

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders: Records and identity: by Hilary Rowell

Australian framework

Under the Australian Commonwealth (federal) Constitution which took effect from 1 January 1901, responsibility for the function of Aboriginal affairs (which had been administered by the separate colonies before 1901) remained with the new Australian state governments, and did not pass to the new Commonwealth government.¹ This remained the situation until after the successful referendum to change the Commonwealth Constitution in 1967. After the change, the Commonwealth government had the power to make laws with respect to Aboriginal people. An Office of Aboriginal Affairs was created in the Commonwealth in 1967 and this was replaced by a Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1972.

As a result of these constitutional arrangements, until the early 1970s government records relating to Aboriginal affairs were generated by the relevant state government, and, if extant, are now held either in the state archives or a state government department. (In the Northern Territory, records relating to Aboriginal affairs were generated by the Commonwealth government which administered the Territory. In the Australian Capital Territory, most services for Aboriginal people were provided by the New South Wales government.) Where services were provided by non-government organisations, such as churches, missions or homes, extant records are usually held by non-government organisations.

Therefore, gaining access to records about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been separated from their families can be complex even if a person is seeking access to records within a state or territory. Children may have been through a succession of children's homes run by government or non-government organisations, through foster homes and/or have been adopted.

As there is no single piece of legislation across Australia governing access to government records, there is no consistency in terms of practices or policies. At the federal level, the *Archives Act 1983*, the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* and the *Privacy Act 1988* are relevant for gaining access to records. There may be as many as three pieces of parallel legislation in each state as well as state adoption legislation.²

Government inquiries

The number of Aboriginal people seeking access to government records to enable them to re-establish their identities by finding their families and communities began to increase slowly from the 1980s with the establishment of the first Aboriginal Link-Up organisations and the investigations and reports of a number of Parliamentary and other committees into social issues and adoption.³

¹ The Australian federal government is referred to as the Commonwealth government.

² The Australian Archives' submission to the National Inquiry, part quoted in Australia, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Canberra, April 1997, pp. 324–25. (The Australian Archives was renamed the National Archives of Australia in March 1998.)

³ Link-Up organisations are those which assist Indigenous people link up with their family and community, undertaking, or assisting with, research into their clients' backgrounds, providing support and counselling during the process and assisting with reunions. Rebecca Stubbs covers this in more detail below.

Two government inquiries had an Australia-wide influence by alerting the general community to the issues involved and also had an influence on the number of people seeking access:

- the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody established by the Commonwealth, State and Northern Territory governments in 1987 in response to concern that Aboriginal deaths in police and prison custody were too common; and
- the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families established in 1995 by the federal Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

The royal commission found that the number of deaths in custody was higher for those Aboriginal people who had been separated from their families than for Aboriginal people generally. The commission recommended that Link-Up organisations should be funded to help Aboriginal people to re-establish links with family and community; that the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments should provide access to records to assist Aboriginal people to re-establish links; and that principles and processes for access should be negotiated between government and appropriate Aboriginal organisations.⁴

The release of the National Inquiry's *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997 raised further the level of Australian community awareness of the past treatment of Indigenous peoples and the impact this has had, and is continuing to have, on their lives. Many non-Indigenous Australians became aware, for the first time, of the harrowing stories of the removal of Indigenous children from their families. The report traced the history of the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families. Among the inquiry's recommendations were a number relating to records including:

- government and non-government records relevant for tracing family and community links should not be destroyed;
- funds should be allocated to government record agencies for preservation and indexing;
- Commonwealth and state records task forces, including representatives of government, church and other non-government record agencies and of Indigenous user services, should be established to provide advice on a range of access related matters, including common access guidelines and agreements between governments for dealing with interstate inquiries; and
- cultural centres should be established for the transfer of historical and cultural information.⁵

Access to records

The *Bringing Them Home* report identified five essential features of a system to provide access to all government archival records to assist Aboriginal people to re-establish links and thus identities:

- information about the availability of access to records should be widely communicated throughout Indigenous communities;
- access to one's personal records, including information about one's family background, should be available as a right;

⁴ Australia, Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, *National Report*, Canberra, 1991, vol. 5, recommendations 52–3.

⁵ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *op. cit.*, 1997, recommendations 21–5, 29, pp. 347–56.

