of Australians placed in institutional or out-of-home "care" as children, *Forgotten Australians*, became the third part of a trilogy documenting the appalling historical treatment of children.<sup>50</sup> The establishment of the Senate inquiry

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<sup>47</sup> Australian Senate, *Lost Innocents*, 105.

<sup>48</sup> Australian Senate, *Lost Innocents*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Australian Senate, *Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Revisited*, 13–14.

<sup>50</sup> Australian Senate, *Forgotten Australians*, 2.

that gave rise to this report reflected a climate of increasing attention to the brutality of past practices and policies of Australian governments, and the role of churches and other agencies in relation to the maltreatment of vulnerable children. As with the inquiry into child migration, it followed struggles for recognition by support and advocacy groups and was set in train by a Senate motion put forward by Senator Andrew Murray. More than 600 submissions were received from people who were in “care” in government and non-government institutions or foster homes during the 1920s to the 1990s. The *Forgotten Australians* report stated that this inquiry had “generated the largest volume of highly personal, emotive and significant evidence of any Senate inquiry”. It noted that evocative language describing the appalling treatment of children was “constantly repeated” through submissions and other forms of evidence.<sup>51</sup>

It found that more than half a million Australians had experienced out-of-home “care” during the twentieth century. Some children were institutionalised or made wards of the state because of family dislocation or from being orphaned. For others, it was due to perceived behavioural problems, because they had been “neglected” or were believed to have been in some form of “danger”. Yet institutional care did not offer a safer environment. On the contrary, as with the report on child migration preceding it, *Forgotten Australians* documented extensive experiences of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and widespread experiences of neglect, humiliation and deprivation.

The report noted that upon arrival at some institutions, “health and hygiene procedures” were routinely undertaken. These included “delousing by cutting and washing hair in kerosene”, but the most traumatic practices involved “internal examinations” for girls, some of whom “were not even teenagers”.<sup>52</sup> Clothes and other belongings were removed, letters were censored or not passed on, and it was a common practice for children to be referred to by an identification number, rather than their name. Children were put to work in conditions that amounted to slave labour, and the provision of food, clothing and education was grossly deficient. Punishment often took the form of physical beatings that, the report noted, “went way beyond the sort of

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<sup>51</sup> Australian Senate, *Forgotten Australians*, 4, 85.

<sup>52</sup> Australian Senate, *Forgotten Australians*, 86.

corporal punishment which was acceptable at the time”.<sup>53</sup>

For some, making a submission to the inquiry meant telling their story for the first time. As with the two previous inquiries, many witnesses asked for their submissions to be kept confidential. However, it was noted: “All these people desperately wanted the Committee to read and hear what they had experienced in childhood and the impact that those events have had throughout their life. They wanted their voice to be heard”.<sup>54</sup> The importance of being heard was especially pressing in light of the refusal by those implicated in past abusive practices to acknowledge the suffering caused. Indeed, the committee concluded that many comments made by churches and care providers revealed “a complete lack of understanding or acceptance of the level of neglect and abuse that occurred in their institutions”.<sup>55</sup> In stark contrast, the report highlighted the profoundly damaging effects of institutional abuse and neglect, including depression and phobias, alcoholism, low self-esteem, anger, fear, shame, guilt, drug addiction and suicide. As with *Bringing Them Home* and *Lost Innocents*, the *Forgotten Australians* inquiry underscored that traumatic childhood experiences can have serious ongoing and intergenerational legacies.<sup>56</sup>

The inquiry found that governments the Churches and agencies should issue formal statements acknowledging their role in past institutional care policies and practices and the impact this had on the lives of many care leavers. These statements should express sorrow and apologise for the physical, psychological and social harm caused.<sup>57</sup>

The committee stressed that in addition to formal apologies, other measures of reparation should be initiated. It was recommended that these include the establishment of a national scheme of redress, improvements to the accountability and transparency of church processes for dealing with allegations of abuse, measures to assist with locating and accessing records, as well as the provision of a raft of services to address the present needs of care leavers, especially support and advocacy services.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Australian Senate, *Forgotten Australians*, 101.

