Prepared for difference?
Exploring child protection practice
with Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander families in rural Australia

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Abstract

In Australia, over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems is increasing. The legacy of the stolen generation has led to grief, sadness and loss of identity for many people, and major disparities in health, education, employment and housing means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are more susceptible to child welfare interventions in the present and future. This makes it imperative that responses for these families are more effective, in order to achieve socially just outcomes.

As well, Australia’s growing multicultural society has increased demand for services provided to people from diverse cultural backgrounds to recognise the impact and importance of culture and to respond effectively. Cultural competency, which focuses on developing knowledge, skills and values for cross cultural practice, has gained momentum. It aims to enhance the ability of workers to provide culturally relevant and effective responses to people from different cultural backgrounds. However, ensuring that practices in the human services are culturally appropriate, culturally safe, salient, and effective, has proved elusive.

This research aimed to explore the experiences of rural child protection workers employed by statutory and community agencies working with Indigenous families at two rural sites. Levels of cultural competency and the impact of cultural competency on effective practice were examined and implications for policy development and practice were identified. Face to face interviews were conducted with 30 practitioners. Thematic analysis revealed four main themes: (1) the readiness of workers for cross-cultural practice, (2) the resources and strategies they used to engage in the field, (3) the influence of the interface between the local/geographic, practitioner, client and organisational contexts and (4) the impact of these on practice and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. This study used
Bourdieu’s theoretical framework (1989; 1990a; 1990b; 1993) to examine the ways in which workers managed and influenced the contexts (or fields), in which they practiced, and which have their own systems of values and acceptable practices. Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus*, *capital* and *field* were used to analyse the child protection field of rural practice. The study explored the resources (or *capital*) that participants used as pathways into employment in child protection, and how they manoeuvred themselves within contexts (*fields*) of place, organisation, and culture, that of themselves and the “other”, were highlighted. The concept of *habitus* enabled the taken for granted notions of workers engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to be brought to the surface and examined.

Analysis of the data revealed that child protection practitioners lacked knowledge about the contexts in which their practice occurred. Neither were they sufficiently prepared to respond to the complex challenges that confronted them in cross cultural practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in rural communities. Place played an important role in considering issues of power, difference and identity, with each local community having its own value system and practices. Indigenous workers faced dilemmas in their dual roles as Indigenous community members, and child protection workers. Child protection workers felt that inflexible bureaucratic demands compromised their capacity to be effective. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers expressed confusion and frustration when their goals of protecting children and strengthening families were not achieved.

Further, data revealed that organisational contexts with their particular use of policies and procedures and power and authority in statutory roles took precedence. For example, statutory participant responses prioritised compliance and completion of “routine” responsibilities, and prescribed intervention processes over other practice possibilities inclusive of culture. For non-Indigenous workers, time constraints impacted on building
relationships with local agencies, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Information sharing, and cross cultural collaboration were also jeopardised by these processes. Many non-Indigenous workers participating in this study relied on their own ‘narrow’ knowledge base to understand the causes and nature of child abuse and neglect in Aboriginal communities. These workers sometimes ignored or did not/could not account for the broader historic and intergenerational contexts of child removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities, and child protection policies which have continued to impact disproportionately in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. These workers therefore lacked the breadth and depth of child protection responses demanded through models of cultural competency.

This study showed that in a rural context, the knowledge of Indigenous workers was undervalued. Neither were they empowered to actively participate and influence decisions. The beliefs, experiences and values that non-Indigenous child protection workers brought with them to their practice (habitus), without reflection, unconsciously influenced and impacted experiences with, and expectations of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

This study therefore, concludes that child protection workers need to be better prepared and informed in cross cultural practices and possibilities in order to consciously respond to (rather than react to) the complexities they face in their roles. A cross cultural approach makes explicit the differences between the actual and perceived values and procedures of those who provide services, and the values and responses of those who receive them. It also explicates the power differential between these parties. Deliberate preparation for cross cultural practice and alertness to the issues faced by people from different cultural backgrounds within their local contexts is essential.
"This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself."

Rosslyn Aitchison

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List of Abbreviations

AASW  Australian Association of Social Workers
AIHW  Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AICCA  Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies
ABS  Australian Bureau of Statistics
ARC  Australian Research Council
ATSILS  Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services
CCAM  Cultural Competency Attainment Model
CMC  Crime and Misconduct Commission
COAG  Council of Australian Governments
CSO  Child Safety Officer
HREOC  Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
QCPCI  Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry
RE  Recognised Entity
The Department  Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services
US Dept HHS  United States Department of Health and Human Services
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Chapter One: Introduction

The subject of this thesis is cultural competency and its applicability to child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within a rural context. It explores the experiences of child protection workers, working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Cultural competency approaches advocate practice that enhances the ability of workers to provide culturally relevant and effective responses to families from different cultural backgrounds than that of the mainstream culture within which it is geographically located (Green, 1999; McPhatter, 1997). Although a commitment towards cultural competency has been articulated at all tiers of Australian government and their bureaucracies, and embraced by community organisations involved in health and human services, development of behavioural indicators for assessing the cultural competency of workers has not been forthcoming (Bean, 2006; Harrison & Turner, 2010; Kwong, 2009). In the field of child protection, there has been little investigation of the experiences and perceptions of workers who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, despite child protection practices having a significant and disproportionate impact on Indigenous families in Australia (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (AIHW), 2012; Gooda, 2010).

Attempts to define culture have proved difficult due to its evolving and emerging nature (Dean, 2001). The use of the term ‘culture’ has itself been criticised as a signifier of difference, a relationship marker upon which groups have tried to imprint their values over less powerful others (Park, 2005; Parrott, 2009; Pon, 2009). This research explored the beliefs, experiences and values of Indigenous and non-Indigenous child protection workers who work in rural areas with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. In Australia, where there is currently much interest and talk about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, with images and attention drawn to traditional cultural forms such as paintings, dance, and ceremonies, it is easy to overlook
the socio-political realities that exist within Aboriginal communities (Cowlishaw, 2010; Eckermann et al., 2006). These images do not overtly convey the current chronic disproportionate levels of education, employment and socio-political disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who concomitantly experience significant health problems, and much lower life expectancies than do other Australians (AIHW, 2011; Goote & Rowse, 2007). The average life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men is 67.2 years (compared to 78.2 for non-Indigenous men) and for women 72.9 years (compared to 82.6 for non-Indigenous women), and over half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the age of 15 years have a disability or long term health problem (Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council, 2011; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012; AIHW, 2011).

The legacy of past policies of forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, culture and communities, also lead to intergenerational disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian in current health, education, employment and housing uptake. Such outcomes make these families susceptible to child welfare interventions. A significant and persistent over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the child protection system makes it imperative that child welfare services for these families are more effective and responsive in order to achieve socially just outcomes.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples comprise only a small percentage (2.5%) of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011). However, this is a young population with half the population aged 21 years or less compared to the non-Indigenous population where half the population is aged 37 years or less (ABS, 2011). Within this population, almost half of Indigenous households have dependent children, and more than one third of these children are under the age of 15 years compared to the Australian population where one fifth are under the age of 15 years.
Five percent of the child population (aged 0-17 years) in Australia is Indigenous, but they make up 24 percent of the in-care population (Tilbury, 2009). There is an over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system in all Australian states and territories (AIHW, 2012). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who come to the attention of state child protection systems are almost ‘eight times as likely than non-Indigenous children to be subject of substantiated child abuse and neglect’, ‘over nine times the rate of children on care and protection orders compared to non-Indigenous children’ and ‘10 times the rate of non-Indigenous children in out of home care’ (AIHW, 2012, p viii).

Over the past few years the numbers have steadily increased, as has the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under child protection orders who live out of home with non-Indigenous carers (AIHW, 2012). Australia has reflected a similar trend as in other countries where infants under the age of 12 months are the most likely group to enter care and once in care remain in out of home care for longer (Tilbury, 2009). In Queensland, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children account for less than 7 percent of the State’s population, whilst they account for almost 38 percent of children in care (Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (QCPCI), 2012, p. 349). It is estimated that 50 percent of Indigenous children in Queensland are known to the statutory child protection department (QCPCI, 2012, p. 349). The issue of how to work effectively with these children, their families, and their communities is complex. It brings together different cultural perspectives about protective parenting and how children are kept safe, especially in the child protection field where the majority of workers (70%) are non-Indigenous (Martin & Healy, 2010). This raises the issue of how different forms of knowledge are accounted for in the formal child protection process.

A number of inquiries conducted in different states of Australia have found poor outcomes for Indigenous children interfacing with child protection systems due to a lack of
co-ordination and consultation within these systems (QCPCI, 2013; Gordon, Hallahan, & Henry, 2002; New South Wales Aboriginal Child Assault Taskforce, 2006; Wild & Anderson, 2007). In Queensland, an investigation into allegations of sustained and serious abuse of children in foster care by their foster carer and others led to an Inquiry into the responses of the statutory child protection department to fulfil its duty of care to protect the children in their care. The Inquiry reiterated the absolute unacceptability for any child, who has been abused or neglected to the point where they have to be removed from their home by the state, to be placed in an environment where they are further abused (CMC, 2004). However, the Inquiry found that children had been harmed whilst in foster care, and the child protection system had ‘failed Queensland children in many aspects’. Further, it found ‘long standing problems’ had led to ‘averse outcomes’ for many children (including physical and sexual abuse) as a result of poor decision-making (CMC, 2004, p. xi). These inquiries show that most workers in the child protection field are likely to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, yet few empirical studies have been undertaken about this engagement. This is a significant knowledge and research gap in child protection practice. Without this knowledge, the Indigenous child protection field is devoid of a firm basis in its accounting of practice processes and outcomes across cultural difference. The embrace of cultural competency as a founding theoretical framework in the engagement of Indigenous families in the enterprise of child protection is one approach that has been proposed. It is based on the assumption that children and families should be provided with responses by human services agents and organisations that are culturally acceptable to them, and which support their integrity and strengths (Green, 1999; McPhatter, 1997).

The cultural competency approach to child protection, emerged out of an hypothesis that human service professionals who work across cultures can be more effective when they are prepared and have knowledge and awareness about the cultures
of people and communities in which they work, as well as appropriate skills and commitment to the same (Green, 1999; Lum, 1999; McPhatter, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2003). Sue, Arrendondo, and McDavis (1992) described the culturally skilled counsellor as ‘one who is in the process of actively developing and practicing appropriate relevant and sensitive intervention strategies and skills in working with his or her culturally different clients’ (p75). This study explored child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. It aimed to contribute to the current dearth of knowledge about child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The research explored how practice is currently enacted on the ground in rural settings by Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners in a rural context. In doing so, it investigated the extent to which the concept of cultural competency influenced or informed practice.

Approaches which ignore the importance of culture have led to poor outcomes for those at the receiving end of that help, and a lack of satisfaction for workers providing it (McPhatter, 1997). Within increasingly multicultural societies, diverse ethnic cultural groups have drawn attention and criticism to the lack of cultural responsiveness of services largely staffed by mainstream group members (Clarke, 1997; Este, 2007; Maiter, 2009; Purden, 2005; Rangihau, 1988; Sue et al., 1992; Sue et al., 1982; United States Department of Health and Human Services (US Dept. HHS), 2001).

Aims and Research Questions

The study aimed to:

1. Explore levels of cultural competency among child protection practitioners working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in rural Queensland
2. Examine the impact of cultural competency on effective child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

3. Identify implications of the study’s findings for culturally competent policy development and practice in child protection with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Within a small cohort of child protection practitioners working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in rural Queensland, the research examined the following questions:

- Which pathways did workers use to get into child protection practice?
- What were the experiences of child protection practitioners in rural locations?
- How did practitioners describe their practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families?
- What were their views on cultural competency as an approach to practice?
- Were they prepared to respond to the demands they faced in their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?
- How did Indigenous and non-Indigenous child protection workers work together?

**Research approach and design**

This study was funded through an ARC Linkage Project jointly administered by Griffith University, Curtin University of Technology and later Charles Darwin University across two Australian states. The Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services and the Department for Child Protection in Western Australia were partner organisations. The study outlined in this thesis was part of a broader project which focused on the shared problem of recruiting and retaining high quality professional staff to enable child protection service delivery in rural communities with high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children.
This study aimed to deepen appreciation for the current complex community practice environments of child protection workers working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in rural Queensland. It aimed to examine the impact of cultural competency on practice, and to identify implications for culturally competent policy development and practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. A qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews over two stages of data collection was applied to gather the perspectives of child protection workers employed in child protection work in two small rural communities in Queensland. This approach aimed to provide workers, employed in both statutory and community agencies, the opportunity to express their views and experiences of cross cultural practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

**Positioning the Research and Researcher**

My interest in this research derived from my background as a child protection worker. During my own experiences as a social worker in a statutory child protection agency I had the opportunity to observe and work with children who came to the attention of child protection agencies and who entered the system. Some of these children identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. For any child, the experience of being removed from their family and from the familiar context in which they have been living is frightening and confusing. My observations from my practice were that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children could be further disadvantaged if they became disconnected from their families, since they also became disconnected from community and culture. Many of these children had minimal opportunities to experience a sense of belonging and connectedness to their culture during their childhood. Although I believed including and working with Aboriginal people to increase opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to retain their sense of belonging and connectedness to their culture was essential, I wasn’t always sure how to do this. This impacted my own
ability in practice to ensure that whilst I wanted to be respectful towards the differences I encountered, I had little understanding about how to do this in practice.

As a non-Indigenous person, I have been challenged to reflect upon my credentials by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to undertake this research. I can never fully understand the experience of being Aboriginal, but the fact that I am non-Indigenous does not mean I cannot contribute to better practice. Part of the reconciliation project in Australia (1991 – 2001) advocated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians to work together in order to address the key issues of reconciliation, one of which was ‘addressing disadvantage’. This included the high statistics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the care of the state. I see this research as part of this process. Most child protection workers, like me, are non-Indigenous. The research has challenged me to reflect on the knowledge and skills that I brought and used in my own practice and parallel this to the research journey.

An aim in this study was to build on the knowledge base of child protection workers who entered practice in order to improve outcomes for children. I believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who come to the attention of the child protection system have the right to grow up knowing and maintaining relationships with their families, their culture and the shared history they have with non-Indigenous Australians.

**Definition of Terms**

This study is concerned with child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The following is a definition of terms used in the thesis.

This study uses a broad definition of **child protection practice**, as all the activities undertaken by workers in child protection agencies to ensure the safety and
well-being of children who have been, or are at risk of, child abuse and neglect. The child protection system is comprised of all of the government and non-government organisations that deal with child abuse and neglect and includes child abuse prevention, assessment, and services provided to children and their families when concerns are raised about the child’s safety or wellbeing. The focus of this study is on secondary and tertiary child protection practice where services are being provided to children and families to prevent them from being harmed and or neglected.

The terms **Aboriginal** and **Torres Strait Islander** are used in this study as an adjective to describe people who have identified as the First Nation peoples of Australia. I acknowledge that these are colonial labels, and prior to their use, people of Australia identified themselves by their country, for example, Gungali, Darambil or Wakka Wakka people. Many of the workers in this study identified themselves as both of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage as well as having connections to other cultural backgrounds. The Commonwealth government uses three criteria to determine an individual's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status. These are: an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as such and is accepted by the community of reference as having membership. The National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples has encouraged the use of terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (National Congress of Australia’s First Nation Peoples, 2012).

