

# LEAVING HOME: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AS BOTH CHILD EVACUEE IN WWII BRITAIN AND ADULT AUSTRALIAN IMMIGRANT

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## Introduction:

During WWII, up to four million British children were evacuated from their homes in urban areas to rural areas, to avoid the mass aerial bombing which was predicted by war advisory committees. Cheaper for the government than building camps, the evacuation scheme entitled 'Pied Piper', involved children being billeted to the homes of country people who were obliged to provide accommodation for them.

Sent off like parcels with labels on their coats, scores of British children, some as young as three, were thus relocated to the homes of unvetted strangers for months and years at a time, against psychologists' and social workers' recommendations.

Following WWII, in an austere post-war environment of food and fuel rationing, housing shortages and cold winters, many Britons felt the lure of an almost utopian Australia advertised as a land of sunshine and unending opportunity.

Australia, keen to attract skilled industrial workers and migrants who fitted its unspoken White Australia policy, offered an additional attraction of a ten pound fare thus ensuring that millions of British people emigrated to Australia.



## Objectives:

My research explores the experiences of women who were evacuated as children in Britain during WWII and who subsequently emigrated to Australia as adults. I hope to come to an understanding of whether the experience of being an 'evacuee' and/or a 'migrant' is a defining one for such women and, with memory being a 'layered' phenomena, whether the experiences can be separated, or if there is recognition that they are somehow connected. Other themes to be explored include gender and class differences, the interpretation and reinterpretation of 'home', social influences, coping mechanisms, discrimination, isolation and resistance.



## Methodology:

The work of feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith underpins my thesis. Her method of inquiry is termed institutional ethnography which aims to understand and learn from people's individual experiences through the lens of the social organisations and institutions which impact on their lives. What emerges from an analysis of the structural institutions and the discourses they produce upon the evacuation and the immigration experience, is the amount of deliberate social engineering and forms of organising power which constitute particular representations or versions of both the 'evacuee' and the 'migrant' that are often stereotypical, objectifying and universalising. This project seeks competing versions of the evacuee and the migrant to reveal the complexity and diversity of those experiences.

## Method:

The research project involves qualitative interviews with approximately 20 women in their 70s who are both British WWII evacuees and Australian immigrants. I have, to date, had the privilege of sharing the stories of nine such women whose experiences are proving insightful, moving, funny, sometimes harrowing but always thought-provoking.

## Discussion and conclusion:

The women I have interviewed so far all live in Gippsland and generally came here for their husband's jobs with the SEC or associated industries in the post-war period. Some of these women suggest that the Gippsland area reminds them of parts of Britain, particularly Wales, one of the key locations to which children were evacuated during the war. Some of these women have never returned to Britain, with no desire to – others feel they now have two homes, and have made frequent visits back. This reflects the ambiguous nature of 'home' and the difficulty for migrants of relocating and reinterpreting 'home'. Some participants have described the abuse, neglect and petty meanness they suffered during their evacuation experience which calls into question the commonly held notion of 'home' as a place of sanctuary and care. In addition, the motivations, culpability and sanctioning by the British government of a scheme described as the 'singular misfortune'<sup>1</sup> of the war, is both curious and incriminating. Some of the women had no desire to emigrate, but followed their husbands, while others actually made the decision to emigrate. This reflects the amount of agency involved in migration decision-making and alludes to the gendered nature of such decisions. All of these women have developed, whether quickly or more gradually, a deep love and commitment to Australia, having raised families here – and all acknowledge the importance and relevance of telling the stories of ordinary people living through the extraordinary events of both evacuation and migration.

1. Johnson, B.S. (1968) *The Evacuees*. Victor Gollanz Ltd. London.