<sup>54</sup> Australian Senate, *Forgotten Australians*, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Australian Senate, *Forgotten Australians*, 186.

<sup>56</sup> Australian Senate, *Forgotten Australians*, 145–170

<sup>57</sup> Australian Senate, *Forgotten Australians*, xvi.

<sup>58</sup> Australian Senate, *Forgotten Australians*, xix–xxvii.



As with the other inquiries, government responses were mixed. Redress schemes were created in several states, and apologies were issued by some state governments and agencies identified as responsible.<sup>59</sup> However, in keeping with its previous position, after the release of this latest report, the coalition government rejected the committee's two key recommendations: a formal apology and the establishment of a national reparations fund. The politically contentious issue of state apologies was eventually resolved with the defeat of the coalition government and the election of the Australian Labor party late in 2007. Early in 2008, the then prime minister, Kevin Rudd, issued a national apology to the Stolen Generations and, late in 2009, an official apology was offered to former child migrants and people who experienced out-of-home "care" as children.<sup>60</sup>

### **Therapeutic culture as a legitimising frame: the Royal Commission**

In the reports of the inquiries into the Stolen Generations, child migration and children in institutional "care", the impact of childhood abuse and trauma on psychological health emerged as a major concern. Furthermore, the importance of telling one's story—of giving voice to victims'—was strongly endorsed, as was the value of culturally appropriate forms of counselling. A psychologically infused therapeutic ethos was crucial: it legitimised the experience of trauma and provided a framework and a language for understanding and explaining the ongoing and often intergenerational legacies of childhood abuse and neglect. That psychological knowledge and a therapeutic sensibility has been—and continues to be—marshalled in this way underlines a political dimension of psychological discourse and therapeutic culture that is rarely acknowledged.<sup>61</sup>

Certainly, greater awareness of past abuse and its ongoing effects is not in itself sufficient; there are clearly limits to what may be called *therapeutic*

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<sup>59</sup> Australian Senate, *Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Revisited*, 33–47; Daly, *Redressing Institutional Abuse*.

<sup>60</sup> Prime Minister of Australia, "Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples," Parliament House, 13 February 2008, <https://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>; "Transcript of Address at the Apology to the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants," Parliament House, 16 November 2009, <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/110625/20091116-1801/www.pm.gov.au/node/6321.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Wright, "Theorizing Therapeutic Culture."

*politics*. However, I argue that a politics rooted in the therapeutic ethos has served, in Australia as elsewhere, as a precursor or springboard for social action and institutional change. Crucially, the issues raised by the three inquiries considered above continue to reverberate throughout Australian society. This becomes strikingly clear in brief consideration of a further example, that of institutional child sexual abuse, which was recently examined in the largest inquiry ever conducted in Australia, a five-year-long and far-reaching Royal Commission.<sup>62</sup>

The establishment of the Royal Commission followed sustained activism by individuals and groups, built on previous inquiries, and owed much to increasing media attention to the issue of clergy sexual abuse. In announcing the inquiry, the Australian government commended victims for having the courage to speak out:

Anyone who has ever suffered child abuse deserves to have their voices heard and their claims investigated ... This Government will do everything it can to make sure that what happened to children in the past is never allowed to happen again, and that survivors receive the support and justice they deserve.<sup>63</sup>

At the first public sitting of the Royal Commission, in April 2013, Justice Peter McClellan began his address by drawing attention to the rapid social changes that recent generations of Australians have witnessed. An important one, he noted, was the “preparedness to challenge authority and the actions of those in power in areas where this would not previously have been contemplated”.<sup>64</sup> Media reports at the time suggested that more than 5,000 victims of institutional abuse would provide testimony.<sup>65</sup> By the end

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<sup>62</sup> Katie Wright, Shurlee Swain, and Kathleen McPhillips, “The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 74 (2017): 1–9.