The term **Aboriginal** refers specially to the Aboriginal people of mainland Australia and does not necessarily include Australia’s other Indigenous population – Torres Strait Islander peoples. In this study, the term Aboriginal community is used to denote communities where the predominant population identifies as Aboriginal. I acknowledge that Torres Strait Islanders do reside in those communities and that within
the community there are residents who identify as being of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage.

**Peoples** and **people** are terms which have been used interchangeably to reflect the definition by Briskman (2007) who uses the former to recognise diversity of Aboriginal peoples within Australia, their cultures, ways of interacting, relationships and societies, and the latter to reflect varied descriptions in literature and media sources.

**Indigenous** is a term used interchangeably with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is also used to refer to wider groupings of world’s First Nations peoples. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use the term ‘Indigenous’ to acknowledge their identity as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and their connection through descent to the original inhabitants of the land. The term does not separate the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are very different, with their own unique histories, beliefs and values. I use the term Indigenous in this study when I am talking about workers who I am aware have identified as Indigenous in their employment because they identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. In the literature, and in the child protection field, the word Indigenous is at times used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples although it does not state whether it refers to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. If I am aware of the cultural background, I have attempted to present this, for example when I am referring specifically to Aboriginal people, I use the term Aboriginal people.

The term **participant** is used in the study to refer to the child protection workers who took part in the study. Participants are employed at a statutory agency or community based agency known as a Recognised Entity. To distinguish participants who are employed at either agency, I use the term statutory participant or community participant. When I refer to the child protection workforce I use the term **worker**. Workers in the
statutory agency refer to themselves as Child Safety Officers. The term **CSO** is used to refer to these workers.

The term **Recognized Entity (RE)** *(defined under the *Child Protection Act 1999)* is an agency who provides services to Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islander people. Its members include individuals who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who have appropriate knowledge of, or expertise in child protection, and who are not officers or employees of the statutory child protection department.

**Thesis Chapters**

Chapters two and three are literature review chapters. Chapter two reviews the literature on the impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their culture. It outlines the history and development of child welfare responses and policies which directly impacted on them and their families. It points out the detrimental consequences that these policies have had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, children and families, who continue to be over-represented in child protection systems. Finally, the chapter explores the system’s response to ongoing pressures and criticism from the external environment to acknowledge the impact of the legacy of past practices, and to recognise cultural considerations and participation of cultural representation in contemporary practice.

Chapter three focuses on cultural competency literature. It examines the pressures which have drawn attention to the importance of culture in the provision of services within increasingly multicultural contexts. The concept of cultural competency is one approach which emerged following criticism that the human services were failing to provide services that meet the needs of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The
international development of this concept together with the strengths and weaknesses of this approach are considered as well as models for practice.

Chapter four presents the research methods of this study. The qualitative methodology that guided this research and the research methods are presented. This research used the conceptual framework introduced by Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 1990a; 1993) as a tool of analysis. The data collection was conducted in two stages over a period of one year. I travelled seven times to each of the two rural sites to conduct interviews with practitioners who were employed in the child protection field at the statutory agencies, and at community agencies at both sites. Semi-structured interviews (See Appendix C and D) were used as the data collection method.

Chapter five is the first of two chapters which present the research data. In chapter five, the pathways into employment are considered together with the induction provided to the child protection participants. This is important in order to understand the resources, including the expected knowledge that Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants bring to practice and how these filter their initial experiences. The chapter also considers the processes participants use/d to actively develop and acquire cultural knowledge and skills for their cross cultural practice.

Chapter six builds on the data contained in chapter five. This chapter presents the organisational factors which drive practice, and how workers who engage in direct practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families describe their interventions.

Chapter seven provides an analysis and discussion of the research findings, considering the importance of context, including local/geographical area, child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and the organisational context including those contexts of relationships and power. It presents an analysis using Bourdieu's framework (1989; 1990a; 1993) to consider the child protection
field, and how the concept of habitus and capital influences interactions in the child protection field. It discusses how power is structured and understood differently by different actors and ‘subjects’ of child protection practice.

Chapter eight presents the conclusions, recommendations, and the implications of this research for future child protection practice and policy. It builds on the knowledge of practitioners in the field who entered the field motivated and committed towards protecting children. It accentuates the difference and complexity of practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and how policies and procedures of the child protection system impact them. A recommendation of the study is that in order for practice to be culturally responsive and progress towards positive outcomes with Indigenous Australians, workers need to be supported to enhance their cross cultural knowledge and skills, and be challenged on the values and attitudes that they bring with them into the field. Implications of the study’s conclusions and recommendations for further research are also discussed.

Summary

This chapter outlined the foundations of this thesis. It introduced the purpose, research problem and research issues. Chapters were outlined and briefly described. The next chapter focuses on the history and development of welfare responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia following colonisation. It presents the context for the current child protection system and the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within it.
Chapter Two: Literature Review: Child Protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

To me, Aboriginality is about that shared experience, that shared culture and that shared pride (McQuire, 2008, p. 25).

Introduction

This chapter discusses the term Aboriginality. It reviews the literature on the impacts of colonisation which forced an interface of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their cultures with the culture and ways of largely British explorers, governors and settlers. It presents the child welfare services that were developed by non-Indigenous persons and structures to respond to the perceived harm and neglect Indigenous children and families experienced following the arrival of the British settlers. It also presents the ‘betterment’ British colonists espoused they could bring to Aboriginal people. Many colonial attitudes and views towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remain in the present. This literature review demonstrates that government policies had direct political and economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. Power was exercised on Aboriginal society by government representatives through the forcible removal of their children.

The legacy of these past policies of removal, and the intergenerational effects of separations from family and culture have been cited as the underlying causes for the current over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within child protection systems across Australia (AIHW, 2012 QCPCI, 2013; Calma, 2007; HREOC,
1997). Finally, this chapter presents the current child protection system and includes reports and inquiries that have investigated the ability of these systems to respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

**Aboriginal Culture**

Aboriginality can be seen as the knowledge and practices/processes (‘ways’) that Aboriginal people select from their experiences and their cultural traditions and heritage to pass on to their young people; to express a sense of self to and with other Aboriginal peoples; and to express a sense of identity of the self as different from other non-Indigenous Australians (Beckett, 1988). Much of this knowledge is based in personal accounting and storytelling (yarning). These accounts and stories gain status and validity through repeated sharing and confirmation by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons and communities (Stanley, Tomison, & Pocock, 2003). This reinforces the importance of experience, heritage and cultural tradition in the identity making and keeping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It also recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people select and determine how and what knowledge and ‘ways’ are passed on, and to whom. In reality, Aboriginality is a complex term which encompasses many different and diverse forms of knowledge and behaviours, including languages, views, customs, beliefs and values. Regional (clan and country) differences within Australia, make broad generalisations about Australian Aboriginality difficult.

In Australia, for more than a century, Aboriginality and Aboriginal heritage was devalued and suppressed through political and economic practices by settlers who had little to gain, and potentially much to lose through the valorisation of Aboriginal cultural traditions, historical experiences and belongingness to land and sea (Beckett, 1988; Cowlishaw, 2010). In order to survive the multitude of changes forced upon them
particularly on their ability to continue their traditional ways of life Aboriginality became a
dynamic (rather than something static), reflecting its cultural capacity to remain relevant
yet fluid and flexible (Eckermann et al., 2006; Korbin, 2002; May, 1994). A contemporary
Aboriginality has therefore evolved, which Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Sale (1999) state is
taken for granted by many people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
Beckett (1988) proposed that despite this dynamism, there are entrenched beliefs held
about Aboriginality by those outside of this culture which act to constrain Aboriginal
people in their dynamic construction of Aboriginality as they please within broader (largely
mainstream) society. As a numerically small group within the Australian population, their
identity and rights have often depended on them being able to present themselves in
certain prescribed ways in order to be accepted as an Aboriginal person and/or Torres
Strait Islander by powerful others. Judgments about who is entitled to join Aboriginal
organisations or make land claims (including notions of ‘traditional and ‘historic’ land
claimants) are two examples of this representing the socio-political difficulty of Aboriginal
people themselves to determine their identity and ‘authenticity’ (Cowlishaw, 2011).

Alongside this, Cowlishaw (2011) contended that a popular fascination has
emerged in many sectors of non-Indigenous Australian society which she describes as a
national Aboriginal mythopoeia that views Aboriginality as a powerful system of beliefs
and practices about Aboriginal people. She suggested that this view of Aboriginality is
now perceived as unique and precious; an ancient culture that has become valuable,
admired and even revered. Within this definition many realities that currently exist within
Aboriginal communities are ignored. Cowlishaw (2011) argued that this perception places
pressure on Aboriginal people by those outside of their culture to produce, express and
bear witness to particular beliefs and practices in order to present a cultural authenticity of
Aboriginality. Cowlishaw (2011) proposed that this mythopoeia is based on a form of
‘nativism’ where Aboriginal people’s sense of who they are, is supposed to relate to a
specific place (tribal origin) and to their dispossession (colonial history; p.184). Sutton (2009) described this as a ‘liberal consensus’ from which those within the Australian population privilege a commitment to abstract notions of ‘culture’ above concern for the plight of living persons. He called this a wilful blindness to the differences in the real material and socio-political inclusion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons living within the same geo-political arena. Sutton (2009) also recognised the role and function of Indigenous egalitarian social organisation; beliefs and loyalty to family; obligation and reciprocity; and the rejection of accumulation which may be both cultural philosophic (valued) practices and necessary values in a community dispossessed of economic and political inclusion with wider society. Similarly, Langton (2010) urged the need to accept these realities of Aboriginality, as well as taking cognisance of the fundamental changes that have occurred from traditional Aboriginality and the typical hunter-gatherer way of life to the more contemporary one where the population is overwhelmingly young, has poor outcomes in health, education and employment, and where many Aboriginal people are poor, marginalised, powerless and sedentarised, not being dissimilar to people living in the ‘developing’ world. What these perspectives illuminate are both the ongoing differences between Western values, beliefs and practices, and Indigenous tradition, social values and culture, and the lack of socio-political and economic inclusion of Aboriginal people that is not openly talked about, acknowledged or valued (Sutton, 2009).

The differences between the mythopoeia referred to by Cowlishaw, and the realities presented by Langton, and Sutton, have given rise to a complex tension within the expectations and perceptions held in regards to what Aboriginal people can or should say about themselves and what others have said and continue to say about them (Altman & Hinkson, 2010; Beckett, 1988).

In an attempt to identify, through discourse analysis, how non-Indigenous young people talk about Indigenous Australians, Augoustinos et al. (1999) conducted focus
groups with psychology students. They found that although students had an awareness of historic narratives, and alluded to the possible coercive practice of the British imposing their lifestyle over Aboriginal people, they implicitly and explicitly blamed a ‘failure to adapt' for the current plight of Aboriginal people (p 93, 96). Problems and social inequalities were accounted for by the use of discursive techniques that legitimated and rationalised the contemporary conditions to which Langton (2010) referred. Alongside this the students expressed a resistance to viewing Indigenous Australians as a sub-culture because they viewed this as a threat to the national identity. Augoustinos et al. (1999) attempted to show that the ways Indigenous Australians were constructed and problematised in ordinary talk by these young people, attempts to justify and legitimate their oppression and powerlessness. These are commonly used arguments and debates on race relations in Australia. Augoustinos et al (1999) concluded that even in this young population, there are strong views and perspectives about Aboriginal people, which reflect a form of modern racism.

The following section reviews the literature on the initial experiences and treatment of Aboriginal people at beginning of British settlement in Australia when the cultures of Aboriginal people and the British were forced to interface and often clashed over the rights to resources of land, food, water and women. This is important because it lays the foundation for racist and prejudicial attitudes and perceptions that have a continued presence in Australia. It draws to the surface the sense of superiority that existed when the colonists arrived in Australia, and reveals how they justified the positions of power which they assumed, and which they used to guide their actions in this new colony.
History

The first contact

The arrival of the British in Australia has been described as an invasion because the intent of their entry into the country was to occupy and take possession of it (Baldry & Green, 2002). What is evident, is that in 1788, the arrival of the British on Australian soil saw the beginning of a conflict between two completely different societies which resulted in the ongoing disruption to, and destruction of, traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of life. The basis of the arrival of the British to take up settlement and possession of the country was based upon the European doctrine of *terra nullius*, or ‘empty land’ which implied that the country had no sovereignty and was able to be acquired simply by taking possession. The belief that Australia was uninhabited refuted the existence of the Aboriginal population even though their existence had been recorded by Cook when he had charted the east coast some years earlier (Baldry & Green, 2002; May, 1994). Aboriginal people living in Australia were not valued even as persons and their traditional ways of life were not respected by the new arrivals. Based on the belief that they were taking possession of an empty land, the new settlers saw little value in learning how Aboriginal people used the land. Their communal custodianship or guardianship to the land, where the land belongs the people, was a stark contrast to the concept of private, individualised land ownership as adopted in the western system (May, 1994). Land was cleared for sheep and wheat farming as more British settlers arrived. Aboriginal communities who lived on or near settlements were forced back into the territories of other communities and any attempts to resist were met by physical violence (Flick, 1990, p. 61). As settlement grew, Aboriginal people were moved out of areas to accommodate the European population and were often visible at the margins of these settlements.
It became obvious shortly after the arrival of the new settlers, that Aboriginal people were experiencing trauma and distress at being removed from their traditional lands, and prevented from being able to continue their traditional ways of life (Baldry & Green, 2002; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), 1997). Aboriginal people were given no place in the new settlement, which was modelled on English society (Van Krieken, 1992). Even though the devastating effects of introduced diseases, declining fertility rates, and the ruthlessness and brutality of armed settlers were witnessed by new settlers, Aboriginal people were increasingly positioned as a ‘problem’ (Litwin, 1997). Their traditional ways of life were overshadowed by the vision that the new settlers planned for the colony. To respond to this ‘problem’ in 1883, the Aborigines Protection Board was established, which recognised that Aboriginal people and their children were experiencing harm. The response had little impact on the issues which were causing the harm.

There were some significant attempts by the Europeans very early in the settlement to ‘protect’ Aboriginal children. A number of families took Aboriginal children into their homes or to other institutions for the purpose of educating them to western ways. Their actions demonstrated their belief that these children could be ‘civilised’, which inferred that they could be productive in the workforce (Chisholm, 1985; HREOC, 1997; Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation & Wilson, 1997). Their actions failed to attain the outcomes they had anticipated, Aboriginal children did not remain within this new society, instead they returned to their family and culture. These actions were then attributed, by some, to the negative influence of their parents who they thought undermined their efforts (Chisholm, 1985). This failure contributed to a shift from sympathy to blame, and Aboriginal people were criticised by the new settlers in their persisting resistance, as being unable to accommodate change. Chisholm (1985) provided an alternative explanation for this failure. He believed the failure of these first attempts was due more to
Aboriginal resistance at the threatened loss of their culture. In his review of early child welfare responses to Aboriginal children in New South Wales, he argued that despite the ability of Aboriginal children to learn quickly, they did not, as was anticipated, adopt European values and life styles over Aboriginal values and lifestyles. He suggested these attempts to ‘civilise’ however, continued to have considerable influence as a model used later by authorities to implement further welfare policies and to exert forms of social control over Aboriginal children. Increasing levels of state intervention to respond to the problems faced by Aboriginal children and families were largely conditioned and justified by beliefs that social and cultural trauma was an inevitable social pathology that originated within Aboriginal communities themselves (Litwin, 1997).