- access procedures should be simple, straightforward and very cheap, if not free of charge;
- all relevant records should be identifiable and should be thoroughly indexed; and
- individuals need pre-search counselling, support during the perusal of files and counselling subsequently because of the distressing nature of their personal backgrounds.⁶

As I mentioned in my article in the recent issue of ICA's journal *Comma*, organisations have taken action to improve access to records to meet the inquiry's recommendations. This includes:⁷

- **Statements and protocols:** Peak or professional organisations have responded with general policy statements and protocols relating to Indigenous issues; some archives institutions have developed access protocols and entered into memoranda of understanding with Indigenous communities covering access arrangements.
- **Directories, guides and indexes:** General directories have been prepared that point users to the appropriate record holding agencies and outline their services. A number of archives institutions have prepared or are working on guides and indexes to their holdings relevant to Indigenous people.
- **Outreach and training:** A number of archives institutions have organised regional visits to Indigenous communities, sometimes in cooperation with other cultural or Aboriginal Link-Up organisations, to alert people to their holdings and to conduct training sessions.
- **Grants:** Some government grants are available to non-government organisations to assist them in the care, preservation and description of records relating to Indigenous people.
- **Link-Up organisations:** The Commonwealth government provides funding to Link-Up organisations around the country and to the Family History Unit of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies to enable them to assist the national network.

I want to look in more detail at three areas that illustrate aspects of the features of an access system identified by the National Inquiry: protocols and agreements; name indexes; and exhibitions.

Protocols and agreements

These tend to fall into two types: general protocols that set frameworks for action and more specific agreements between parties.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services

One of the former type is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services. The Protocols were published in 1995 by the Australian Library and Information Association and were endorsed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network (ATSILIRN). The protocols were revised in 2005 and 2010–11 after review and extensive consultation and are available on the internet.⁸

⁶ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *op. cit.*, 1997, pp. 340–42.

⁷ Hilary Rowell, *Reclaiming identity: Australia's response to children in care*, International Council on Archives, *Comma*, vol. 2011, no. 1/2011, pp. 123–34.

⁸ The Protocols were first published as A Byrne, A Garwood, H Moorcroft & A Barnes, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols for libraries, archives and information services*, Australian Library and Information Association for ATSILIRN, Canberra, 1995. For the review, see M Nakata, A Byrne, V Nakata & G Gardiner, *Mapping the impact of the 1995 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols for libraries, archives and*

The Protocols are intended to be a good practice guide for libraries, archives and information services in interacting appropriately with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and in handling materials with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. They need to be interpreted and applied in the context of each organisation's mission, collections and client community.

The points covered in the Protocols are grouped together under the following headings: Governance and management; Content and perspectives; Intellectual property; Accessibility and use; Description and classification; Secret and sacred materials; Offensive; Staffing; Developing professional practice; Awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and issues; Copying and repatriation of records; and The digital environment.

Having revised the Protocols, ATSILIRN's challenge is now to ensure that the Protocols are publicised and organisations commit or recommit to their adoption. Also, their value needs recognition in the archives as well as the library sphere. Some progress has been made: for example, earlier this year Libraries ACT (the library service of the Australian Capital Territory government) decided to implement the Protocols. The Protocols were then mapped against their National Policy Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and Collections.⁹

Some archival institutions, such as the State Records New South Wales, have developed their own protocols, consistent with the ATSILIRN Protocols.¹⁰

National Archives' Memoranda of Understanding with Aboriginal People concerning access

The National Archives has developed specific memoranda of understanding concerning access arrangements.

Because governments played a major role in Indigenous peoples' lives, the extent and nature of information recorded about them is often sensitive and sometimes offensive, reflecting the community attitudes of the day. The biased language, level of detail, as well as the personal sensitivity of the information, goes well beyond what was normally recorded about the non-Indigenous community.

In the Commonwealth sphere, the standard public access arrangements under the *Archives Act 1983* were not adequate to assist Indigenous people. The Act provides for the general public right of access to records that are in the open access period and which are not exempt under categories of sensitivity defined in the Act.¹¹

information services, Research report, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, 2005. The current Protocols are available at: <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/atsilirn/protocols.php> (viewed 29 July 2012).

⁹ Fiona Blackburn, Libraries ACT, Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network, *ATSILIRN Newsletter*, vol. 18, issue 1–2, p. 2.

¹⁰ Australia, State Records New South Wales, *Protocols for Staff Working with Indigenous People*, June 2008. See <http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/state-archives/resources-for/indigenous-people/files/Protocols%20for%20Staff%20Working%20with%20Indigenous%20People.pdf> (viewed 29 July 2012).

¹¹ The open access period covered records that were more than 30 years old. As a result of a change to the Archives Act in 2010, the open period was changed to cover records that are more than 20 years old. This change is being implemented progressively between 2011 and 2020.

However, by its very nature, much of the information about individual Aboriginal people is intrusive and is excluded from public access as it is an unreasonable disclosure of information relating to personal affairs. This is often the very information the Aboriginal people want to see to assist them in linking up with their families and communities.

