

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices

About the author

I graduated in Applied Social Studies at Sheffield Hallam University, UK in 1986 with a 2:1 Honours degree and Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW). I hold a Masters in Socio-Legal Studies (1998, UK) and will shortly complete my PhD in Social Work (Disability Studies) at the University of Sydney. I am a social care consultant and am also currently working with Forgotten Australians who were previously placed in Church of England Children's Homes. I am an affiliate lecturer at the University of Sydney.

Submission

Firstly, I pay my respects to all the agencies and individuals who have campaigned for this Inquiry. I am both inspired and moved by the courage, candour and grace of all those Australian citizens affected by forced adoption who have made submissions. They have, amongst many other things, demonstrated that the pain and ongoing intergenerational trauma caused by forced adoption can be profound and unquantifiable.

I have followed the inquiry since its commencement and, over the last six months or so, have been privileged to speak with quite a number of the mothers whose babies were taken from them. There is clearly a need for more research in terms of how to offer appropriate support to citizens affected by forced adoption which has prompted this submission.

Research concerning Australian citizens affected by Forced Adoption

This submission focuses on the nature of research into forced adoption and the positioning of university-based academics in relation to such research. Because of past practices by agencies, Australian citizens affected by forced adoption constitute a group who have been, almost by definition, significantly disempowered, disenfranchised and devalued as citizens. Because of their historic disempowerment it is extremely important that research which involves Australian citizens affected by forced adoption is not only ethical but is driven by an explicit empowerment and healing agenda. As a researcher conducting a project alongside

people with an intellectual disability (a highly disempowered and marginalised group historically), I searched carefully for a research paradigm that would guide me in ensuring that my research practice was accountable, respectful and inclusive. The Emancipatory Disability Research (EDR) principles (Barnes, 2001; Stevenson, 2010) serve this agenda. EDR principles demand, for example, that research produces outcomes which are of practical benefit to participants. Action research projects which involve participants using their experiential expertise in devising and evaluating their own service/support models are especially valuable.

Emancipatory Forced Adoption Research (EFAR)

A re-worked version of the EDR principles would be highly applicable to research involving Australian citizens affected by Forced Adoption. This would hopefully ensure that research is produced with appropriate integrity and draw on the expertise of individuals and organisations such as Origins NSW and others. As a starting point, I respectfully submit the following set of principles for consideration by the Committee and, of course, all those who have submitted their stories to the Senate Inquiry and their organisations.

Principles of Emancipatory Forced Adoption Research (EFAR)

1. **Control:** Unlike conventional approaches, (EFAR) must fully involve citizens affected by forced adoption throughout the research process. Other researchers may be involved but they must be accountable throughout the entire research process to a research advisory group or committee controlled and run by citizens affected by forced adoption.
2. **Accountability:** Research processes and practices must be open and explained to research participants and participating organisations. The findings and implications of research must be disseminated in appropriate formats to all relevant audiences, including citizens affected by forced adoption.
3. **Practical outcomes:** EFAR must attempt to leave citizens affected by forced adoption in a better position to deal with the issues they face in their lives and must not exploit their experiences for career benefits to researchers. EFAR should produce knowledge, understanding and information that will have some meaningful practical outcomes for

citizens affected by forced adoption in their struggles to overcome the issues they face in society.

4. **Critical theory:** EFAR focuses on the historic, economic, environmental and cultural barriers encountered by citizens affected by forced adoption and their families.
5. **The 'problem of objectivity' and need for methodological rigour:** Researchers must ensure that they openly state their ontological and epistemological position and their choice of research methodology and data collection strategies must be logical, rigorous and open to public and academic scrutiny.
6. **The choice of methods:** the choice of methods must adequately reflect the needs of the project concerned and the wishes of citizens affected by forced adoption.
7. **The Role of experience:** Discussions of citizens affected by forced adoption's experiences, narratives and stories should be couched firmly within their historical, environmental and cultural context (Adapted from Barnes, 2001; Stevenson, 2010).

I hope the above will be given some consideration by the Senate Committee and stakeholder organisations.

Yours faithfully,

Miriam Stevenson

References

Barnes, C. (2001). *Emancipatory Disability Research: Project or Process*. Paper presented at the City Chambers, Glasgow, on 24th October 2001 available at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Barnes/glasgow%20lecture.pdf>.

Stevenson, M. (2010). Flexible and responsive research: Developing rights-based emancipatory disability research methodology in collaboration with young adults with Down syndrome. *Australian Social Work*, 63(1), 35-50.