The presence of Aboriginal people dependent on government rations, and those suffering from malnutrition and disease, was unsettling and annoying to the British who continued to view them as a nuisance (HREOC, 1997; Van Krieken, 1992). In exploring the development of child welfare institutions and agencies in their social and political context, Van Krieken (1992) found an underlying theme in these early welfare policies that also demonstrated attempts to eradicate the traditional culture of the Aboriginal people and replace it with the values of British society. In their review of the history of Indigenous welfare policies Baldry and Green (2002) outlined that Aboriginal Australians continued to be seen and treated as members of a ‘race in extreme need of civilizing’ (p. 1). They outlined government welfare policies and practices driven by racist values aimed to variously, eliminate, exclude, assimilate and integrate Aboriginal people. These policies and practices ignored the value of Aboriginal practices, attitudes and beliefs and continued to view Aboriginal people as inferior. They were founded solely upon Western beliefs, values and practices of individualism, the work ethic, deservedness and Christian morality which were at the same time being imposed by the British upper and middle classes upon the poor in England, and were based on what British people thought was
good for Aboriginal people with little or no respect to Aboriginal social or cultural 
institutions that already existed (Baldry & Green, 2002; Chisholm, 1985). Extinction of 
Aboriginal peoples was anticipated by those in authority as inevitable.

By the end of the nineteenth century, it became evident that the Aboriginal 
population was not dying out as quickly as the authorities had anticipated. As European 
settlement spread, so did contact, a consequence of which was the emergence of a 
‘mixed race’ population (Van Krieken, 1999). The next section traces government policies 
and practices and their various attempts to control and assimilate Aboriginal people into 
the ways of the British. In particular it considers the impact of legislation and policies on 
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

**Segregation 1890s to 1950s**

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, comprehensive legislation was 
introduced to segregate the Aboriginal population from the rest of the population. Prior to 
the 1900s, Aboriginal children were dealt with under the same legislation as non-
Indigenous children. The *Industrial Reformatory Schools Act 1865* in Queensland had 
created industrial and reformatory schools for children under 15 years. The aim of these 
government funded schools was to remove children and rescue them from degenerate 
circumstances for those who were deemed neglected, and to retrain them to become 
useful and productive in the labour force. A dominant perspective on the cause of child 
maltreatment reflected a personal dysfunction model which perceived that the child’s 
situation was the result of the actions or inactions of the child’s carer, usually the parents 
(Stanley et al., 2003). The broader social and economic problems that may have 
contributed to working class families being unable to work or financially support 
themselves or their children were ignored and Aboriginal parents, who did not aspire to, or 
commit themselves to the values inherent in this work ethic were viewed negatively. Child
welfare responses were focused on the need to make ‘good and useful citizens’ of children who came to their attention, which in the case of boys, were disciplined and obedient workers and in the case of girls, hardworking and deferential housewives and domestic servants (Van Krieken, 1992, p. 79). This legislation viewed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents as not fulfilling their expectations as parents.

The period between the 1890s and 1950s legally sanctioned protectionist policies. The increasing mixed descent population made it further imperative to governments that these people join the workforce, in order to avoid their reliance on government rations (HREOC, 1997). Legislation removed the common law rights of Aboriginal parents over their children, legalising the role of the state as legal guardian of all children with Aboriginal descent, who could be taken at will and sent to a mission, a child welfare institution or to a white foster family (Kidd, 1997; Van Krieken, 1999). Queensland was at the forefront of other states of Australia in leading the implementation of such laws that took complete control over Aboriginal lives (including their children) and assumed the power to determine where they could live, where they worked, who they married, who cared for their children, what they could earn and how they could spend it (Kidd, 1997). This was the beginning of a period of racial segregation, where governments appeared indifferent towards the conditions and treatment of Aboriginal people whose needs were neglected and who continued to be treated as a low priority.

In Queensland, the *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* was introduced. The difference in this Act was that it did not apply to all Aboriginal people as a racial group, rather it defined categories. The Act had jurisdiction over all Aboriginal children under the age of 16 years, and all full-blood Aboriginal people (Kidd, 1997). The effect of this Act was that it had a direct impact on the opportunities of Aboriginal people to pass on their Aboriginality to their young people. The state assumed responsibility as guardian of Aboriginal children, separated them from their families,
forbade the use of traditional languages, and tightly monitored contact between children and their families. This Act provided broader powers to authorities to intervene and regulate the family lives of Aboriginal people. It relinquished the need for proof of negligence as all Aboriginal children under the age of 16 were defined as neglected solely on the basis of race (Kidd, 2000). Section 7 of this act defined a neglected child to include any child born of an Aboriginal or half-caste mother. Section 31 in the Regulations of the Act provided for the care, custody and education of Aboriginal children, and authorised the right to transfer any half caste-child orphaned or descended from Aboriginal parents to any part of the state. Being Aboriginal in itself constituted neglect and provided the right to remove, institutionalise and attempt to re-socialise the child (O'Connor, 1993). Churches and government administered missions were established throughout the state, on small amounts of land that had been gazetted for the use of Aboriginal people, usually in rural isolated areas.

The practice of removing Aboriginal children from their parents came to be known as the stolen generation. It was at its height in the first half of the twentieth century (Cuneen & Libesman, 2000; Read, 1998). Under the banner of ‘protection’ and supposedly for ‘their own good’, Aboriginal people were subjected to administrative practices which included enforced population transfers, confinement under arbitrary and quite authoritarian regimes, imposed excessive moral scrutiny, placement, and inferior educational training (Evans, 1980). Whilst the policies legislated were proposed to protect Aboriginal families and children, these policies at the same time ignored their human rights (Cuneen & Libesman, 2000; Eckermann et al., 2006). The Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 excluded Aboriginal peoples from towns and segregated them on reserves. It sought to isolate Aboriginal people from white people (Cox, 2007).
Segregation provided an ideal process to attempt to enforce social control over what remained of the Aboriginal population. Aboriginal missions became pools for Aboriginal labourers, enforced by a white administration constituted through a number of state government departments such as health, law, training and education (Cox, 2007). This process provided further economic advantages. It satisfied the needs of the developing Australian economy by providing cheap labour, and it provided the potential for the mixed descent population to be self-supporting whilst ensuring the supply of cheap Aboriginal labour to the cattle industry, segregating Aboriginal people from the bulk of the white population at minimal cost (May, 1994). Queensland state government representatives, mission officials, and the labour movement were involved to such an extent that they believed themselves to be authorities on Aboriginal people, and were influential in formulating Aboriginal policies not only in this state, but also in other states (May, 1994, p.8). Until the 1960s, the Act and those who administered it controlled the everyday life of Aboriginal people and led to the removal of thousands of Aboriginal children, often some distance away from their families to government funded missions (Kidd, 1997).

On missions, children who lived in dormitories were segregated from their parents, many of whom resided there. The government representatives authorised under the Act, strictly controlled and closely monitored the children, and determined when and how much contact was permitted between the children and their parents. Recorded in the history of Cherbourg, an Aboriginal mission in Queensland, were administrative processes implemented by government representatives who refused to allow residents to speak their language or practice cultural customs, and who imposed European methods of learning and knowledge which attempted to inculcate capitalist values of time and work on those residing there (Blake, 2001). Penalties for small infringements of these rules could result in individuals, with no grounds for appeal, being transferred to distant parts of
the state for long periods. Evidence in government records reveal that children on missions throughout Queensland were underfed, underclothed, and living in appalling unclean, overcrowded, infested, and unhealthy conditions (Kidd, 2000). Additional evidence from residents, and children who had been removed from their families and lived in dormitories, revealed many were also victims of physical and sexual abuse by staff who administered punitive punishment, and humiliated them for the least infringements (HREOC, 1997; Kidd, 2000).

Missions were located in isolated areas away from settlements. Growing concerns raised by key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies and communities were ignored by the general public. It was not until 1995 that the National Inquiry into the Stolen Generation drew attention to the experiences of Aboriginal people and their history of being forcibly removed as children and segregated from general society and from their own families who lived there. The Inquiry concluded that not only Protectors and Boards had failed in their guardianship duties and in their statutory responsibilities, but in many cases agents and delegates of the state such as missions, church institutions, foster carers and employers had failed to provide contemporary standards of care to Indigenous children. The submissions to the Inquiry provided evidence that departments and their representatives had failed to protect children from harm, and had excluded Indigenous parents in decisions about their children (HREOC, 1997). The Inquiry found that up until the mid-1970s Child welfare services to Aboriginal children had reflected a relationship of domination and control rather than care (Van Krieken, 1992). The resultant impact on the Aboriginal population is a deep seated distrust towards these systems, and their response to them has been one of suspicion and resistance (Goodall, 1999; Litwin, 1997).

By the middle of the twentieth century Australian welfare policies enforced on Aboriginal people and their culture had negatively impacted their ability to pass on their Aboriginal cultural ways (their Aboriginality). First, Aboriginal people were excluded from
being able to reside on their traditional lands which was of fundamental importance to Aboriginal culture. Second, ensuing practices implemented legislation which prohibited Aboriginal societies and communities of their traditional ways of life, and their cultural practices. Third, these practices were enforced through continued and increased use of police and the justice system to control Aboriginal people and to respond to any forms of perceived resistance in the form of severe repercussions including periods of detention and transfers to distant destinations throughout the state. The human rights of Aboriginal people were ignored (Baldry & Green, 2002). Child welfare policies were seen as a central strategy in the attempted eradication of traditional culture and the re-socialisation of Aboriginal children (O'Connor, 1993). In 2004, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) was one profession that acknowledged and apologised for the historic actions of non-Indigenous social workers as government agents and instruments of government policy, within justice, welfare and health systems who had contributed to the destabilisation and disempowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities (AASW, 2004). During the second half of the century, government policies had moved towards assimilationist practice.

Assimilation 1950s to 1960s

In 1937, bureaucratic representatives and politicians from Australian states (excluding the Northern Territory and Tasmania) and Commonwealth Authorities met together at the Commonwealth/State Native Welfare Conference to adopt a uniform national policy to determine the nation’s response to what was now being publicly referred to as the ‘Aboriginal problem’. Prior to this, it was the States that managed and responded to Aboriginal populations within their borders. The proposal by Queensland officials for ongoing separate and hierarchical native settlements was rejected by others at the conference who agreed theoretically upon an eventual ‘absorption’ of ‘all part-
Aborigines into the general white community’ (Evans, 1980, p. 346). Segregating Aboriginal people on missions maintained a financial responsibility on the State. From this conference, States began adopting policies designed to assimilate or absorb Indigenous people of mixed descent into broader society, without the responsibility of providing financial assistance. In Queensland established bureaucratic procedures continued to focus their efforts on keeping Aboriginal children and families on missions and settlements separate from the general population. Here there was only nominal shift towards assimilation (Evans, 1980). The number of Aboriginal people living on Queensland missions increased. Fixed mental attitudes and resistance to change by those in authority in this state continued to view Aboriginal people as inferior, and as cheap labour sources which financially contributed to, and supported mission administrations. During this time, the public ignored the perspectives of Aboriginal people, and ‘not a single statement from an Aborigine was ever reiterated in Parliament or reproduced in printed reports’ whilst the Labor government was almost continuously in power between 1915 and 1957 (Evans, 1980, p.350).

In 1939 the *Aboriginal Preservation and Protection Act* was introduced. It provided that all Aboriginal children be under the legal guardianship of the Director of Native Affairs. At the same time, parallel legislation, the *Torres Strait Islanders Act 1939*, was enacted, which meant that under these Acts, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were denied guardianship of their own children for no other reason than their race (O’Connor, 1993). Government policies had up until the 1960s restricted the movement of Torres Strait Islander people on to the mainland to ensure their employment in the marine industry. However, in the 1960s, the economic value of the Torres Strait Islander worker vanished with the collapse of the marine industry and greater numbers of Torres Strait Islander children were removed from their families and institutionalised (HREOC, 1997).
Implicit in the assimilation policy was a resistance to accepting the value of Aboriginality, and the view that there was nothing of value in Indigenous cultures (HREOC, 1997). By the 1960s, most Indigenous Australian economic, social and cultural systems had been disrupted by the policies and practices of the previous 150 years (Baldry & Green, 2002). In Queensland, government policies continued to advocate removals of Aboriginal children from their families, and segregation on missions which trained children for the rural workforce. The next section considers child protection practice during the second half of the twentieth century.

Changes in child protection practices

The previous sections presented government and charitable group responses towards Aboriginal children and families during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. These responses attempted to regulate and socially control Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through a series of interrelated economic, social and cultural policies. These policies operated from a perspective that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children needed to be protected from their neglectful states in order to integrate them into the social order as productive citizens. However, Kidd (1997) noted an increased criticism towards the restrictive management of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population during the second half of the twentieth century through Aboriginal people themselves fighting for land rights and self-determination and through the increased opprobrium of international groups such as the United Nations. The Australian government and its representatives were compelled towards change both internally and externally. There was a growing awareness that Aboriginal people themselves should be involved in issues that concerned them and in which governments were involved (Demack, Guthrie, Tuk, Moore, & Williams, 1974). By the middle of the twentieth century,
growing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were living outside of missions and settlements, in urban and rural communities. No housing was provided for them.

By the 1960s there was growing pressure on Australia to review its policies and treatment of Aboriginal children, young people and families in Queensland and other states of Australia. Until then, child protection policies had been specifically focused on non-Indigenous society, since Aboriginal people were acted upon in terms of the Act rather than in terms of the general policies of the State.

However, child protection concerns were about to burgeon. The modern discovery of child abuse in the United States raised media attention to the prominence of child abuse and neglect (Kempe et al, 1962). These studies led to broader definitions about what constituted child abuse and these views gathered momentum worldwide (Tomison, 2001). Media interest sparked public concern about the welfare of children, and propelled a demand for expertise in the assessment and treatment of child abuse cases and neglect, and distinct, professionally, staffed child protection services located within social service agencies or government departments began to emerge (Goddard & Saunders, 2001; Tomison, 2001). Mounting pressure on child welfare systems to be seen to protect children, alongside greater public awareness, led to increasing concerns being brought to the attention of these workers. Child protection systems, and professionals employed in them, assumed greater responsibility to investigate child protection allegations received about families, and to determine responses. Assessment of actual or potential high risk of harm to children became the focus of child protection practice, and new strategies that emerged were concerned with the management of this risk (Parton, 1996). In a risk oriented approach, individuals were held responsible for their own fate and that of their children through investigations about the future consequences of their actions. The notion of risk however, was contingent upon differing and sometimes
conflicting interpretations. In the child protection field, the notion of risk demanded that workers take greater responsibility to ensure children were being protected in families. These approaches paid less attention to the context and contributing factors which impacted on the ability of families to raise their children in an environment in which they could be protected. In Queensland, these changes in child protection practices influenced changes to legislation, and professionalised the workforce.