In 1993, the Archives organised a seminar in Darwin in the Northern Territory to assist Indigenous researchers to use the Archives and to get feedback on ways of improving the Archives' services. It was agreed that it was imperative for Indigenous peoples to be involved in access processes and decision making, particularly because of the sensitivities which would not be apparent to, or understood by, the non-Indigenous community. And so, informal consultative and collaborative arrangements with Link-Up organisations were developed in the Archives' Darwin and Melbourne offices. Discretionary access was arranged on a case-by-case basis, given the complexities and sensitivities.¹²

However, as the number of inquiries grew, case-by-case handling became increasingly cumbersome, resulting in delays in responding to inquiries. So it was decided that it would be preferable to negotiate (initially in the Northern Territory) a memorandum of understanding with Indigenous groups covering access matters and have clearly defined and well understood arrangements.

The Archives contracted an Indigenous person, Phyllis Williams, to arrange the negotiations between the Archives and the Northern Territory Indigenous community.¹³ Between 1995 and 1997 a number of meetings were held in locations around the Northern Territory to examine the issues. Then, at a ceremony in Darwin in March 1997, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Archives and Northern Territory Indigenous groups – the Northern Territory Stolen Generations Combined Reference Groups, KARU Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency and the Central Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency – was signed. The MOU provides accredited researchers with access to open period Commonwealth records to enable them to re-establish family and community links. The crucial element is that accredited researchers have access to sensitive open period material which is normally withheld under the Archives Act.

Indigenous people (or their agents) seeking access under the MOU are required to complete and sign an application form by which they accept that they will safeguard personal information they may see about people other than the person they are researching and will not reveal sensitive information about a person without the written consent of the person (or the next of kin if the person has died).

The Indigenous people involved in the negotiations also wanted accreditation processes included in the MOU. It was agreed that access would be provided to applicants after the Archives has

¹² For more detail about the developments from 1990-4, see Sue Rosly, Access to archival records for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, *Australian Society of Archivists, Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 23, no. 1, May 1995, pp. 60–73; see also Hilary Rowell, Access to records in the National Archives of Australia by Indigenous peoples, *Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers, ACARM Newsletter*, Issue 22, May 1998, pp. 18–23.

¹³ Phyllis Williams subsequently joined the permanent staff of the National Archives, later becoming the Director of the Darwin and Adelaide offices. She also acted as director of the Sydney office. She was awarded the Public Service Medal in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in June 2011 'For outstanding public service in driving significant reforms to communications and service delivery in the National Archives of Australia, particularly in relation to Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory'. She retired in 2012.

undertaken an identification verification check with one of the Northern Territory Link-Up organisations, or the applicant has provided a statutory declaration indicating that they have been affected by government removal policies.

The MOU also covers other matters including the provision of free copies; advice about placing correcting statements on files; and the creation of an Aboriginal Advisory Group. The Group, which now meets twice a year, was established to provide advice and assistance to the National Archives in implementing, managing and reviewing the MOU.

Memoranda of understanding along similar lines were negotiated and signed with the Victorian Indigenous community in 2000 and the South Australian Indigenous community in 2002.

The memoranda and associated consultation processes have worked well, particularly in the Northern Territory. There continue to be regular requests for access under the MOU. To date about 1000 people have been accredited under MOU arrangements, mainly in the Northern Territory, and the provision of access and free photocopies has been appreciated.

In the Northern Territory, the Aboriginal Advisory Group has provided a most useful mechanism for raising problems and suggestions, and for consultation on a range of access issues. The Group was involved with the National Archives and the Northern Territory Archives Service in two forums held in Darwin and Alice Springs that brought together representatives of Indigenous community organisations, record holding institutions and organisations providing services to Indigenous people. The forums resulted in the publication by the National Archives in 2006 of *Tracking Family: A Guide to Aboriginal Records Relating to the Northern Territory*. We hope to produce a revised edition of *Tracking Family* in 2013.

Group members have also contributed to a group newsletter, have spread information about the National Archives' record holdings and services through their networks and have given talks at the National Archives, Darwin office and at Society of Archivists' conferences. They have also assisted us in seeking permission for use of material relating to Indigenous people in exhibitions and publications.

Name indexes

One of the major practical difficulties in assisting Indigenous researchers is identifying records relevant to the particular person being traced.

As part of implementing the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recommendations, in 1993 the National Archives published two guides to records relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.¹⁴ While these were well received, it was clear that there was a pressing need for additional retrieval aids such as a name index of Aboriginal people mentioned in Commonwealth records. File titles are indexed in the Archives' online database, RecordSearch, but many files have general titles such as 'Bungalow Aboriginal Reserve Daily Journal' (and may or may not contain

¹⁴ Australian Archives, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Commonwealth Records: A Guide to Records in the Australian Archives, ACT Regional Office*, Canberra, 1993 (compiled by Ros Fraser); and Australian Archives and Public Record Office, Victoria, *My Heart is Breaking: A Joint Guide to Records about Aboriginal People in the Public Record Office of Victoria and the Australian Archives, Victorian Regional Office*, Canberra, 1993.

hundreds of names) and very few have people's names in the file titles. In 1993 and 1994 the Archives was unsuccessful in seeking grants to prepare indexes.

