

SILENT VIOLENCE: AUSTRALIA'S WHITE STOLEN CHILDREN

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the
Doctorate of Philosophy in Arts, Media and Culture
at Griffith University, Nathan, Qld

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2005

In relation to adoption, the question needs to be asked:

In what other period of human history did young mothers willingly defy nature and give away their babies en masse to strangers?

(Jigsaw, Brisbane)

Abstract

This thesis makes a significant contribution to the existing knowledge on ‘unmarried mothers’. Much of the literature on ‘unmarried mothers’ has been written by white, male, middle-class professionals who assume that unwed mothers are happy to place their babies for adoption so that they can be free to pursue other interests, meet other men and make a new life. However, after interviewing many of the mothers who gave up their babies in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s in Australia, I found this was not the case. Many of the mothers had wanted to keep their babies but were forced to relinquish them by their families and the wider society who seemed more intent on upholding nuclear family values than making available the resources needed to keep natural mothers and their babies together. My argument throughout this thesis is that given a choice – a viable economic and socially supported choice – many of the unmarried mothers, typified by those whom I interviewed, would not have parted with their babies. Most mothers interviewed, and presumably many of those in the community at large, have experienced much pain and grief as a result of the separation – a grief which is profound and lasts forever. Using Marxist feminist theories of the state and post-structural theories, my thesis highlights the perceptions and memories of birthmothers about the birthing experience and adoption as experience, process and life consequence.

I also argue that the removal of white, working-class babies from their mothers compares in some small way with the removal of the indigenous ‘stolen children’ in the same period. The removal of Aboriginal children from their homes and cultures has been referred to by some scholars and activists as a form of cultural genocide. While the removal of babies from white, working-class, unwed mothers was different in that it had few racial implications, I argue that the system in place at the time was patriarchal and class-based and as such left the young, unwed women with no options but adoption. The thesis makes a very important and socially significant contribution to our understanding of unmarried mothers in that it presents a largely unwritten history of women. Rich in the voices of unmarried mothers, there are important conceptual, empirical and practical policy implications flowing from the research findings.

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed:

Dated:

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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the following people without whose support this dissertation would not have materialised.

The 68 mothers Australia-wide who responded to the mail questionnaire.

The 30 mothers who spoke from the heart during personal interviews.

Linda Bryant, Jigsaw, Brisbane – for her personal and professional guidance.

Janice Benson, Jigsaw, Brisbane – for assisting in gaining the trust of mothers from interstate.

Dian Wellfare, Origins, Sydney – for providing important historical data.

Chris Harris, Origins, Tasmania – for providing assistance from a distance.

Sue Pace and Penny Baker, Information Literacy Services, Griffith University Library, Nathan Campus – for their assistance with the computer and always being there for me.

Helen Jeays and David Gardiner – for editing the thesis.

Julie Martin – for assisting with the survey questionnaire.

My supervisors, Drs Georgina Murray and Sarah Rickson – not only for their professional expertise, but their unfailing patience and kind words of encouragement throughout the long duration of this degree.

Professor George Lafferty – for his professional expertise in his capacity as co-supervisor in the very early stages of this degree.

Drs Malcolm Alexander and Anthony van Fossen, Professors Kay Ferres and Wayne Hudson – for their ongoing encouragement and support.

My close friends, Pat, Daphne, Yvonne, Cathy and Errol.

Special thanks are due my parents and late maternal grandmother. However, I also wish to thank other members of my family, and in particular my daughter and her husband, my sister and her former husband, aunt Annette.