**The development of the Queensland child protection system**

For fifty years, the State Children’s Department had operated under the *State Children Act 1911* in Queensland, which provided care of children under the age of 13 years. This was replaced in 1965 by the *Children’s Services Act 1965* designed to promote and protect the wellbeing of children and youth through a comprehensive and coordinated program of child and family welfare. This Act extended its provision of services to children up to 18 years of age and the Department of Children’s Services, established pursuant to the new Act, assumed responsibility for administering it. The introduction of this new legislation focused on the actions or inactions of parents, and the need to protect children from unacceptable living conditions (Department Communities Child Safety and Disabilities, 2012a; Stanley et al., 2003; Tomison, 2001). This approach sought to ensure children were protected, by ‘rescuing’ them from their circumstances, with the most likely response by workers from this new department to remove children, whose circumstances were deemed serious enough, from their parent’s care until they turned 18 years of age (Department Communities Child Safety and Disabilities, 2012a). Professional workers were faced with increasing numbers of children coming to the attention of child protection services and many of these children were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children.
Prior to the enactment of the *Children’s Services Act 1965* the Dewar Committee had, in 1963, reviewed existing child welfare legislation. They assumed that the needs of Aboriginal and Islander children did not differ from those of other children except that they were the responsibility of the Department of Aboriginal land Islander Affairs. The committee did not consider, in its terms of reference, how this new Act would specifically relate to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people (O’Connor, 1993). Prior to 1965, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children had been legally under the guardianship of the Director of Native Affairs. In 1965, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Act* was introduced which stipulated that the Director was no longer the legal guardian of a growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and parents who were now not living on missions. Parents of these children regained guardianship of their children. Initially, even though now under the new Act, the practice continued for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were brought to the attention of workers from the Department of Children’s Services to be placed within Departmental facilities or transferred to dormitories within Aboriginal missions. However, there was resistance from Aboriginal communities and some professional staff to the placement of these children within the dormitory system on missions.

Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continued to be removed from their parent’s care when workers believed they needed to be ‘rescued’ from unacceptable circumstances, increased pressure was placed on the Department’s own institutions to accommodate them. The *Children’s Services Act 1965* provided for transfers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under the guardianship of the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs to the Department of Children’s Services. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who breached the criminal law were processed and placed out of their community, and many young people were committed to correctional institutions. The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
being admitted into the care of the Department of Children’s Services increased. These practices challenged the authority and resources available to the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs who, up until this time had been able to make decisions over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and children including how to manage their property and control many aspects their lives. The relationships between the two departments exhibited tension, in particular relating to who had the authority to make decisions and control outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (O’Connor, 1993).

By the early 1970s, Aboriginal children were over-represented in the care of the Department of Children’s Services, and more significantly there was an over-representation in institutionalised care (O’Connor, 1993). This placed great demands on the workloads of child protection workers who were predominantly non-Indigenous. The Commission of Inquiry into the Nature and Extent of the Problems confronting Youth in Queensland was conducted in 1974. The report acknowledged a growing awareness of the impact of the cultural differences between Aboriginal people and the general community (Demack et al., 1974). The Inquiry also recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth were experiencing specific disadvantage within the juvenile justice and child welfare systems and placement in white institutions. Although the Inquiry did not link the negative experiences that the families of these children might have had living on missions, or the experiences they may have experienced living within the general community which was predominately non-Indigenous, the Inquiry did recommend that government action which involved Aboriginal young people should adopt a policy of using Indigenous employees in determining the course of action to take to respond and how it was implemented (Demack et al., 1974). Attempts to incorporate and reassess the cultural appropriateness of interventions by the Department of Children’s Services with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children was resisted by a
Queensland State Cabinet decision (Number 26409) in May, 1977 which ensured that the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs retained responsibility for co-ordinating and controlling the affairs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (including children). This direction restricted the Department of Children’s Services’ ability to develop policy and practice, as well as consultative links with community and community agencies in relation to decisions being made about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The two State departments, the Department of Children's Services and the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs although working with the same client base continued to operate separately.

Although Australia signed the *International Convention on Civil and Political Rights* in 1966, Queensland’s legislation was viewed by the federal government as inequitable (Kidd, 1997). Offers of negotiated reforms from the federal government were brushed aside whilst Queensland state authorities continued to maintain that it was vital for them to maintain power over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living on missions or reserves, now defined as ‘assisted persons’, continued to receive inferior health and housing services, and lower incomes compared to the general population. Aboriginal people living on missions continued to experience high rates of poor health, high rates of morbidity including infant mortality, and over-crowded housing (Kidd, 1997). Despite the continuing pressures towards self-determination, and anti-discrimination, the lives, living conditions, and material resources of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in missions continued to be under the control of government authorities operating as it had for more than half a century.

In the 1970s, further changes occurred when Aboriginal people initiated self-managed services to address the health and legal needs of people within their communities. Free legal aid was introduced for low income earners in Australia and the new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Legal Service (ATSILS) was set up. For the
first time, legal representation was a feasible option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people especially those in remote areas and isolated communities. This irrevocably changed relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the police, as they were now able to challenge injustices in their treatment by those in power. The pattern of arrests and penalties of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was being questioned for the first time and bail applications replaced many detentions (Kidd, 1997). Industrial action was initiated which challenged practices of withholding wages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the workforce (Kidd, 1997).

There were also changes implemented within child protection systems to acknowledge cultural difference. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities had not been formally engaged in child protection systems in Australia up until the 1980s (Briskman, 2007). However, increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continued to come to the attention of welfare systems. Services provided to them were not seen as effective and were not attaining positive outcomes (Litwin, 1997).

During the 1980s, the Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs published policy guidelines about adoption and fostering of Aboriginal children which placed a high priority on maintaining Aboriginal children in their family and community environment. In 1981 Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies (AICCA) were established throughout Australia to support families; to ensure contact continued between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families; and to recruit Indigenous carers. It was anticipated that these agencies would be able, within their social and cultural context, to provide information to, and advocate on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Their introduction was resisted on the basis that these services were duplicating the state’s departmental services, which already provided care for children and this should include Indigenous children (O’Connor, 1993).
In 1984, the Queensland government drafted a policy and procedures statement about placement of Aboriginal children for consultation with community groups and established the principle of placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within their own community so they could maintain their cultural identity. To introduce the new policy, child welfare departments proposed compulsory training for professionals and those who cared for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Although the recommendations to endorse the Aboriginal Placement Principle occurred in 1984, it was not formalised until 1987. When introduced, concerns were raised that there had been a lack of planning and promotion offered to staff (Ah Kee & Tilbury, 1999). At the same time the department began to record the cultural origin of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the care of the department (Ah Kee & Tilbury, 1999). Workers within Aboriginal and Islander Child Care services raised concerns about the lack of consultation and involvement in matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children despite these policies being introduced. Ah Kee and Tilbury (1999) proposed that the commitment towards self-determination that supported AICCCAs to care and look after their children required a collaborative partnership. Consultation had been impeded by tensions and structural barriers with the statutory agency such as lack of information sharing, status and perceived power in statutory agencies, alongside organisational priorities. Those working within Aboriginal and Islander Child Care services argued the Aboriginal Placement Principle needed constant reinforcement to stop minimisation of the importance of children living apart from their families and communities to maintain cultural links.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and child care workers were recruited into the statutory agency (Qld) to improve the quality of practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (Ah Kee & Tilbury, 1999). Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the non-government sector continued to work within Aboriginal
Child Care Agencies to provide support to families, and provide advice in relation to matters involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, they saw their efforts hampered through limited funding; the wide geographic area being serviced, competing demands on their service from multiple organisations and a lack of holistic service delivery to families and communities (Briskman, 2003). Further existing child welfare systems failed to adequately define the parameters of the authority of Aboriginal Child Care Agencies especially in relation to the child protection bureaucracy (Litwin, 1997).

In 1996, the Federal Labor government for the first time, initiated a National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their Families to review the laws, practices, and policies which had resulted in the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The inquiry examined the adequacy of current laws, practices and policies and issues related to the high level of contemporary separations. It publicised the impact of past policies on the experiences and treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It concluded that legislation and policies of forced and unjustified separations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children had resulted in ongoing trauma for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that had intergenerational impacts on individuals, families and communities. It also drew attention to contemporary removals, which it proposed amounted to a new practice of forced separation where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who came to the attention of current child protection services were being removed from families. Critiques argued that this mirrored earlier colonial practices (Cuneen & Libesman, 2000; HREOC, 1997). None of the submissions to this Inquiry supported views that interventions from welfare departments had been effective in dealing with Indigenous child protection needs (HREOC, 1997).

The Inquiry recommended understanding contemporary separations in the broader context of social, cultural and economic issues as reasons which made Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander families more susceptible to child protection intervention (Cuneen & Libesman, 2000). It concluded that the underlying reasons for over-representation of children in child welfare agencies in Australia were ongoing separations and intergenerational effects of past removals, poor socio-economic conditions in communities and systemic racism which sustained a continuing distrust by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples towards welfare departments, and workers employed in them, as threatening the removal of children. In 1999 a new Child Protection Act was enacted in Queensland state parliament.

**The Child Protection Act Queensland**

The *Child Protection Act 1999* was introduced in response to the challenges of contemporary issues that faced children and families. Implemented in this Act were additional provisions for placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care. The Act incorporated the Child Placement Principle to ensure that family members and community representatives were consulted and involved in all decisions relating to the placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children outside of their immediate family (Section 83). Additional principles provided that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from family through child protection processes, develop and maintain cultural connections with family, traditions and language (Section 5C). Further the Act states that those exercising powers to make decisions and develop case plans need to provide information and help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies and people impacted by decisions, to understand and participate in the decision-making process, and to be aware of their rights (Section 5D, 51 D). The statutory organisation was also required to provide and coordinate responses to allegations of harm, and to consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies, now called Recognised Entities, about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Section 7 (o)). This
legislation provides the framework for child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In practice, however, it is child protection workers who apply these principles. This raises questions about the knowledge bases, understanding, values and skills of these child protection workers.

Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) conducted a collaborative study involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers with a range of experience in working with children and families. This qualitative study, found that workers employed in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific positions brought with them different cultural, personal and professional identities than non-Indigenous workers. These Indigenous workers felt unsupported by their mostly non-Indigenous child protection agency staff, to use their preferred Indigenous approaches in their practice. The Indigenous workers of the Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) study thought that child protection staff lacked a clear understanding of how ‘best practice’ and ‘Indigenous practice’ could co-exist. This was consistent with the findings of the Harms et al (2011) who conducted focus groups with Aboriginal community members to ascertain their views about the knowledge that social workers need to possess for effective work with Aboriginal clients. Aboriginal community members said knowledge of Aboriginal history and the intergenerational impact of harm was a critical area of knowledge that workers needed, as well as cultural knowledge about family and community structure and the different functions and authority roles of people within communities. Community members proposed Aboriginal people wanted child protection intervention responses to be driven from within community rather than being driven by agencies and persons outside of the community (Harms et al., 2011).

Research such as those cited have fuelled a growing criticism that existing welfare service models are not culturally appropriate if they fail to recognise the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worldviews and social priorities (Rowse, 1992). Various government Inquiries in different states of Australia have demonstrated that these
issues continue to be raised and continue to present challenges to child protection services.

**Australian Inquiries**

A number of Inquiries throughout Australia have been commissioned in response to concerns raised about the ability of state government authorities to protect children from harm. Many of these Inquiries have focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have come to the attention of state child protection systems. In Western Australia in 2002, the Gordon Inquiry investigated complaints into family violence and child abuse in Aboriginal communities (Gordon et al., 2002). Community consultations confirmed that family violence and child abuse in Aboriginal communities are not culturally acceptable. The Inquiry identified the lack of ‘fit’ between western bureaucratic structures and Aboriginal community structures, which resulted in poor outcomes for Aboriginal children. In 2004 in New South Wales, the Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce examined the incidence of sexual assault in Aboriginal communities. It concluded that Aboriginal communities perceive government and non-government responses to this problem as ineffective, culturally inappropriate and inconsistent. This reinforces mistrust which has existed historically (New South Wales Aboriginal Child Assault Taskforce, 2006). In the Northern Territory in 2007, a further Inquiry commenced in response to concerns that Aboriginal children were being sexually harmed in that state and were not being protected by government child welfare services responsible to protect them. This Inquiry concluded that a lack of coordination and communication between government departments and non-government agencies had caused a breakdown in interventions (including crisis interventions) and services provided to Indigenous children living in that state. In its conclusion, it recommended the need for consultation with Aboriginal people, and the development of a family support infrastructure (Wild & Anderson, 2007).
Child protection systems in Queensland have reflected similar outcomes following Inquiries in that state. The Forde Inquiry in 1999, was commissioned to investigate whether there had been abuse, maltreatment or neglect of children in Queensland institutions (Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions, 1999). The Inquiry found many children residing in government, and non-government institutions and detention centres had experienced harm as a result of unsafe, improper and unlawful treatment by those responsible for their care (Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions, 1999). In 2004, concerns raised about harm to Indigenous children in foster care triggered an Inquiry into services provided to children under care and protection orders residing with carers. The Crime and Misconduct Commission investigated whether the child protection system at that time was meeting its obligations to protect and meet the needs of these children. The findings of this report were discussed in chapter one. Amongst the recommendations was the need to continue to support and to resource independent community-based Indigenous organisations such as Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies (AICCA) which were recognised as services able to provide and support culturally appropriate child protection services to the Indigenous community (Crime & Misconduct Commission (CMC), 2004). In 2013, a further Inquiry found the current child protection system in Queensland ‘is failing vulnerable children and their families’ and that the ‘perception of a system under stress is justified’ (QCPCI, 2013, p.xvii). The inquiry found ‘over the last decade, child protection intakes have tripled, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care has tripled, the number of children in out-of-home care has more than doubled, and children in care are staying there for longer periods’ (p.xvii). The Inquiry’s report made reference to the previous two Inquiries, stating that despite recommendations to fund and develop primary and secondary child services to deter entry of children into the system, this had not occurred.
The findings from each of these Inquiries illustrated poor outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who came to the attention of child welfare systems and an absence of consultation with representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A pattern has continued which views child protection issues within a framework that does not incorporate different cultural perspectives in service responses, despite an over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection systems in all states of Australia, and despite the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies. It brings to the surface, a largely unacknowledged power imbalance between these agencies and the statutory bureaucracies which reflects a lack of co-ordination, communication and consultation in responses and approaches to issues that arise for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families and communities.

Contemporary Child Protection Practice

There has been a growing recognition internationally that child welfare programs and approaches focused solely on the individual, are destined to fail if they do not take into account community contexts (Repucci, Woolard, & Fried, 1999). The individualisation of family problems provides no framework for understanding the contexts which perpetuate and maintain family stress and difficulty. If these were taken into account then child protection workers would recognise that child abuse and neglect are caused by a multitude of factors some of which are internal to persons and some of which are caused by external factors (Belsky, 1980; Cuneen & Libesman, 2000).

Embracing diversity has also become a central focus of international child protection literature. This focus recognises the need for specific and/or multiple interventions to be utilised for different groups (Repucci et al., 1999).
Ecological approaches which aim at prevention and improving the contexts in which the family is positioned place more emphasis on recognising and mitigating the impact of wider community and socio-economic and political causal factors as well as cultural factors (Stanley et al., 2003).

In Australia, child protection practitioners operate within state legislation and policy which differs between states. In 2009, the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020* (the National Framework) was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to establish a national approach to ensure the safety and wellbeing of Australia’s children. This framework is to be implemented over a twelve 12 year period (COAG, 2009). The National Framework aims to facilitate collaboration between state, territory and commonwealth governments and requires integrated governance arrangements that cut across government boundaries and include the non-government sector in planning and implementing actions. The framework prioritises universal supports, more intensive secondary prevention, with tertiary child protection services considered a last resort. One of the six supporting outcomes of this framework relates to Indigenous children, acknowledges over-representation and aims to ensure they are supported and safe in their families and communities.