As a result of the *Bringing Them Home* report recommendation 22 on indexing, the Commonwealth government gave the National Archives \$2 million over four years to index, copy and preserve relevant Commonwealth records held in Darwin, Canberra and Melbourne to make them more readily accessible.

The first step was to consult other organisations which had prepared indexes relating to Indigenous people – including the South Australian State Records, the Queensland State Archives and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

We then consulted Indigenous people in the Northern Territory and Victoria concerning matters such as appropriate levels of indexing, priorities for indexing and the way in which the resulting indexes should be made available. This was crucial to the success of the whole project.

Issues that arose in consultations during the development of the index included:

- **Confidentiality and sensitivity:** Indigenous people were very concerned about the possibility of indexers disclosing personal information seen while indexing. They did not want the indexers to gossip about the details or to use their positions to gain information which they would subsequently use in writing essays, articles or books. As a result of this concern, the need to respect privacy was emphasised in training the indexing staff.
- **Internet access:** We had suggested that the index could perhaps, in future, be loaded on the internet so that Aboriginal people, wherever they lived, could conduct their own research. This was strongly resisted in the Northern Territory. People felt that they had been studied and their personal stories and culture used in research in ways beyond their control in the past. They didn't want further personal information to be available on the internet, particularly to anthropologists who might use the information for their own purposes.
- **Avoid creating yet another dossier:** in line with the wishes of the Indigenous people consulted, the indexing procedures directed that index entries include only essential identifying information about a person – enough to enable the user to identify whether the index entry is likely to be relevant to the user's search.

The Archives recruited and trained indexing teams of three or four staff, mostly Indigenous people. Their involvement was critical for the success of the project. The teams commenced work in Darwin and Canberra in 1998 and later in Melbourne.

Specific government funding for the indexing project ceased in June 2002 but indexing continued at a reduced level from funding found within the National Archives' own resources until June 2004. By that time, over 21,000 files were checked and 420,000 index entries had been compiled.

Since 1999 the National Archives' reference staff have searched the Bringing Them Home (BTH) name index on behalf of Link-Up organisations and people affected by former government removal policies. We have had requests from Aboriginal people for index searches for thousands of names. We know that the index has achieved its aim of assisting people to link up with their families. For example, not long after the first index entries started being made available in 1999 to staff for

searching, the information we provided assisted in a reunion – the woman concerned had been searching for her mother for over 50 years.

In 2006 the National Archives developed a new interface to the BTH name index in consultation with Indigenous groups. This enabled online password protected access to be given to Indigenous Link-Up organisations with whom the National Archives has memoranda of understanding. The National Archives has supported this with training sessions. This has assisted Link-Up staff in providing more timely services to their clients. Link-Up staff in Central Australia, in particular, have found it useful to undertake searches in their own offices.

Just as we received assistance from those who had undertaken indexing previously, we have provided details of our indexing procedures to others. Since 2000, other organisations have also developed Indigenous name indexes including the Northern Territory Archives Service and the Public Record Office Victoria and State Records of South Australia has dedicated additional resources to their existing indexing project.

Exhibitions

The National Archives developed an exhibition, *Between Two Worlds: the Commonwealth government and the removal of Aboriginal children of part descent in the Northern Territory* in close collaboration with Aboriginal people. It was part of the Commonwealth government's contribution to the International Year of the World's Indigenous People in 1993. The exhibition included the stories of six Aboriginal people and helped raise community awareness of the often disastrous consequences of government policies towards Aboriginal people. It toured Australian towns and cities in the mid-1990s and then again after 1997 because public interest was sparked by the National Inquiry's *Bringing Them Home* Report. A book about the exhibition was also published.¹⁵

I have asked State Records New South Wales, the state government archives, for permission to talk about their recent exhibition, *In Living Memory*, based on the approximately 1000 black and white photographs of the former New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board. I think it is a wonderful example of a respectful and moving exhibition that involved wide consultation and careful consideration of protocols. What follows is based on material by Aboriginal liaison staff of State Records, Kirsten Thorpe and Sue Newman. I acknowledge my indebtedness to them.¹⁶

The exhibition opened in 2006 at the former State Records Gallery in The Rocks, Sydney. It was so popular that it was extended several times and only finally closed in June 2012 when The Rocks building was closed. A travelling version of the exhibition visited 18 regional centres in New South Wales between 2008 and 2010 and it is on its last round of tours at present, to Canberra, Cootamundra and then the New South Wales Parliament in Sydney.