<sup>63</sup> Jenny Macklin, Julia Gillard, and Nicola Roxon, “Government Formally Establishes Royal Commission,” Joint Media Release, Australian Government Former Ministers, <https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/13233/government-formally-establishes-royal-commission/>

<sup>64</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Formal Opening of the Inquiry Transcript,” 3 April 2013, 1, <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/transcript-3-april-2013.pdf>.

<sup>65</sup> Australian Broadcasting Commission, “Justice McClellan Opens Royal Commission,” 7:30 Report, 3 April 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/justice-mcclellan-opens-royal-commission/4608378>.

of the Royal Commission, more than 8,000 people had shared their story in a “private session”.<sup>66</sup>

A wide range of institutions were investigated. The Catholic Church had been the subject of much attention internationally, and scrutiny of abuse within its parishes, schools and children’s homes was an important focus of the Royal Commission’s work. Yet it soon became clear that many other religious organisations had also failed to protect children. The Royal Commission found that children had been sexually abused in a range of non-religious organisations, such as schools, sporting clubs, orphanages and children’s homes.<sup>67</sup> As with systemic problems identified in the Catholic Church, it was revealed that in many settings, rather than abuse being a problem of isolated criminal behaviour, it was made possible by institutional deficiencies, and in some cases, repeated offending was enabled by the complicity of authorities.<sup>68</sup>

Victims and survivors have faced enormous challenges in seeking acknowledgement of and reparation for crimes against them as children, particularly when confronting very powerful institutions like the Catholic Church.<sup>69</sup> Although considerable challenges remain in the pursuit of justice, the exposure of systemic and institutional violence has been aided, I argue, by the legitimising frame that psychology and therapeutic culture have provided. The capacity of victims to speak publicly about matters hitherto unspeakable has been central; so too have been shifts in conceptualisations of childhood, and acceptance of the severe and often ongoing damage caused by abuse—understandings of which have been furthered through decades of psychological research and public dissemination of this knowledge.

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<sup>66</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses, Final Report.

<sup>67</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses, *Final Report*.

<sup>68</sup> Jodi Death, “Bad Apples, Bad Barrel: Exploring Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy in Australia,” *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 4, no. 2 (2015): 94–110; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States, 1950–2002* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004); Karen Terry, “Stained Glass: The Nature and Scope of Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church,” *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 35, no. 5 (2008): 549–69. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses, *Final Report*.

<sup>69</sup> Chrissie Foster and Paul Kennedy, *Hell on the Way to Heaven* (Sydney: Random House, 2010).

The Royal Commission gave victims and survivors a public voice in Australia in ways that radically challenged forms of institutional authority and denial that had hitherto kept people silent. The profound impact of abuse was a recurring theme in witness testimony, one buttressed by extensive research evidence. Survivors were supported by an empathetic trauma-informed approach that drew on contemporary understandings of psychological injury. The final report noted that the impact of child sexual abuse is different for each victim, but common experiences include mental and physical health problems, difficulties with interpersonal and sexual relationships and issues around gender and sexual identity.

The Royal Commission found that sexual abuse can affect many areas of people's lives, including their connection to culture, their religious and spiritual beliefs and affiliations, their interactions with society, and their education, employment and economic security.<sup>70</sup> Drawing attention to the impact of abuse was important in underscoring why the inquiry was necessary, why children need to be protected and why survivors need redress. It is too soon to evaluate the longer-term outcomes of the Royal Commission. However, a national redress scheme is due to commence in mid-2018 and regulatory reform to improve child safety is underway across Australia. As with similar inquiries internationally, the Royal Commission and the changes it has fostered reflect a shifting social and cultural terrain in which the interests of children and past victims, and those of churches and other institutions, are being reconfigured.