In Queensland the statutory agency, Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services, (herein referred to as ‘The Department’) has legislative responsibility for tertiary intervention (Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services, 2012a). At the tertiary end of the child protection system, the ethical and practical (given the increasing costs associated with removing a child into out of home care) dilemma remains about when to remove a child at risk of harm and when and how to maintain and preserve families. This dilemma is exacerbated when interfacing with different, and specific, cultural perspectives (Stanley et al., 2003).
Alongside this, the definition of what constitutes child abuse varies and there has been and continues to be a lack of consensus about the threshold of what constitutes risk in work with families who come to the attention of child protection systems. Pressures of surveillance and scrutiny through social and public media forums influence practice responses in child protection practice. The fact that professionals themselves bring to child protection their own cultural meanings and behaviour patterns influenced by their life experience, ethnicity, social class, gender and professional training (or not) present further challenges (Gillingham, 2006; Schon, 1992; Welbourne, 2002).

All of these perspectives have influenced contemporary practice responses. Tomison (2001) reviewed the changes to the child protection system over the past century and proposed that much of contemporary child protection practice has become ‘forensically driven’ by bureaucracies reliant on experts, and standardised practices which alienate non-government agencies and communities. In 2004, the Department purchased a series of assessment tools from the US Children’s Research Center, including an actuarial risk assessment tool (Tilbury, 2005). This aimed to change the nature of assessments and the types of information gathered, and judgements made about harm and risk. This screening criteria was implemented in the Department in 2006. More recently however, concerns about the over-reliance of workers on using these tools has raised doubts about whether they have been used as a replacement for expertise and have not improved decision-making (Gillingham, 2011). The criteria on which the tools are based continues to focus the responsibility for protection of a child/ren on their parents or carers. This criteria does not account for relationships of shared communal responsibilities that exist within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and networks; rather this is ignored when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. Litwin (1997) concedes that the bulk of child
protection services continue to be undertaken directly, or as directed, by statutory child protection agencies which remain the key decision-makers (Litwin, 1997).

Tilbury (2009) found that ‘government intrusion’ into Indigenous families far exceeds that which occurs in non-Indigenous families’ (p.62). She concluded that government interventions have not been effective in protecting children or strengthening family functioning. The Crime and Misconduct Commission (2004), however, suggested that authorities are reluctant to remove Aboriginal children from inadequate parental care on the basis that family violence is part of Aboriginal culture. The data provided by Tilbury (2009) did not support this has occurred, but rather that intervention by statutory agencies continues to be intrusive. She argued that practitioners operate within narrow parameters of a ‘child saving approach’ rather than a nuanced, contextualised approach which would focus more on child welfare systems addressing child abuse and neglect in Indigenous communities, characterised by poverty, high unemployment, and limited infrastructure. Approaches, such as the use of Indigenous community workers working alongside frontline staff, and reviews of service delivery in conjunction with Indigenous agencies, reflect attempts to improve outcomes (Ah Kee & Tilbury, 1999). However, policies based on the premise that the government should decide what is best for Indigenous people continues to present major barriers to a nuanced, contextualised approach (Sweeney, 1995).

Research (see for example, Cuneen & Libesman, 2000; Libesman, 2004; Tilbury, 2009; Stanley, Tomison & Pocock, 2003; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004) establishes the link between historic and contemporary levels of socio-political and economic disadvantage and related problems to over-representation of specific groups of people (including specific racial and ethnic groups) in child protection systems. Despite this, there are few programs operating to address child abuse and neglect in these terms in Indigenous communities (Stanley et al., 2003). For example, in Australia the legacy of
trauma as a result of the impact of past removal policies continue to be ignored in programmatic terms (HREOC, 1997; Stanley et al., 2003).

Feeney (2009) suggested a model of healing practice for Indigenous people who had suffered trauma as a result of history and the impact colonialism. This model stressed the importance of maintaining the focus and control of these programs with Indigenous people who recognise the harm done historically by government led intervention policies. The model focused on how to heal people ‘who have been stripped of their identity, language, connection to country, culture, laws and pride’ (p.4). His model used learnings from Canada and New Zealand. The components of this model included developing therapeutic practices and programs supporting both individual healing and community cultural renewal grounded in Indigenous traditions values and cultures whilst integrating contemporary evidence-based healing approaches. In this way, he demonstrates that therapy needs to operate from the basis of historic understanding of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, and the legacy that it has left, especially for Indigenous peoples. In Canada, Aboriginal stakeholders have argued the right to self-government, and the right to control the delivery of child and family services and programs (Hudson & McKenzie, 2003). Child Welfare initiatives in Manitoba, Canada, reflect significant policy towards self-management of child and family services programs including major jurisdictional shifts to create Aboriginal authorities to oversee policy and service development for Aboriginal children and their families in that country (Hudson & McKenzie, 2003). By contrast, there is little to no evidence of a paradigm shift in child protection in Australia for Indigenous people to be given the primary responsibility for protecting their children (Stanley et al., 2003).

Recommendations made by the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families in December, 1996 to transfer legal jurisdiction over Indigenous children’s welfare to Indigenous communities, regions or
representative organisations have been largely ignored (HREOC, 1997; Tilbury, 2009). The call for practice approaches that focus on community, and their interface with child protection bureaucracies, rather than individually focused interventions, continue (Libesman, 2004).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be over-represented in the child protection system in Queensland. This increases the likelihood that workers employed in statutory and community child protection agencies will work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (AIHW, 2012). This is particularly the case in rural areas in Queensland where there are large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents living in Aboriginal communities. In Queensland the rurality of Aboriginal peoples is strongly linked to past locations of missions and settlements.

Child Protection Practice in Rural Areas

Living and working rurally in a professional capacity presents unique challenges. Low population density and geographic isolation lead to specific demands on workers from within the agencies they are employed. Some of these demands are that workers will: carry large and complex workloads; be flexible in their role when resources are limited, which can be seen as code for adapting readily and quickly to shifts in priorities of administrators; and participating in community activities (Lonne & Cheers, 2000). As well, rural communities are comprised of complex, and interrelated systems of formal and informal social and political units. Relationships between community members are interdependent and complicated, being influenced by historic, familial and social experiences (Helbok, 2003). Children and their families are an integral part of these networks, and relationships. Child protection workers, especially those placed in communities need to navigate these complex webs of relationship. The complexity of their location within the social and political fabric of community life leads to a variety of role
dilemmas which workers must resolve at the levels of both their professional and private lives. Rural workers are aware they are highly visible in the community (Lonne, 1990). Workers and their families are often actively involved in community activities, groups and use local resources and services. Maintaining confidentiality especially when workers are mixing socially with potential or past clients creates ethical dilemmas that are required to be managed (Helbok, 2003).

Child protection work is often viewed in the community as being about social control rather than social care (Cheers, Darracott & Lonne, 2007). As such, this work is stigmatised. This exacerbates issues of role conflict and role ambiguity where workers are required to be both investigators of potential and actual child abuse, and simultaneously the ‘helper’ to children and families (Markiewicz, 1996). Managing these aspects makes the role of the professional worker in the field of child protection acutely stressful and demanding, and child protection services in rural areas as in other areas have long standing issues related to recruitment and retention (Hodgkin, 2002; Markiewicz, 1996). Markiewicz (1996) raised the need for recognition of the complexity of the child protection work, and need for availability of supervision and peer support to assist workers process practice based dilemmas.

In a Victorian study, Hodgkin (2002) asked managers and supervisors in child protection agencies to discuss their views relating to retention and recruitment. Hodgkin (2002) found there were different perspectives about the causes of, and responses to, levels of worker recruitment and low retention. Whilst some participants of the study suggested that the work environment was a crucial factor for staff retention, others highlighted the effects of bureaucratic structures in child protection organisations which they viewed as problematic, highly structured and prescriptive. These participants proposed that newer workers experienced high levels of frustration because the ability for workers to be autonomous and creative in their practice was limited. All of these
participants expressed concern about the punitive climate within their organisations. They suggested a culture had evolved to position workplace problems (such as high case-loads) as the problem of individual workers who were pathologised as stressed and not coping. This culture was enforced through the use of unspoken sanctions one of which was to call into question the suitability of the worker for child protection practice. In response to problems of retention, managers and supervisors who participated in the Hodgkin (2002) study presented consistent views about the critical importance of attracting and recruiting staff who live in the area, and who are committed to rural practice. The authors found successful recruitment had occurred in areas where courses were offered locally in areas, which have limited or no tertiary opportunities organisations have struggled to attract and retain staff.

A growth in rural human services within the last decade has resulted in employees being recruited not only from local sites, but from urban and other locations (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2001). The experiences of these workers, who relocate to rural employment, include being regarded as outsiders, and therefore suspect in communities (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2001). Developing strategies to cope and adjust to rural community life is viewed as necessary for long term survival in employment in rural locations (Hodgkin, 2002; Krieg Mayer, 2001).

The lack of services and supports in rural areas provides limited professional development opportunities. Distance from family and friends create other demands (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2001). In her study of rural practitioners, Krieg Mayer (2001) identified professional and personal isolation as two of the most significant factors unique to rural practice. She outlined a number of qualities and skills needed by rural practitioners. These qualities and skills relate to the ability of the practitioner to be flexible, adaptable, persistent, and willing to take on tasks outside their actual job description. Lonne and Cheers (2004) in their research on rural social workers confirmed that rural
practice was generic, which requires workers to fulfil a variety of roles in the community
due to the lack of resources, and ongoing demands. O'Sullivan, Ross, and Young (1997)
indicated that rural workers need to have knowledge, skills and characteristics such as
the ability to work with minimal supervision, the ability to cope with a lack of anonymity,
and a desire to live in the communities in which they work.

Geographic location imposes additional demands on child protection workers who
relocate to rural areas where there are high populations of Indigenous children and
families. Workers are required to adjust to these demands as well as provide an effective
professional response to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
These additional demands cannot be ignored or minimised in exploring child protection
practice in rural areas.

**Over-representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be over-represented at
all levels of the child protection system in all states of Australia. In 2011, the number of
Indigenous children who were recorded as having a substantiated outcome following an
investigation was 1731 compared to 4030 non-Indigenous children. Given the small
number of Indigenous children residing in Queensland, per thousand children,
investigations of alleged harm for Indigenous children were more than 6 times more likely
to be substantiated than for non-Indigenous children. Figure 1 presents the number of
children per thousand substantiated following investigations of child protection concerns
received by the statutory agency. The figure shows that the gap between substantiated
investigations for Indigenous children and non-Indigenous children has widened.
In 2011, there were 44.8 children per thousand Indigenous children on Child Protection Orders compared to 5.1 per thousand non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2012). Queensland Indigenous children were greater than eight times more likely to be on an Order in Queensland than non-Indigenous children. During the past four years, the number of Indigenous children on Child Protection Orders has steadily increased whilst the number of non-Indigenous children on child protection orders has remained the same (Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, 2012b). Many of these Indigenous children have been placed in out-of-home care.

There were 3052 Indigenous children living away from home in Queensland in 2011. This number increased from 1934 Indigenous children who were living away from home in 2007 (Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, 2012b). The number of these children placed with kinship carers, and meeting
the Child Placement Principle, was 52.5%, a decrease from 2007 when the percentage of children living in out of home care who met the principles of the child placement principle was 58.5%. More than half of the Indigenous children, placed outside of their families, are also placed outside of their communities. The trend during the past five years is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Percentage of Indigenous children placed with kinship or Indigenous Carers according to the Child Placement Principle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: (Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, 2012b)

Summary

Policies, practices and legislation to do with family life and child protection in Australia have disregarded and ignored the value of Aboriginality, and traditional ways of life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Systems which administer these policies have been pressured both internally and externally to recognise the differences which exists within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, and to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in human service responses provided to them. Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to experience poor outcomes in health, education and employment, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be over-represented in all levels of child protection systems throughout Australia. Further, the gap between the number of non-Indigenous and Indigenous children entering these systems has increased (HREOC, 1997; Libesman, 2004; Litwin, 1997; Stanley et al., 2003).

In the second half of the twentieth century, sustained criticism of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child welfare policies both internally and externally, placed pressure on authorities and demanded that bureaucracies redefine their relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The distinct socio-cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were recognised and Indigenous organisations were established to advocate and collaborate in matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Litwin, 1997). However, there is a difference between autonomous decision-making of mainstream child protection agents in relation to decisions that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and conscious, deliberate cross-cultural consultation which facilitates participation of these groups with the aim of making services culturally appropriate (Alexander & Pollard, 1983). The latter requires a conscious shift in power from mainstream administration, to active consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons' views.

Inquiries into child protection systems consistently find a lack of fit between western bureaucratic structures and their operations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs, perceptions and preferred operations. Neither has there been a shift in power which actively enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be consulted, to collaborate and participate in decisions about their children. Working collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the child protection endeavour necessitates the need to encompass diverse opinions, knowledge, values, lifestyles and cultures to determine which path to take and culturally appropriate
ways to respond (Zubrzycki & Bennett, 2006). Where child protection interventions have not incorporated cultural difference, communication and consultation, practice responses have exhibited poor outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. It is recognised that this collaboration and consultation is not easy, since there is significant resistance within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to child protection interventions which are viewed as threatening.

Intervention that refuses to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interpretations and understandings risks engaging a process which creates a set of detached needs removed from their social and cultural contexts, where connectedness to culture and community continue to be the crucial to the development of the child’s identity and social wellbeing (Baldry & Green, 2002; Litwin, 1997; McMahon, Reck, & Walker, 2007). Current models of service delivery do not appear effective in addressing these issues.

Having outlined issues pertinent to child protection with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the next section focuses on the necessity of helping workers and bureaucracies develop a culture and skills of cultural competency. Cultural competency as a preferred practice framework arose from criticisms by Aboriginal peoples that cross-cultural practice in the human services was not responding to the needs of diverse cultural groups, and that these groups continued experiencing poor outcomes. Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations share a similar history to other countries with a history of colonisation; these include Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Cultural competency raises the importance of knowledge, skills and values in cross-cultural practice in the human services with people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Different models have been developed which identify the importance of inductive learning, critical reflection and enhancing skills work across cultures (Green, 1999; Lum, 2005; McPhatter, 1997; Sue, Arrendondo & McDavis, 1992; Tong & Cross,
1991). The next section considers the emergence of cultural competency, models of practice, and the challenges and issues that present in this approach to cross cultural practice.
Chapter Three: Cultural Competency – is it achievable?