What has made this such a successful exhibition?

¹⁵ Rowena McDonald, Australian Archives, *Between Two Worlds: the Commonwealth government and the removal of Aboriginal children of part descent in the Northern Territory*, IAD Press, Alice Springs, 1995.

¹⁶ For information about the exhibition, see also: <http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/state-archives/exhibition-romance-industry/past-exhibitions/in-living-memory/in-living-memory-exhibition> (viewed 27 July 2012) or contact State Records New South Wales.

First of all the content: most of the photos in the Board's collection (dating from 1919 to 1966) were taken to document its work and promote its policies. The collection includes images of Aboriginal children's homes, education, housing and employment, children from the bush visiting Sydney for annual summer camps and studio portraits of young Aboriginal women. In addition, some photos were sent by young women back to the matrons of homes and others were submitted by readers of the Board's *Dawn* magazine with the hope they might be published and seen by lost relatives.

A selection of the historic Aborigines Welfare Board photos have been displayed with stories and with contemporary photos of Elders and members of Indigenous communities by the well-known Aboriginal photographer, Mervyn Bishop. For example, wedding photos taken on reserves and stations in western New South Wales were displayed as if on a family mantelpiece together with contemporary photos of the people concerned or their descendants and with their stories.

The photos still produce mixed emotions for Indigenous people: from the delight at seeing rare evidence of community and culture, to the sad reminder of loss and separation and the intrusion of authorities into every aspect of their lives.

The second reason for the exhibition's success was the work the exhibition team put into consultation, informed by protocols based on principles of respect, communication and consultation, and accessibility. Although the photos are open to the public, permission is needed to tell stories of the people pictured because of the past government intrusion in their lives and the sensitivities involved. The team consulted the Indigenous community, including the state Department of Aboriginal Affairs; an advisory group; and individuals and communities represented in the Board's photographs.

Information days were often held at the opening of the touring exhibition where organisations that could assist the local community were represented, including, for example, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, New South Wales Link-Up, the Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme and local libraries etc.

One of the links made during the project was with the National Archives. The National Archives has a small collection of photographs relevant to New South Wales Indigenous people. Prints of these, together with Aboriginal Welfare Board photographs were included in albums in the *In Living Memory* exhibition thus spreading information about photos to people who would not have known they existed. People who saw the exhibition provided State Records and the National Archives with information about the photographs – including names of people and locations. Viewers could also request copies of photographs.

As Sue Newman mentioned recently, the exhibition has made an impact on the Indigenous community from the exhibition's beginnings until its last day in The Rocks when an Aboriginal woman saw a picture of her mother for the first time – she had never seen a picture of her mother before.

Even though the main exhibition has closed, the work undertaken will have a continuing impact:

- the additional information gathered about the photographs will assist the State Records in providing reference services and enable more people to find photographs of their relatives;
- the material will be able to be used again, for example for special event days;

- the networks and goodwill that have been developed will continue; and
- during the course of the exhibition non-Indigenous staff have seen cases which demonstrate the significance that records can have for Indigenous people separated from the families.

In reviewing the exhibition, the exhibition team identified the following as being critical for a successful exhibition:

- make strong and meaningful connections with communities;
- the exhibition should honour the community, enabling them to connect with and be proud of their history;
- be adaptable and respectful to different cultural processes;
- design exhibition spaces to be welcoming to the Aboriginal community; and
- the exhibition should have mutually agreed outcomes and benefits for all parties involved.

Conclusion

The above show some of the practical issues that arise in developing a system to provide access to all government archival records to assist Aboriginal people to re-establish links. The projects mentioned demonstrate the importance of:

- developing and implementing protocols based on respect;
- consultation and developing networks with Indigenous communities; and
- the value of collaboration between service providers.

Within the National Archives, we have recently examined the way we provide services to Indigenous people. Although we have made considerable progress, we feel that we need to review procedures and processes. As a result, we have created an Indigenous unit in the national office by reorganising the structure and creating an additional Indigenous-identified position. This now parallels units set up in other organisations. It will give us more capacity to coordinate and get the best use out of the resources available for a range of purposes: for example, we want to build on existing material to produce, in consultation with Indigenous communities, a family history kit relevant to our holdings. We also want to prepare or update strategies and procedures, again after consultation.

We want to build connections, or closer connections, with Commonwealth government departments with regional networks, other cultural institutions and Link-Up organisations to ensure that as many people as possible know about our services and to ensure that we can cooperate on projects, such as workshops, seminars, exhibitions, publications and websites, wherever possible, to maximise benefits for the Indigenous communities.

