

Sense of identity

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Developing a sense of self entity is an essential part of every individual becoming a mature person. Each person's self-conception is a unique combination of much identification, identifications as broad as woman or man, Catholic or Muslim, or as narrow as being a member of one particular family. Although self-identity may seem to coincide with a particular human being, identities are actually much wider than that.

They are also collective -- identities extend to countries and ethnic communities, so that people feel injured when other persons sharing their identity are injured or killed. Sometimes people are even willing to sacrifice their individual lives to preserve their identity groups. The Australian Aboriginal sense of personal identity is derived from only one context, the idea of place. Negara, sense of place, is a word of great importance that contains both physical and metaphysical connotations.

Unraveling these apparent contradictions reveals a distance dimension of the Aboriginal world view and sense of identity. The entire earthly environment is ngurrul, or "country", "camp", or "place", as made by the Ancestor Spirits. The colonization of Australia by Europeans has caused a lot of problem for the local Aborigines. It drastically reduced their population, damaged ancient family ties, and removed thousands of Aboriginal people from the land they had lived on for centuries.

In many cases, the loss of land can mean more than just physical displacement. Because land is so much connected to history and spirituality, the loss of it can lead to a loss of identity. The issue of Aboriginal identity only became an issue after white settlement. However, that is not to say that there was no cultural identity pre-colonization, but more that colonization was

the cause of Aboriginal identity to be threatened. There are several ways in which the colonists imposed themselves on Aboriginal society.

Firstly, when they arrived they needed land to settle on and this of course meant they would take land away from local Aborigines. This action displaced thousands of people from their homeland and severed their spiritual connection to the land. From this point on, the idea of Aboriginal identity was simultaneously created and put at risk. Without land and place to connect people to their heritage, Australian Aborigines were forced to search for other symbols of Aboriginality to provide them with a sense of identity. It is hard to calculate how many aboriginals children "...have been forcibly separated from their families and communities since the very first days of the European occupation of Australia" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997) but that it could sit at between one in three and one in ten in the period from 1910 until 1970. Numerous stories outlined in the report that the environments these children were forced into after being taken from their parents were far from acceptable.

One example is the story of Jennifer who was taken from her parents and taken to Cootamundra Home where "Some of the staff was cruel to the girls. Punishment was caning or belting and being locked in the box-room or the old morgue" (BTH, 1997). This story is not in isolation, there are others. In Paul's case no one in his foster family ever acknowledged or discussed his heritage and he was left to feel different based the observation that his skin looked different; he was 18 before someone mentioned that he was of Aboriginal descent.

The importance of identity for many aboriginal people seems to be recognized on a broader scale than in recent years. The negative media images which drew a direct line between Indigenous people and violence and alcohol have been replaced with more realistic images, depicting vibrant and diverse people and cultures. As well, the importance of 'place' would appear to be slowly acknowledged as critical to Indigenous people's sense of identity. Place is used here to describe a belonging to and knowledge of country and kinship to its people.

This was denied to many Indigenous people due to the assimilation policies introduced in the 1940's. Indigenous people lost contact with their families, with their land, with their very essence. Children were taken from their families to be institutionalized or fostered with Anglo Australians. Aboriginal people were forced from their country and moved onto reserves. Anglo Australians made all decisions for Indigenous people, (including who was or was not aboriginal!)