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the historic and contemporary experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia following colonisation. It traced the emergence of current child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families in Queensland. The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system raises the likelihood that those who seek employment in this field will be required to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families during their career. Exploring approaches to working across cultures is therefore an essential subject of research endeavour. Working effectively within the context of Australian history with its legacy of diverse legislation that removed children on the basis of race, is complex. Cultural competency is an approach which has gained momentum and has been afforded significant importance in the caring professions as well as being the subject of considerable debate (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010; Harrison & Turner, 2010; Kohli, Huber, & Faul, 2010; Kumagai & Lypson, 2009; Kwong, 2009; Parrott, 2009; Pon, 2009). The purpose of this chapter is to consider the concept of cultural competency as a strategy for improving the effectiveness of work across cultures within the human services with a particular focus on child protection services. The chapter reviews the literature in relation to the development of cultural competency and how it is defined. It considers its emergence in different countries and the practice models which have ensued. Finally, this chapter presents literature that critiques the effectiveness of cultural competency as an approach to work with people from different cultural backgrounds, and explores studies evaluating its implementation in practice settings.
The concept of cultural competency recognises that societies (including Australia) are multi-racial, multicultural and multi-lingual. Cultural competency offers a direct contrast to monocultural policies and practices. The concept originated from the work of Sue et al. (1982) who challenged the belief held throughout mental health and counselling practice settings in the United States, that existing mono-cultural approaches and strategies to providing services were adequate and appropriate when applied to people from a variety of geographic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They argued that human service professionals were failing to meet the particular and specific mental health needs of racial and ethnic minorities. They proposed a perspective that provides a balanced, realistic and strengths based focus, rather than one which views minority groups as racially inferior or culturally deprived.

Sue et al. (1982) outlined that culturally skilled counsellors adopt cross-cultural counselling competencies which integrate an awareness of their own biases and assumptions with the worldview of their multicultural clients without negative judgement. Further they advocated that counsellors need to actively develop relevant, appropriate and sensitive practice strategies and skills. Sue et al (1982) and others began articulating and developing a range of counselling competencies for use by human service professionals in the United States (Sue et al., 1998; Sue & Sue, 2003). The underlying assumption of cultural competency in the human services is that assistance provided to people is more effective if it is culturally acceptable to, and supports the integrity and strengths of, the culture of the recipient client (Green, 1999; McPhatter, 1997).

This next section considers how cultural competency approaches emerged in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia all of whom share common historic colonial histories, which have left a severe, ongoing and detrimental legacy to the first nations’ people of those countries. Today in all of these countries children from
Indigenous cultures are over-represented in child welfare systems (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2012; Libesman, 2004; Tilbury, 2009).

The emergence and practice of cultural competency in countries founded through processes of colonialism

The United States

The concept of cultural competency was developed in the United States in the 1980s (Sue et al., 1982; Zander, 2007). Prior to its development, the concept of multiculturalism, which had provided the opportunity for the voice of the diverse racial and ethnic groups to be heard, emerged from the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Multiculturalism was a radical departure from the ‘melting pot’ assimilationist approach. This approach exerted pressure on people from diverse cultures by those in the dominant culture to relinquish their traditions and practices. The approach used often oppressive and arbitrary means to seek those from other cultures to conform to the ways of the dominant political group (Sanders, 1980). At the same time the demographics in the United States reflected increased immigration and a growing cultural diversity. The reality that the population had differing and diverse views on issues about how they looked after their children and engaged their primary relationships and how they supported and sustained each other in community, to how they gained and managed their socio-economic and political inclusion in society could no longer be ignored. The United States was a multicultural country. Multiculturalists proposed the need for tolerance and appreciation of different cultures. They opposed a singular view of culture, and placed value on the distinctive attributes and contributions of different cultures to the wider American society. The multicultural approach valued difference and advocated for providing access and opportunities to others from different racial and ethnic groups (Sanders, 1980).
Acknowledging diversity, however, did not necessarily bring about changes in the strategies and approaches of professionals to the health, education and welfare needs of these various racial and ethnic groupings. Sue et al. (1982) highlighted the experiences of many marginalised groups within multicultural America who continued to experience poorer health outcomes and socio-economic disadvantage compared to those who derived from colonial American stock. These authors drew attention to factors such as language barriers, lack of access to health and education services, and a mistrust of services that did not recognise how their own limitations were contributing to this ongoing disadvantage. They criticised health practitioners working with multiple cultural, racial and ethnic groups, for ignoring the specific (group) and unique needs of these populations. These and other researchers found that professionals viewed persons from cultures other than the mainstream in negative ways. These professionals concentrated on pathological aspects of clients from different cultural backgrounds which portrayed them as racially inferior with incompatible values to persons in wider American society, and more prone to theorisation of health issues being linked to genetic deficiencies (Sanders, 1980; Sue, Arrendondo and McDavis, 1992).

Whilst professions could not totally ignore this critique, it did not necessarily lead to changes in practices. Differences in the racial and cultural backgrounds of clients at times lead to professionals misreading the meanings of interpersonal interactions and behavioural cues (Sue et al, 1982). In the 1980s, attempts to understand the critique and the importance of recognising and accounting for people’s history, cultural preferences and worldview were urged (Sue et al., 1982, 1992). With this consciousness arose a view seeking tolerance, appreciation and understanding of the dynamics of cultural diversity in professional interactions, rather than positioning immigrant groups as ‘the problem’ (Sanders, 1980; Sue et al., 1982).
This occurred against a backdrop of rapid change within the world, within cultures and sub-cultures. Sanders (1980) found that when practitioners were inflexible and insensitive, and were resistant, unwilling, or experienced difficulty in being able to accommodate cultural differences and worldviews between themselves and their clients, problems arose. Wrenn (1962) used the term ‘culturally encapsulated’ to describe counsellors who, in attempting to protect themselves from this ‘disturbing reality of change’ that was occurring, surrounded themselves with a ‘cocoon of pretended reality – a reality which is based upon the past and the known’ (p. 445). In this cocoon ‘of their own making’, culturally encapsulated workers ‘see a small world as real’ and ‘representative of the whole world’, whilst in reality, it is a limited one and not necessarily the reality for clients (Wrenn, 1985, p. 325). Culturally encapsulated practitioners define reality according to a mono-cultural set of assumptions and stereotypes, and believe that it is possible to deal with clients from other cultures without any modification of their assessments and interventions (Wrenn, 1985). Therefore, they are less open to accept the reality of others, and rationalise and justify their standpoint. Wrenn (1985) contended that these practitioners, often from dominant cultures, encounter greater resistance from their clients who sense their inflexibility and insensitivity to differences, than do more culturally aware and unprejudiced practitioners. Discussions about difference in cultures were, at the time (1980s), seen to be synonymous to differences in skin colour (Gould, 1995). The behaviour of many professionals reflected a belief that changes in practices were unnecessary. There was an implicit endorsement of the value of ‘Anglo conformity’ (Gordon, 1964). Further, there was at least a lack of overt opposition towards many people from other cultures as long as they adopted this standard of assimilation.

Schools and universities were some of the first institutions to make changes to incorporate multiculturalism within curriculums. Seelye and Wasilewski (1981) explored how multiculturalism and the entry of multicultural students, who were now attending
schools and universities in this country, was implemented in practice in educational settings with particular focus on desegregation and inclusivity of minority racial and ethnic groups. They found resistance in the education system, by both staff and students from dominant cultures, towards students from minority groups. These students continued to be inferiorised. Increased access of racial and ethnic minority students into education systems did not mean that their unique experiences and preferred ways of learning were recognised, let alone embraced. Seelye and Wasilewski (1981) found that professionals in the education system continued to operate from an ethnocentric stance, in which ‘Anglo’ was the norm, and ‘non-Anglo’ cultures were viewed as ‘other’. When multiculturalist approaches moved beyond basic descriptive levels, and implied a transformation of professional and societal roles and socio-political and economic resources, the lines become sharply drawn on what would be tolerated in terms of prospective strategies for responding to diversity (Gould, 1995). Underlying biases continued, and ‘multiculturalism’ was found wanting in its ability to problematise and provide a social, political and economic materialism to its proposed ‘valuing’ of difference and diversity.

Nonetheless, as a result of ongoing immigration and population growth, there was mounting consensus that this was altering not only the demographic but also the social fabric of the United States. This emerging society was seen as more complex than one reflecting a dominant Anglo-Irish heritage (Anderson, Scrimshaw, Fullilove, Fielding, & Normant, 2003; Brach & Fraser, 2000; Sue et al., 1998; Weaver, 1999). Within health services, despite improvements in the overall health of United States citizens, there were serious inequities in the health care system. Limited resources and lack of access had negatively impacted on the health status of the most vulnerable – Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans and Asian/Pacific Islanders (Gordon-Bradshaw, 1987, p. 254).
In the United States in the 1990s, Sue et al. (1992) argued that counselling professions continued to maintain counselling practices, and research was seeped in the values of dominant middle class America. These values reinforced notions of white, dominant group superiority through embrace and reliance on, (a) the inferior or pathological model, based on the premise that minorities are lower on the evolutionary scale than their white counterparts and therefore inherently pathological or inferior, (b) the genetically deficient model which views minorities as deficient in desirable genes and that differences between dominant and minority cultures reflect a biological and genetic inferiority; and (c) the cultural deprivation model which blames the minority group themselves for the problems they experience. Sue et al. (1998) contended that counselling does not occur in isolation from larger events in society and is linked to historic and contemporary aspects of racism and oppression in dominant society. These authors contended that services in the 1980s in the United States were provided to minority groups by human service professionals who were not competent or trained to understand the impact of culture on service delivery and outcomes. They argued that this was unethical and, potentially if not probably, harmful. Their research suggested that there is likely to be a great deal of healthy suspicion held by minority group clients, as to the counsellor’s conscious and unconscious motives of particular forms of service delivery.

Although the literature in relation to cultural competency in the United States consistently portrays professionals working towards the attainment of cultural competency, namely, having cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and cross-cultural skills, the reality is that biases, attitudes and practices prevail in practice (Sue, Arrendondo & McDavis, 1992). Racial and ethnic groups continue to be less likely to access essential health services, less likely to receive care, and the quality of the care provided to them is more likely to be poor in quality (US Dept. HHS, 2001). As well as
cultural awareness there is the need for sensitivity; a respect for differences among people, and a respect for the inherent worth of diversity (Grossman, 1994; Zander, 2007). Dyche and Zayas (2001) drew attention to the need for professionals to demonstrate cultural knowledge, and attributes of empathy and receptivity in cross cultural practice as a basis for developing collaborative relationships.

Although the multicultural paradigm in the United States provided the opportunity for organisations to work towards change, perspectives based on race continued to exist in many systems and institutions. Resistance to change, and inability to value the strengths in diverse and multiple cultures, was evident (Cross & Katz, 1994; Gould, 1995; Seelye & Wasilewski, 1981; Sue et al., 1982). This created barriers not only for those within the formal and professional human services system, but those attempting to access it (Sue et al., 1982).

In order to address these concerns, the employment of Indigenous bicultural/bilingual paraprofessionals to progress a workforce able to respond to multicultural client populations has been implemented in the United States (Wu & Windle, 1980). Fong and Gibbs (1995) explored the experiences of bicultural workers who take up positions in the human services. They found, that once employed, these workers are rarely in positions to set their own job specifications or to formulate policies which guide service delivery. Existing workers in these bureaucratic systems with their established service rules and procedures anticipate that bicultural workers will simply apply established procedures to diverse populations through bridging language and cultural gaps. This creates ethical dilemmas for bicultural workers who experience dilemmas about their client base. They are faced with making the decision about who are their clients: the people they serve, the managers, the organisation, or people needing a direct service response? Fong and Gibbs (1995) found that prevailing dominant cultural perspectives within organisations are a barrier towards organisational change. They also
found that organisations with history, hierarchy, an operating system of processes and procedures, and an institutional culture, are most resistant to change. These systems are often not flexible enough to accommodate internal or external innovation. Bicultural workers who participated in the study conducted by Fong and Gibbs (1995) experienced patterns of intolerance with little effort by staff within these systems to accommodate them and value their different perspectives on client assessment and modus operandi.

Stewart and Bennett (1991) found that attaining goals of tolerance and acceptance of difference rests ultimately in the relationships built between service providers, and clients who receive the service. If there is to be ongoing commitment to valuing diversity, this will be reflected in relationships that demonstrate active and practical toleration of difference on the one hand, and an accommodation of this on the other.

In 2001, the main message from David Satcher, the Surgeon General of the US Public Health Service in a report conducted by the United States Department of Health and Human Services is that ‘culture counts’ (US Dept HHS, 2001, p. 23). This report acknowledged that health care systems were largely organised and staffed by mainstream group members who knew more about the disparities in service provision, than the reasons for them. The report criticised clinicians and service systems that were immersed in dominant cultural mores. They found them ill-equipped to meet the needs of patients from other cultural backgrounds, and demonstrated bias in the delivery of care (US Dept HHS, 2001). The report acknowledged the long history of legalised discrimination and racism towards diverse racial and ethnic groups and how this had contributed to clinical bias. The report advocated that a cultural competency approach be implemented throughout health care organisations. It directed that this approach be implemented through cultural awareness training of staff and, greater leadership roles and accountability provided to people from racial and ethnic groups.
This section of the literature review indicates that there is a divide between model development and implementation of the model into practice, the latter of which is much more elusive.

**New Zealand**

New Zealand also reflected a history of colonisation where societal institutions such as those of education, justice, health and social welfare were designed, directed and controlled by those in positions of power rather than by, Maori people (Rangihau, 1988). Cultural renaissance and increased activism of the Maori people during the 1970s led to changes in views about how services that work across cultural groups should be delivered. This included child protection services. This section considers the context that existed in New Zealand.

The Treaty of Waitangi signed in 1840 providing the basis for a bicultural approach which acknowledges shared responsibility and authority for decisions between Maori and non-Maori people in New Zealand. The concept of ‘cultural safety’ was first developed in the profession of nursing within this bicultural context (Johnstone & Kanitsaki, 2007). Its objective was twofold. First, there was the intent to ensure that consumers had input into improving nursing services provided. Up until then services had been overwhelmingly mono-cultural and were perceived as non-responsive to the cultural needs of Maori people. Second, it meant that nurses needed to broaden their understanding of cultures other than their own, and become more aware of the cultural worldviews that they brought with them into practice settings (Ramsden & Spoonley, 1994). The aim of cultural safety, from its inception to the present is to improve health status gains and ensure positive outcomes for Maori people by emphasising the critical importance of cultural factors on the effectiveness of health care (Ramsden & Spoonley, 1994). Cultural safety practice is very much about listening to service users, and their experiences and perceptions of their needs and interface with formal human services organisations.
The concept of cultural safety, as with cultural competency, aims to legitimise difference and diversity. It recognises, that for change to occur, there is need for reflection and examination of power relationships by individual practitioners and by organisations as a whole (Gibbs, 2005). The difference between cultural competency and cultural safety is that the latter accentuates the perspectives of service users about impact and appropriateness of services. Both approaches acknowledge the need to address cultural bias in workers who provide services. Workers in this framework are viewed as culture and power bearers. Cultural safety practice seeks to address bias and power differentials between Maori and Pakeha cultures. Cultural safety developed within the context of political and media review. It is a notion that seeks structural change and recognises inequalities within health care interactions (DeSouza, 2008).

The push towards cultural safety in nursing led the way to reforms in child welfare in the 1980s in New Zealand. Social policy reforms at this time shifted towards greater involvement of families in decision-making and planning about children that came to the attention of the child protection authorities, and a decrease in making these children and families solely dependent on statutory authorities (Stephens, 1996). This approach identifies the importance of cultural influence on decision making and future planning in the lives of Maori children, who, like all other First Nations groupings around the world, are over-represented in welfare systems.