We also, as a profession, need to look to the future, to new technologies or new types of projects in other spheres to see whether there are opportunities for organisations to work together to provide better, more integrated and tailored services to enable Indigenous people to re-establish their identities and find their stories.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: records and identity

The work of Link-Up and the AIATSIS Family History Unit

Rebecca Stubbs, Senior Family History Officer, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

One cannot overestimate how important it is for Indigenous people to know about their family, to know who they are and where they come from. Identity is important to us all – but for Indigenous people, who your family is and where you are from is so important that not knowing this is like almost like not knowing your own name. For many, archives and records play a vital role in establishing and maintaining those connections.

In this paper I wish to discuss the importance of records to Indigenous people and the vital role that archives play in helping those who were removed from family (the Stolen Generations) to reclaim their identity.

By discussing the work of the National Link-Up Program and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Family History Unit and by using my own family's experience as an example, I hope to demonstrate the importance and emotional impact of access to archival records for Indigenous people.

Between approximately 1869 and 1969, thousands of Indigenous Australian children, known as the Stolen Generations, were forcibly removed from their families and placed in institutions, missions and adopted or fostered by non-Indigenous families. The reasons for removal are often debated but the consequences are less arguable – loss of language, loss of culture, loss of family connections and the profound loss of a sense of belonging and identity.

I am currently employed at AIATSIS as the manager of its Family History Unit. I am also the daughter of a member of the Stolen Generations. As such, I am both someone who assists Indigenous people on their journey of discovering their family history and an Indigenous person who has been, and still is, on that journey.

I have worked in the Family History Unit for ten years and have developed strong working relationships with my colleagues in the Link-Up program and an understanding of the nature and importance of their work. This understanding is further strengthened through my personal experience of assisting my mother – a member of the Stolen Generations – to trace her family and reconnect with her identity.

It is through my own family history journey that I learnt about Indigenous family history research and, I believe most importantly, developed an appreciation and understanding of the importance of records and archives to Indigenous people.

It is also from this personal perspective that I have developed a strong desire to assist other people embarking upon this journey.

My mother was removed from her family at eighteen months of age and, along with her five sisters, was sent to Cootamundra Aboriginal Girls Training Home in Cootamundra, NSW. Her two brothers were sent to Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Home near Kempsey, NSW. My Mum spent sixteen years in Cootamundra Girls Home and was 18 years old when she left. During this time she was denied any knowledge of her family other than the sketchy information passed on by her elder sisters. In fact,

Mum did not know even her parents' names until she applied for her birth certificate at the time of her marriage in 1972 when she was 31 years old. When I was growing up I knew little more about my family than my grandparents names and it was not until 1994 when Mum attended a reunion for former residents of Cootamundra and Kinchela homes that she, and I, began to be curious about our family history.

Together we began to visit archives and libraries and to read through many pages of files and records. I saw what a profound effect it had on my mother to find out about her life and her family and came to realize that this is a vitally important experience that many Indigenous people miss out on. I became passionate about helping other Indigenous people to have the same experience and thus applied for a position at AIATSIS and was lucky enough to be successful.

The AIATSIS Family History Unit

The AIATSIS Family History Unit is funded by Australia's federal Department of Health and Ageing and is part of the National Link Up Program. I have worked in the Family History Unit since 2002 and have been the manager of the Unit since 2006.

The role of the Family History Unit is to support Link-Up staff (see *The National Link-Up Program* below) in family history research process and to facilitate access to records. Our aim is to enable Link-Up Caseworkers to have the necessary skills, training and knowledge to undertake family history research for their clients. We support Link-Up Caseworkers through:

- Family History Research training workshops
- 'Case File Reviews' at Link-Up Services
- Research assistance and general inquiries
- Advice and support with accessing records
- Maintaining the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Biographical Index (ABI)
- Developing a range of family history tools and guides
- Developing and maintaining best practice guidelines for conducting family history research
- Facilitating access to records from Canberra based record holding agencies
- Assisting Link-Up staff to build and maintain relationships with state and territory based record agencies
- Maintaining the AIATSIS Link-Up Service webpage and general AIATSIS Family History webpages.

The AIATSIS Family History Unit provides nationally accredited training to Link-Up staff in the research process, including being aware of records and knowing how to access them. The Family History Unit also assists Link-Up staff to establish and maintain relationships with relevant record-holding agencies; conducts research of the AIATSIS collections and selected other family history resources on behalf of Link-Up staff and provides them with advice and guidance on family tracing and research.

My time in the Family History Unit has given me an appreciation not only of the work of Link-Up Caseworkers but also the challenges that they face when accessing records for their clients. I have also become aware of some great examples of cooperation between Link-Up staff and archives staff and the kinds of formal and informal relationships that really help Link-Up staff and their clients to access records.

