DEGRADED IDENTITIES:
An analysis of the long-term psychological, physical and criminogenic effects of institutional trauma in a detention centre for adolescent males.

Presented by
Dianne Margaret McInnes (MCrin)
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No child shall be deprived of his or her liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily. The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.

Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 37(b) 2 September 1990
Abstract

This thesis investigates the effects of the environment in The Institution for Boys Tamworth during the 1960s and 1970s, at that time generally considered to be one of Australia’s most brutal juvenile detention centres. This maximum-security institution was for adolescent males, aged between fifteen and eighteen years, who according to authorities required strict discipline. The former residents are the “most forgotten” of the group identified as the “Forgotten Australians”, comprising over 500,000 young people, who experienced “care” in institutions or out-of-home settings in Australia during the twentieth century. The particular focus is the effects of the institutional experiences and disintegrative shaming on the identities and self-control of its adolescent residents, as well as its impact on their adult lives, especially in terms of their propensity for criminal behaviour.

By adopting a qualitative narrative inquiry approach through interviews, questionnaires, biographies, an online survey and analysis of historical records, an examination of the patterns and meanings of the former residents’ institutional experiences and their consequences is presented. The narratives gave the former residents a voice, and in telling their stories, may have helped them understand the effects of their time in the Tamworth Institution. NVivo9 software was used to code the recurring themes and patterns including references to the daily rules, regime, routine and punishments. These data were supplemented by findings from government inquiries.

Their regular disintegrative shaming punishments and their isolation in solitary confinement created a permanent stigma that lowered their self-esteem, degraded their identities, inhibited the mature development of the adolescents, and may have led to their criminal behaviour as adults. These shaming punishments included wearing boxes on their heads until the box disintegrated, and begging for more than three pieces of toilet paper, then describing their toilet practices before having these descriptions checked after completing their motions. The boys dug holes for graves, and then filled them in while fearing the next hole could be their own grave. The absence of parental attachment and diminished self-control contributed
towards their risk taking activities, such as drug and alcohol use, gambling, stealing and general aggression.

According to their narratives, their punitive experiences as adolescents in the Tamworth Institution certainly increased the adult residents’ propensity for hate, anger and violence with far-reaching consequences. Nevertheless, there were complex and nuanced interactions found between the environment of the Tamworth Institution and each former resident’s self-control, self-esteem and personal identity. Although all the adolescent residents had been in “care” in other institutions, the Tamworth Institution served as a significant force in their lives, and was often blamed by them for their lack of success or inability to function in society. By capturing the stories of these former residents, this thesis contributes both empirically and theoretically to the understanding of linkages between adolescent institutionalisation, disintegrative shaming, destabilised self-control and degraded self-identity. Ultimately the results demonstrate the potential criminogenic effects of adopting punitive approaches to juvenile delinquency.
Declaration

This thesis is submitted to Bond University in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This thesis represents my own original work towards this research degree and contains no material which has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at this University or any other institution, except where due acknowledgement is made.

By…………………………………………
Dianne McInnes

Signed this date…………………………
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I am grateful to Bond University for providing the scholarship that enabled me to undertake this research degree, and especially to Professor Raoul Mortley, Dean of the Faculty of Society and Design, who gave a senior citizen the opportunity to embark on university studies beginning at Bond College and ultimately into this postgraduate arena.
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