In 1988 a report to the Minister of Social Welfare found dissent by Maori people to expert driven approaches which undermine kinship structure and identity (Rangihau, 1988; Waites, Macgowan, Pennell, Carlton-LaNey, & Weil, 2004). This report recommended changes in the roles of workers, and increased involvement of community and family in decision-making. The report considered issues of racism in three broad forms, personal racism, cultural racism and institutional racism; all of which manifest through negative attitudes and a resistance to valuing minority beliefs and lifestyle.
practices. The most insidious and destructive form of racism, the report proposed, was institutional racism through which, it alleged, governments and other institutions of society ignore and freeze out minorities. In 1989, the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act* sanctioned lowering reliance on legal and protective interventions, and advancing the principles of family responsibility, children’s rights, cultural affirmation and community-state partnerships. This Act requires social workers to develop cultural competence as an ongoing process implemented through demonstration in decision-making and practice (Ernst, 2001). Child protection practice now aims to sustain the value of Maori culture through participation and consultation in decision-making (Rangihau, 1988).

Reforms in New Zealand, propelled by dissent from Maori people, led to changes in legislation and practice in child welfare. This process drew attention to the importance of accounting for culture in human services practice. Child welfare approaches in Canada share a similar history, and are discussed in the following section.

**Canada**

First Nations peoples of Canada are referred to as Inuit, Metis or North American Indian (Statistics Canada, 2011). In this section, they will be referred to collectively as ‘First Nations’ People of Canada’ as is the practice in Canada when the more global term of ‘Aboriginal peoples’ is not used. This also allows this thesis to maintain a distinction between Canadian First Nations’ peoples and Australian Aboriginal peoples.

For centuries the Canadian population has reflected racial and cultural diversity as a result of ongoing immigration. Despite this, colonisation in this country, as in Australia, led to attempts at assimilation by colonists, who viewed other cultures as both inferior and underdeveloped and legislation was implemented which reinforced this view (Maiter, 2009). An underlying assumption of assimilation is the belief that members of different
cultural backgrounds will, and should, relinquish their cultural ways and take on the customs and practices of the coloniser.

The ideology of assimilation in Canada is evident in policy responses to First Nations’ children and their families. *The Indian Act* 1876 was acclaimed as being a vehicle for implementing policies that would ‘civilise’, ‘protect’ and ‘assimilate’ First Nations’ peoples. In reality it legitimated the destruction of the social, spiritual and economic traditions of those communities and cultures (Palmer & Cooke, 1996). Between 1960 and 1983, many children between the ages of seven and fifteen, were removed from their homes, families, and culture and sent to residential schools where they were forbidden to speak their language or participate in cultural rituals. This process, which later became known as the ‘Sixties Scoop’, provides an example of assimilationist policies. The experiences of children who were removed during this time has raised concerns about the care provided to these children, abusive experiences they suffered, and the negative effects these removals had on their self esteem, identity and life chances, and on their families and cultures (Palmer & Cooke, 1996). These harms do not match the intent and rhetoric which justified their initial introduction.

Multicultural populations have continued to grow in Canada, as a result of broad-based immigration (Clarke, 1997). A growing awareness that traditional approaches, in health and human services, had not addressed the needs and issues of individuals and communities from diverse multicultural groups contributed to the need to develop innovative and effective methods to more effectively respond (Clarke, 1997; Este, 2007; Hackett, 2005; Purden, 2005). Added to this were demands from within diverse communities to collaborate and participate in planning and service delivery (Este, 2007). With the introduction of the concept of multiculturalism and the passing of the *Multiculturalism Act 1988*, there was a recognised and written history that acknowledged the reality of Canadian cultural diversity. With the emergence of multiculturalism came
the cultural literacy or cultural competency approach, which insisted that those working across cultures learn about cultures other than their own to recognise the impact of mainstream culture on minority cultural groups. This goal began to be implemented in various social institutions and levels of government as well as social work practice including child welfare and child protection (Maiter, 2009).

In 1991, a study conducted by the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) found that despite increased pressure on Canadian social work education faculties to ensure that graduates were responsive to changing racial, ethnic and cultural compositions, actual practice responses towards addressing multiracial and multicultural issues had not developed (Este, 2007). In the field of child welfare, issues of race, ethnicity and culture had posed considerable dilemmas and struggles. Child welfare workers from mainstream culture who attempted to increase their understanding of the norms and values of cultural groups were criticised for comparing these to their own dominant Western cultures and making negative judgements (Maiter, 2009). Knowledge alone, about the influence of history and inequality, was also found to be insufficient to ensure that clients from different cultural backgrounds received services from human service agencies that valued and respected their culture. Instead, practices continued to reflect negative judgements, stereotyping and generalised thinking about minority groups and First Nations’ Peoples (Maiter, 2009).

The population of Canada continues to reflect cultural diversity. Over the last three decades problems have continued to persist for diverse ethno-racial groups who face considerable challenges. Systems have been accused of homogenising group members, and focusing blame on these groups for the problems they face, whilst providing inadequate and inappropriate services that are not responsive to their needs (Maiter, 2009).
The history of policies and practices towards Indigenous peoples in Australia was presented in chapter two. As in the United States, New Zealand and Canada, colonisation and assimilation policies negatively impacted traditional Indigenous cultures. Whilst the civil rights movement in the United States drew attention to racism which had become an important international issue, Australia at the time was criticised particularly for its treatment of Aboriginal peoples. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in an attempt to ‘make known’ the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia presented the history of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. It stated:

_The relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were historically influenced by racism, often of the overt, outspoken and sanctimonious kind; but more often, particularly in later times, of the quiet assumption that scarcely recognises itself. What Aboriginal people have largely experienced is policies nakedly racially-based and in their everyday lives the constant irritation of racist attitudes. Aboriginal people were never treated as equals and certainly relations between the two groups were conducted on the basis of inequality and control (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991, para.1.4.14)._ 

Views about multiculturalism were gathering momentum, given the diversity of cultural backgrounds that lived here. Zubrzycki (1977) known as the father of multiculturalism, first defined multiculturalism in Australia as ‘What we believe Australia should be working towards is not a oneness, but a unity, not a similarity but a composite, not a melting pot but a voluntary bond of dissimilar people sharing a common political and institution structure’ (Australian Ethnic Affairs Council, 1977, p.17). However, ‘Australia’s policy and social thought has focused upon concerns of integrating immigrants within a cohesive and inclusive conception of society whilst treating Indigenous issues as a separate yet not totally unrelated problem’ (Naraniecki, 2013, p. 248). Up until 1967,
Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were not recognised as Australian citizens and no explicit or separate protection of their social, political, land or human rights, existed (unlike Canada and New Zealand). In 1972, Australia signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights giving a commitment to the civil and political rights of individuals within the nation state. Ratifying this commitment depended on being able to eliminate all racial discrimination in Federal and State legislation. In Queensland, legislation in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, (as presented in chapter two), was grossly inequitable and any attempts by the Federal government to instigate change was aggressively challenged and resisted by the government in that state (Kidd, 1997). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who had been on the receiving end of racist legislation experienced a life of interface with non-Indigenous people characterised by low status, no public voice, and being subject to discriminatory laws (Cowlishaw, 2006). Liddle (1993) recalled her experiences as an Aboriginal person growing up in Australia during this period in which she was a victim of discrimination and racism. She said,

As for racism that’s an everyday thing for Aboriginal People. It can be overt or it can be institutionalised. When I was young, Aboriginal children who spoke traditional language at school would get a hiding. Why did they do that to us? It was called ‘integration’ - the old integration. In order to help Aboriginal people they had to be exactly like white people (p.116).

Pressures by human rights’ activists and a push towards self-determination in the 1970s, led to Aboriginal people initiating community controlled services in health and law (these are outlined in chapter two). In 1972 the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was pitched outside of Parliament House demonstrating the particular and unique right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ rights to land. The Australian Constitution provides the government with the power to make laws and take action based on ‘race’. For example, Section 25 allows that States can ban people from voting based on their race; and section
51 (xxvi) provides the authority for the Australian government to pass special laws that discriminate against people based on their race.

In 1975, The Racial Discrimination Act was enacted in Parliament. This had a direct and very profound effect on Australia’s constitutional structure and Federal and State laws relating to both racial discrimination and Aboriginal rights (Havemann, 1999). For example, in Queensland The Racial Discrimination Act provided the legal basis for the Aboriginal Legal Aid Service to successfully challenge State government authorities, such as police, for ‘wrongful detentions, arrests, and fines’ (Kidd, 1997, p.292). Unlike Canada and New Zealand, Australia had no explicit or separate protection of human rights (Havemann, 1999). The Racial Discrimination Act 1975 for the first time provided legislation for the Commonwealth with respect to one of its powers, to override that of any State on the same matter (Havemann, 1999). However, Aboriginal people continued to be detained in custody by police and are over-represented in detention centres (Havemann, 1999, p. 296).

In 1987, the Prime Minister, in response to the growing public concern of Aboriginal deaths in custody, established a Royal Commission to investigate the causes of death of Aboriginal people in State and Territory jails (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991). It raises serious concerns about the failures by police and police systems to regulate the care of Aboriginal prisoners. The Commission brought attention to the frequency with which Aboriginal prisoners had come into contact with the criminal justice system and found that in three quarters of the cases investigated, the first contact with the system had occurred before the age of twenty (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991, para. 1.2.17). The Commission found Aboriginal people were over-represented in criminal justice systems, and disadvantaged in their dealings within this system. More recently, Blagg, Morgan, Cunneen, and Ferrante (2005) investigated systemic racism in the criminal justice system.
of Victoria. The Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement (1999) makes reference to racism and discrimination as factors contributing to the over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system. The agreement recognises that Indigenous people continue to be over-represented at all levels of the criminal justice system at “unacceptable and disproportionate rates” (Victorian Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee, 2000, p. 12). Blagg et al’s (2005) study reinforced the key messages of the Commission; that resolution of Aboriginal disadvantage could only be achieved through empowerment and self-determination. Blagg et al. (2005) argued that systemic racism is different from individual racism since it focuses on outcomes of societal and institutional activities and processes, rather than intent and attitude, and reflects organisational, rather than individual failure to recognise the impact of policies and procedures on Aboriginal people.

It was not until the early 1990s that the term ‘cultural competency’ began appearing in policy documents and curriculum frameworks in sectors such as education, which promoted culturally inclusive curricula and curriculum frameworks designed around cultural competencies (Thomson, 2005; Wyatt-Smith & Dooley, 1997). These training and education approaches faced resistance by organisations that had existed over long periods and within which practices, policies, and organisational cultures had become embedded. Further they were limited because they depended on external input to educate, train and recruit staff. High staff turnover within organisations, and the lack of coordination between services and organisations, alongside an absence of any monitored assessment of cultural competency, further limited organisational responses to frameworks of cultural competency (Department of Health (Western Australia)), 2001). Rather, there was a reliance by organisations on staff to reconcile their individual understandings of cultural competency within the broader policy and organisational contexts of their practice (Harrison & Turner, 2010). At the same time it was argued that if organisations as a whole were not fully committed to developing cultural competence,
then this would not necessarily create changes in organisational practices (Hasenfeld, 1983; Wyatt-Smith & Dooley, 1997). Perhaps through these tensions, demand for cross cultural training has grown in Australia since the late 1990s, driven by policies and compliance requirements, and the need to effectively manage diverse workforces to provide services to a multicultural Australian society. There is a predicted increase in demand for this training despite inconclusive evaluations about its effectiveness (Bean, 2006). In Australia, ‘the need for cross-cultural competency is recognized in national policy and is increasingly in practice in all tiers of government and community organisations’ (Bean, 2006, p. 14). These policies advocate the need for changed attitudes and respect.

The concept of cultural security recommends a shift from a focus on attitude to a focus on behaviour, that is, organisational responses to a multicultural polity (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2008; Thomson, 2005). In 2004, the Australian Health Minister’s Advisory Council (AHMAC) endorsed, in a joint meeting of Health Ministers, to strengthen relationships between health services and Indigenous populations. The National Cultural Respect Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander State Health departments was developed, which is an overarching plan that identifies key areas needed to harness ‘Cultural Respect’ within those systems (Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council’s Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Working Party, 2004). These concepts drew on the influences of cultural competency from the United States and cultural safety in New Zealand. The development of a culturally competent workforce in health was identified as a priority by the National Health and Medical Research Council in 2004 (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2005). It identifies the need for accountability to, and identification of core competencies.
In 2005, the Victorian government passed the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, which provided a broad reform framework to deliver child and family services in that State. The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) was commissioned to develop an Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework to guide mainstream community service organisations of management strategies to provide better outcomes for Aboriginal children and families in that state (Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, 2008). Underlying the framework was the dimensions of safety, stability and development understood from the lens of culture for Aboriginal children in the context of who the child is, their identity, and their needs and rights (p. 10).

The Australian Association of Social Workers has published a statement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, acknowledging that the historic actions by social workers, in their practice, as government agents and instruments of government policy in justice, welfare and health, had contributed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities being destabilised and disempowered. This statement acknowledges their role in taking children from their parents as part of the stolen generations. This statement expresses a commitment by the AASW towards achieving better social, cultural and economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and has subsequently been incorporated the profession's Code of Ethics (AASW, 2004).

In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (including Australian Commonwealth, state and territory leaders), as part of their National Indigenous Reform Agreement, initiated a strategy to Close the Gap to acknowledge the importance of Indigenous culture, engagement and positive relationships with Indigenous Australians (COAG, 2008). It had only been some months previous, in 2007, that the Federal government launched what became known as the ‘National Emergency’ Intervention in the Northern Territory using as its justification the ‘Little Children Are Sacred’ report (Wild
& Anderson, 2007) that had been released about alleged sexual abuse of children in the Northern Territory. The government, supported by its army, moved to take control of many of the Territory’s Aboriginal settlements and inaugurated an increased presence of police in Aboriginal settlements; mass health checks for Aboriginal children (initially mandatory); restrictions on alcohol; income management; and removing customary law and cultural practices in consideration of bail applications and sentencing (HREOC, 2011). The Intervention promoted the view that a child’s basic human right to be safe, as defined through mainstream cultural understandings, took precedence over respect for cultural differences and racially defined political autonomy and that cultural law and culture were themselves threats to ensuring the safety of Aboriginal children (Sutton, 2009). The Intervention was criticised for suspending the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 in order for it to be implemented; the lack of consultation with cultural leaders; and the fact that it addressed no recommendations in the report from which it evolved (Cresswell, 2011) This report was also discredited by many who saw it as a means for the government to claw back and gain ownership over land previously won by Aboriginal people through legal pursuit and judgement (Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) News, 2007; Altman, 2007; Barker, 2007). It demonstrated the power of the Federal government to intervene in matters normally in the jurisdiction of the States and Territories in Australia. On Wednesday, the 13 February, 2008, the Prime Minister made a national Apology to the Stolen Generations.

In 2009, COAG implemented the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children developed by the Community and Disability Services Ministers Advisory committee towards a comprehensive national approach to promote the welfare and safety of children (COAG, 2009). The over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection systems in all states of Australia was acknowledged. A stated intended outcome of this initiative is that the safety of Indigenous children is to be assured through
a framework of support to their families and communities. The framework expresses a commitment to a planned, co-ordinated and sustainable approach which includes the participation of non-government agencies. No formal evaluation has identified whether this intended objective and process has resulted in the delivery of more culturally sensitive services, or whether perceptions and attitudes of service providers have shifted, in line with this objective.