Following is a discussion on the work of Link-Up, the challenges they face when accessing records on behalf of their clients and some examples of cooperation between Link-Up and record-holding agencies which work very well and should be seen as best practice.

The National Link Up Program

Link-Up services are organizations which provide family tracing and reunion services to members of the Stolen Generations. There are currently eight Link-Up services; they are located in New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia. These organizations were established as a result of the recommendations of the Bringing Them Home Report and are currently funded by the Department of Health and Ageing.

In 1997 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) undertook the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families. The Bringing Them Home Report¹, as it is known, made a total of 54 recommendations. Among those recommendations were several (30a, 30b and 33-35) which addressed the need to:

"assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people separated from their families under past laws, practices and policies of Australian governments, to undertake family tracing and reunion initiatives."

The Australian Government responded to this Inquiry by providing funding to establish a national network of Family Tracing and Reunion Services (known as the National Link-Up Program). The role of the program is to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people separated from their families as a result of past governments' policies and practices

Although Link-Up organizations provide a range of services to members of the Stolen Generations, their main role is to reunite members of the Stolen Generations with their family. This involves searching a range of archival records and documents in order to locate family members and confirm family connections.

Link-Up Caseworkers regularly access archives on behalf of clients. The most commonly accessed records are those created by the various state and territory departments associated with Indigenous affairs (such as the Aboriginal Welfare Board in NSW, the Aborigines Protection Board in WA and various commonwealth departments associated with Indigenous affairs in the Northern Territory). These departments created records relating to the Indigenous missions and reserves as well as records relating to various aspects of the lives of individual Indigenous people.

Link-Up Caseworkers also access other government records relating to clients and their families – adoption, education, hospital, war service, railway employment, police records etc. Non-government records are also accessed; including church archives for records of missions in which they were involved and station records as many Indigenous people worked and lived on pastoral stations.

Challenges

Link-Up Caseworkers face a range of challenges in locating, searching and accessing records for their clients. These challenges can be related to the Caseworker's knowledge of archives, inadequate understanding and cooperation between archive and Link-Up staff or under-resourced services within archives and other record-holding agencies.

¹ http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/index.html

The world of archives is a relatively unfamiliar one to many Link-Up Caseworkers. Link-Up organizations recruit staff with a wide variety of professional and educational backgrounds but, typically, the main qualities sought are familiarity with the local Indigenous community and personal experience of the Stolen Generations. Many Link-Up Caseworkers are the children and grandchildren of members of the Stolen Generations and/or are members of the Stolen Generations themselves. It is less common for Caseworkers to come to the job with prior research experience or knowledge of archival resources and practices and these skills and knowledge are most often acquired on the job.

For this reason many new Caseworkers face a steep learning curve in their first months of employment. They are required to become familiar with what records are available, where those records are held and what the processes are to access them. It is a real challenge for someone with limited knowledge of how such things work to find their way around archives and their collections. Limited understanding of the difference between index records and primary documents; archival description and how to search for, identify and request records can be a significant barrier between Link-Up Caseworkers and records.

Similarly, a lack of understanding of what records archives hold can also be a barrier. Every national, state and territory archive has an index and/or guide to the records it holds of relevance to Indigenous people and some have very good, searchable name indexes. These indexes are routinely accessed and searched by Caseworkers but there are other useful records which may not be so obvious and may be missed. For example; rail employment records, education records, hospital records.

Another challenge is the lack of centralization of records relating to Indigenous people. With the exception of the Northern Territory, Indigenous affairs in Australia has always been administered by state rather than federal government. This means that records relating to Indigenous people, families and communities are held within state archives and record-holding organizations. Therefore, Link-Up Caseworkers need to access records from various states and territories, created by various departments and agencies.

Link-Up Caseworkers often develop very good knowledge of what is available in their own areas, but accessing records from elsewhere can be more challenging. If a client has family from several states – or the client was from one state but removed to another - it can be confusing to know where to look for all of the relevant records. Link-Up Caseworkers need to have a nation-wide focus and knowledge of not only archives in their own states but in others as well.

Link-Up staff also face challenges in accessing records in a timely fashion. Often requests go through general reference services which are already under high demand. Some archives have Indigenous units, however they are often under-resourced. This can mean delays of weeks, months and sometimes years for records. Link-Up clients are often distressed and traumatized, many are elderly or in poor health, and waiting indefinitely for information can often set them back emotionally. Sadly, there have been several cases where elderly or ill clients have passed away before they could be reunited with family.