## **Concluding comments**

What, then, do inquiries into childhood abuse suggest about the consequences of the "triumph of the therapeutic"—the social shifts of the late twentieth century that conservative sociologist Philip Rieff called a "cultural revolution".<sup>71</sup> While some readings of the therapeutic turn suggest cultural decline and even a descent into "victimhood", can it be read, in line with many transitional justice approaches, as a move towards a less unjust society? In view of the analysis of Australian inquiries discussed above, and reflected most powerfully in the Royal Commission, it is possible to consider multiple framings, including one focusing on the

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<sup>70</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses, *Final Report*, Vol. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic*.

significance of emotions and therapeutic notions of healing and care, and another on ongoing power dynamics and social, political and institutional relations.

Such a framing allows for a conceptualisation of therapeutic culture that takes seriously the voice of suffering and the political power of disclosure. It also provides an alternative lens to consider transitional justice arguments about the importance of theorising social change and the mechanisms employed for “dealing with the legacy of the past”, in established as well as emerging democracies. Accordingly, I have argued, claims of victimisation certainly do not reflect social decline and cultural diminishment, as some critics argue, but rather processes of democratisation in which people who have traditionally not had a public voice now have new avenues to assert claims for justice.

The opening up of a discursive space that has made possible discussions of vulnerability, abuse and emotional pain and trauma is thus rather more complex than conservative critics claim. As Eva Moskowitz argues, “We must be wary of vapid public therapies offered while remaining open to the possibilities of a therapeutic politics that enhances social life”.<sup>72</sup> Certainly, it is important to be cognisant of political platitudes of therapeutic consolation, be they in the form of official apologies or the provision of counselling services without meaningful and material forms of restitution. Yet there are also dangers in dismissing this cultural turn as “merely therapeutic”.

The contemporary imperative to disclose experiences of abuse and speak out in the face of coercive authority is a crucial yet often overlooked dimension of the therapeutic turn. Therapeutic culture has helped foster a social climate receptive to the recognition of childhood abuse and acceptance of its detrimental effects. This has provided an important foundation for social action, including investigation of wrongdoing, justice responses such as redress, and efforts to make institutions safer places for children in the future. To be sure, political responses like inquiries have only emerged as the result of sustained survivor advocacy.

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<sup>72</sup> Eva Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-fulfillment* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008)

Without overstating its promise, therapeutic culture has cultivated opportunities for advancing justice for those groups who suffered most in a cultural climate that favoured silence and repression by providing a discursive space that enables public discussion of abuse and trauma. Rather than evaluating therapeutic culture as an end point, it is, therefore, better understood as an one of the factors that has provided legitimation and fostered political will. The inquiries examined in this article suggest that therapeutic imperatives can align with social justice concerns to provide a springboard for social and political action.

To conclude, it is useful to turn to Winter's analysis of transitional justice in established democracies.<sup>73</sup><sup>73</sup> He argues, citing the New Zealand experience: "That the relevant changes are gradual, cumulative, contested and perhaps incomplete does not bar the analysis".<sup>74</sup><sup>74</sup> As he notes: "There are few post-transitional utopias".<sup>75</sup><sup>75</sup> In the Australian context, as elsewhere, the concept of transitional justice, which historically has included a therapeutic dimension, offers a useful lens to critically examine social transformations that arise from nation states confronting past abuse. How historical wrongs are recognised and dealt with is an important issue for all societies. This article has shown that consideration of psychological discourse and therapeutic culture can both enrich theorisation of the role of historical abuse inquiries in societal change, while also contributing to broader understandings of justice as both deeply personal and intrinsically social.

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<sup>73</sup> Stephen Winter, "Towards a Unified Theory of Transitional Justice," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 7, no. 2 (2013): 230–31.

<sup>74</sup> Winter, "Towards a Unified Theory of Transitional Justice," 230–31.

<sup>75</sup> Winter, "Towards a Unified Theory of Transitional Justice," 231.

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