Another limiting factor can be cost. Although Link-Ups are generally funded to purchase records for their clients some are limited in their capacity to do so for various reasons. There have been cases of clients unable to be reunited with family as their Link-Up service lacks the capacity to access and/or pay for records which are vital to tracing their origins.

Link-Up staff have also reported mixed success with negotiating access to records, particularly those held in non-government archives.

Link-Up work is often emotionally and physically tiring and high a turnover of staff is common thus compounding a number of these issues and resulting in a continual need for learning, training and support. The AIATSIS Family History training is a key part of that learning.

Another important issue for archives staff and Link-Up to recognize is the sensitive nature of many records referring to Indigenous people and the emotional impact of reading those records. This is something that I am uniquely aware of from both a professional and a personal perspective.

Obviously the most impactful – and informative - records that my mother could ever read about her life and her family are those housed in archives, specifically State Records New South Wales. They were the records relating to her removal and her time in Cootamundra Girls Home.

To Mum these records were an invasion and made her feel ashamed. They documented every facet of her life and were, at times quite offensive. Particularly distressing were the monthly reports in the 'Home' which reported on such things as morals, cleanliness and intelligence. There were also school reports and correspondence between the Matron of the 'Home' and the Aboriginal Welfare Board.

These records were distressing to read, sometimes offensive in language and attitude and they brought back many traumatic memories. This was an emotional experience, as you may imagine. To be reading something so personal and emotional in an impersonal room full of researchers of all kinds was quite surreal and disconcerting. We would normally think of childhood photos, cards, letters and school reports as personal and something to be kept and preserved within the family. But for members of the Stolen Generations, those things can only be read in the most public of settings – an archive reading room.

It is important for archives to consider the impact of their environment and to provide appropriate spaces for the viewing of sensitive and personal information.

What works well?

There are some excellent examples of best practice with regards relationship-building between Link-Up and archives. Where such practices are followed, access to records is easier for Caseworkers who are able to achieve better and quicker outcomes for their clients.

Some Link-Up services have a model of engagement with relevant record-holding agencies which includes annual stakeholder events at which representatives of the various record-holding agencies speak to Link-Up staff and clients about their records and the services they provide. This is an excellent way of maintaining the knowledge of expertise of Link-Up staff as well as informing their clients and involving them in the process of tracing their family.

Another example of good practice is the creation of specific research positions within some Link-Up services.

Historically Link-Up Caseworkers have done the research required to find family for their clients, but some Link-Up services now have dedicated research staff. This frees the Caseworkers to spend more time on organizing reunions and providing clients with much needed support and guidance whilst leaving the archival research to staff with relevant research and archive experience.

Link-Up Queensland is a good example of this model in practice. It has a formal arrangement with the Community and Personal Histories Unit at the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Affairs – this is an agency which assists Indigenous people to access government records from across a range of departments and agencies, primarily making use of the collections of the Queensland State Archives. Under this arrangement, a Link-Up research officer spends a day or several days a week based at the Community and Personal Histories Unit, doing research on behalf of Link-Up staff and clients. This arrangement allows Link-Up staff to do their own research, thus guaranteeing timely response whilst drawing upon the expertise of Community and Personal Histories Unit. This is also an efficient arrangement for Community and Personal Histories staff who are no longer required to spend time doing research on behalf of Link-Up staff.

On occasion, Community and Personal Histories staff have worked at Link-Up Queensland in the role of Link-Up research officer whilst that person was on leave. This gives them the opportunity to strengthen their knowledge and understanding of Link-Up and its work whilst allowing vital research to continue. It is an arrangement that works well for both parties.

Some Link-Up organizations have Memoranda of Understanding with relevant record-holding agencies. Others have informal arrangements. Such arrangements – formal and informal – are a great assistance in facilitating access to records by Link-Up Caseworkers.

It is very important for Link-Up staff to have good working relationships with their colleagues in archives. This ideally means knowing the names of contact people in those archives and establishing connections with them. There are some examples of where that works very well and Link-Up staff are able to request records easily and efficiently and are kept informed and engaged with the progress of their request. This is helpful as it allows the Caseworker to keep their client informed and to make decisions on the direction of the research.

Why is this all so important?

It is important to realize that for members of the Stolen Generations, archives contain records of their lives – good, bad and distressing. Often archives contain the only records or photographs that ever existed for them, there are no family albums or keepsakes, no treasured cards or letters from loved ones – they are all housed in the archives.

For my mother, being able to access and read those records gave her a sense of identity, of belonging and was vital to her healing and emotional well-being.

Professionally, being able to help someone on that journey is a privilege and carries with it a large responsibility. The emotional impact of such information is enormous, something which I can attest to personally as well as professionally. Understanding that impact is vital to those of us – archivists, Link-Up Caseworkers - and other professionals who are in a position to help Indigenous people to access records.