A commitment towards cultural competency approaches in cross cultural interventions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who continue to experience disadvantage, has been voiced at individual, institutional and society levels. There continues to be resistance by current systems and individuals working within these systems and to acceptance and valuing of cultural difference (Herring, Spangaro, Lauw & McNamara, 2012). Evidence of impacts from initiatives towards cultural competency has been described as ‘scant’ and ‘limited’ by those who question why so many interventions seem to fall short of achieving their goals (Herring, Spangaro, Lauw, & McNamara, 2012, p. 1). The existence of systemic racism is one reason given for this (Paradies, Harris & Anderson, 2008).

Racism is broadly defined by Paradies, Harris and Anderson (2008) as ‘avoidable and unfair actions that further disadvantage the disadvantaged or further advantage the advantaged’ (p.8). ‘Racism can be expressed through stereotypes (racist beliefs), prejudice (racist emotions) or discrimination (racist behaviours and practices)’ (Paradies, 2006, p.153). It has been accused of rationalising social, political and economic interactions between the races (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Bonilla-Silva (1997) agreed, and criticised the term racism, proposing ‘the more general concept of racialised social systems as an alternative framework’ (p. 469, 474). He defined ‘racialised social systems as societies that allocate different economic, political, social and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines: lines that are socially constructed’ (p. 474). He
proposed this was related to the historic classification of a people in racial terms, which he believed was a ‘highly political act associated with practices such as conquest and colonization’, ‘enslavement’, and ‘more recently colonial and neo-colonial labour immigration’ (p. 471).

Racism in Australia is most evident in covertly expressed negative beliefs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups based on race (Hill & Augoustinos, 2001; Paradies, Harris & Anderson, 2008). In her analysis of stereotypes of Aboriginal people, Cox (1993) brought attention to the power afforded professionals as ‘authorised knowers’. She suggested that professionals, often positioned outside of the Aboriginal culture but connected to Aboriginal people through institutional roles in welfare, health, corrections, education or the media, assume power to define Aboriginality and its presentation.

Cultural competency in Australia has been introduced against a backdrop within which the experiences of First Nation peoples in this country have been subjected to oppressive, discriminatory, and racist legislation and practices. Proponents of cultural competency have urged the importance of acknowledging this history, and progressing a shift in attitudes to behaviours that recognise and value the strengths and validity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and peoples. Within the last twenty years, government programs have been introduced to Close the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage which continues to exist. Cultural competency continues to rely on organisations to reconcile difference.

**Summary**

The Indigenous populations in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia share the experience of being colonised. In all of these countries, this experience negatively impacts the ability of First Nations people to continue to practice their traditional cultures, languages, connection to the land and natural resources, and
political and personal autonomy. The trauma and loss of these things bears a direct relationship to poor health, social and economic status. These are all conditions that bring Indigenous populations into contact with human services professionals (Archibald, 2006).

Increasing multicultural populations have brought attention to the lack of responsiveness by workers in the human services to meet the needs of people from different cultural backgrounds. This lack of responsiveness includes the ignorance or minimisation of the impact of cultural bias and racism on non-mainstream populations by those in power. The concept of ‘cultural competency’ emerged in response to this, and is predicated on the belief that effective cross cultural practice in the human services demands that practitioners come to accept and value the differences, strengths and diversity which exists within the people from various cultures.

**Defining Cultural Competency**

Defining cultural competency has proved difficult because of the gap that exists between an understanding of the necessary knowledge and skills of cultural competency in the human services and its display in practice. As well, there is consensus that cultural competency is an ongoing process (an aspiration) with no definitive end (McPhatter, 1997; Tong & Cross, 1991). The terms cultural competence and cultural competency are used interchangeably (Harrison & Turner, 2010). Guthrie (2009) distinguishes competence, as capabilities in a broad sense, whilst competency relates to the performance of specific cross cultural practice skills that can be identified and assessed in the practitioner. He argued the former relates to potential whilst the latter refers to performance. In an attempt to assess cultural competency, Boyle and Springer (2001) evaluated four instruments which had been developed to measure cultural competency. They found these existing inventories and surveys have primarily been validated on white middle class, highly
educated populations within university settings. They advocated the need to implement specific practitioner proficiencies which are culture specific. Boyle and Springer (2001) concluded that (a) there are few measures developed to evaluate skills of cultural competency; (b) instruments that evaluate cultural competency are based on broad theoretical models which are not culture specific and therefore inadequate for addressing culturally-specific contexts in social work practice, (c) a paucity of research exists linking competency scores from these instruments with the actual social, economic and health outcomes for diverse client groups, and (d) empirical research on cultural competency with specific populations is scant.

A cultural competency framework of practice aims to broaden knowledge about cultures and cross cultural interactions in order to develop responsive and sensitive services, which match the needs and expectations of a multicultural clientele (Sue et al., 1992; Weaver, 1999). Green (1999) defined cultural competency as:

*The ability to engage across cultures in a way that is congruent with behavior and expectations normative for a given community and that are adapted to suit the specific needs of individuals and families from that community (p. 87).*

**What is culture**

According to Tong and Cross (1991) culture refers to the integrated patterns of human behaviour that includes language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups. As such, culture plays a significant role in understanding human behaviour (Kwong, 2009). This could be considered, a social definition of culture.

Culture from a psychological perspective is more difficult to define (Betancourt & López, 1993). Studies of culture have asserted that culture lives, breathes, changes and is never static (Eckermann et al., 2006; Korbin, 2002). In exploring the literature on the relationship between culture and child maltreatment, Korbin (2002) found that culture is
not uniformly distributed and doesn't have a uniform impact on experiences of child maltreatment. She stressed culture was 'fluid' and that interaction and interpretation reflects variability within groups and it is necessary to take a more contextual view, examining whole neighbourhoods and communities, in order to understand its impact.

Parrott (2009) agreed that there are changes in cultures due to time and social context. This fluidity of cultures implies that key elements of culture are created and recreated through interactions of people in society; and these interactions are affected by common conventions, institutional practices as well as gender, age, class and sexual orientation of people who take part in these interactions. According to Dominelli (2002), how this occurs, and the ways in which key elements of different cultures arise cannot be separated from the social, and political milieus in which this practice of culture is shaped and reshaped by its actors. Culture is not performed in a vacuum, but in transactions with other ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ actors. Consequently, if culture is influenced by, and adjusts to outside influences, ignoring these influences results in a narrow perspective for understanding integrated patterns of human behaviour including language, communication, action, customs values, and beliefs. Parrott (2009) therefore stated that if workers make judgements of other cultures, they need to simultaneously evaluate their own.

Miles (1982) and Green (1999) maintained that explanations of people’s behaviour are frequently categorised, and assumptions made about ‘natural’ divisions between people are usually on the basis of assumed ‘traits’. These assumptions can both perpetuate and reflect racism (Miles, 1982). The use of transactional and categorical explanations provides a way of viewing this.

**Categorical and Transactional Explanations of Culture**

Green (1999) distinguished between what he called ‘categorical’ and ‘transactional’ explanations of cultural difference. Categorical explanations relate to
sorting and matching specific traits to describe all persons in a particular group or culture (Miles, 1982; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Transactional explanations consider how cultural values, worldviews and practices help or confound relations and interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds (Green, 1999).

In categorical explanations of culture, individuals who fit one criteria are assumed to fit the other attributes that define that cultural group. Augoustinos, Tuffin and Sale (1999) in their study provide examples of the process of stereotyping social groups and its prejudicial consequences. Their discussions with first year psychology students found that these students negatively described their views of Australian Aboriginal people based on the behaviour of a small but distinct group within Aboriginal community.

Categorical explanations for behaviours are often defined by outsiders of the culture. Categorical distinctions may entail processes of exclusion which motivate and perpetuate (although unconsciously) their persistent use (Barth, 1969). In the study by Augoustinos, Tuffin and Sale (1999) participants used discursive resources that legitimised and rationalised the problems and social inequalities of Aboriginal people positioning them as the cause of their problems (p.96). Categorical explanations presume a central point of reference as ‘the standard’ against which all other cultures are measured (Green, 1999). Using such explanations can reinforce models of pathological inferiority, and genetic deficiency to stereotype people as deficient in certain desirable attributes (Sue et al., 1982). The use of categorical explanations of culture have been criticised for their stereotyping of whole groups of people concomitant with their camouflage of individual differences and idiosyncrasies of persons who are otherwise part of the culture under study (Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimble, 2008). Green (1999) saw categorical explanation as a means of managing and controlling ‘potentially contentious relationships’ (p. 23). In colonial societies, categorical explanations about the behaviour of Indigenous people served to justify the assumed superiority of the dominant
cultural group. The implicit assumption in categorical explanations is that cross-cultural relationships are ‘essentially competitive and hostile; competitive for the scarce resources of position, power, rank, authority, goods, time, services, and moral worthiness’ (p. 23).

Transactional explanations of culture on the other hand emphasise the boundaries that exist between groups as well as diversity within groups (Green, 1999). Rather than viewing difference and diversity that exists within cultures as static, transactional explanations consider cultural meanings and the influence and impact of these in cross cultural encounters. Using transactional explanations, culture can be viewed as a framework through which people define and seek solutions to their problems. The ability to intervene in the life of a client therefore implies having some knowledge about these frameworks and how the process of problem definition and maintenance occurs in a local community and how those engaged in and with a community fit into that process.

Transactional explanations include a comparative, self-critical understanding of participating in a system of differential privilege and power (Gutierrez, 1990). Therefore, the transactional view accepts that cross cultural services ‘delivered’ by a bureaucratic system is never ‘free of encumbrances of privilege’ (Green, 1999, p.177). Transactional explanations of behaviour are useful to the cultural competency approach because they demand a knowledge about what is occurring in local communities. They provide the foundation for practice, while also necessitating a conscious deliberation of preconceived beliefs and boundaries that maintain separateness between persons in a community and working within a community.

**Cultural competency approaches**

To work towards cultural awareness, organisations in the United States initially responded by introducing cultural awareness training. The underlying assumption of cultural awareness training is that knowledge of cultures can be taught, learned, trained and attained and that this training heightens the consciousness and the sensitivity of the
worker to the ways in which social, historic and cultural contexts shape clients’ values, beliefs and behaviours (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010). This strategy aims to increase workers’ awareness and knowledge of various and specific cultures. This approach also attempts to reduce worker prejudice. Such training encourages worker self-reflection and challenges workers to increase their awareness of their own cultural values and the impacts of these on others from non-mainstream groups (Lum, 1999; Sanson et al., 1998; Sue & Sue, 2003). The importance of the practitioner’s ability to reflect on their own personal cultural backgrounds and possible biases that they have brought to their work, as well as the views they assumed about their own culture or the culture of others has been raised as essential in cross cultural practice (Green, 1999; Libesman, 2004; Lum, 1999; McPhatter, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2003). Evaluation of cultural awareness programs indicate that participants who complete training perceive themselves as being more aware, knowledgeable, and skilful compared to pre-training (Brach & Fraser, 2000).

However, this self-evaluation has not led to evidence that practitioner and the services offered to people from various ethnic and racial backgrounds are more responsive to their needs than before practitioner training (Gould, 1995). Hardy and Laszloffy (1995) argued that that this occurs because cultural awareness training models rely heavily on providing trainees with multicultural content, rather than promoting inter-cultural experiences. They believed focusing on content over-emphasises the characteristics of various cultural groups rather than developing the cultural communication repertoire of participants themselves.

In professional literature, notions of, ‘culture’ and ‘difference’ seem only to be applied at the interface between workers and clients and not to organisational processes and practices. Nybell and Gray (2004) explored how cross cultural practice and cultural competency was implemented in three agencies. They found that although workers within these organisations believed themselves to be responsive to client needs, they continued
to impose their own mainstream values on to their clients. They maintained that human service organisations and practitioners need to be cognisant of where and how power and decision making is maintained in organisations. For them, this necessitates the need to bring conflict imbued in power relations to the surface in order for this power to be redistributed. They highlighted the need for not only diversity within agency personnel, but also for agencies to learn to operate from within the contexts of their client populations. This includes sites of practice.

Program location has been proposed as a strong influence on positive cross cultural practice. Geographic location of services helps to bridge the gap between knowledge about a location, and the skills needed to nurture an openness and receptivity to diversity in service practice and delivery (Dyche & Zayas, 2001). Cross cultural training programs face dilemmas in bridging knowledge, attitudinal and skill gaps in a ways that are realistic and meaningful. Perhaps the most that can be concluded from these evaluation studies of cross cultural training is that learning about other cultural groups, or even taking into account the perspective of another culture, is a necessary but not sufficient step to achieve responsive multicultural, transactionally conceptualised and driven practice.

In light of this, models of cultural competency practice have emerged to guide practitioners towards cultural sensitive approaches to practice. The next section considers four of these models.

**Cultural competency models**

Practice in the human services with racial and ethnic groups has called for models that are culturally responsive to a multicultural client base (Brach & Fraser, 2000; Devore & Schlesinger, 1999; Green, 1999; Harrison & Turner, 2010; Lum, 1999; Sue & Sue, 2003; Weaver, 1999). Nonetheless, the term has been subjected to considerable debate,
and the way the myriad of practitioners envisage cultural competency in their practice is not easily understood (Harrison & Turner, 2010). Cultural competency models therefore at both theoretical and individual practitioner perception levels focus on the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and skills of professional practitioners and the organisational domain and broader systems of service delivery in which they work (US Dept. HHS, 2001).

Cultural competency models have drawn from multiple theoretical foundations including systems, psychosocial, ecological and strengths based theories and perspectives (Davis, 2009). These bio-psycho-social and ecological frameworks help practitioners recognise the value of seeking cultural knowledge from ‘within’ rather than knowledge ‘about’ the other. Cultural competency models imbued with these perspectives focus on how practitioners embrace cultural diversity and demonstrate this in their interactions. The next section considers models developed by Tong and Cross (1991), Sue & Sue (1982;1999), Green (1982;1999) and McPhatter (1997) to assist those working across cultures to more effectively respond to the impact of cultural difference and diversity.

**Cross cultural partnerships**

In their work with Native American communities, Tong and Cross (1991) proposed that cross-cultural practice in child protection needs to acknowledge and understand the history of these communities alongside contemporary contexts. They argued cross-cultural work should not be assessed as either incompetent or competent but rather along a continuum of points between these extremes. An awareness and understanding of the specific community where intervention is to occur underscores everything else in the Tong and Cross (1991) model of cultural competency.

Tong and Cross (1991) view cultural competency as a three stage continuum. During the initial stage a human services practitioner or organisation may hold views that
assume helping approaches are universally valid in their applications and outcome to all (or any) cultures. This first stage of the continuum recognises attitudes, policies and practices which are consciously or unconsciously destructive to cultures and the individuals within them. At this stage of the continuum services are resistant to an acceptance of difference and take a ‘one size fits all’ approach to practice. This can ignore the strengths and practice possibilities offered through cultural diversity. These practitioners and organisations view their role as ‘rescuing individuals’ from their communities. Practitioners and organisations at this first stage of the Tong and Cross (1991) continuum are perceived to lack the capacity, knowledge and skills to move to the second stage.

The second stage of the continuum, referred to as ‘cultural pre-competence’, implies that a practitioner and/or organisation is poised to move towards cultural competency. At this stage, persons are open to an acceptance of difference premised on the conceptual position that no one culture is ‘better’, ‘more knowledgeable’ or ‘superior’ than or to another. At this stage practitioners and organisations accept that services are not and have not been adequate to meet the needs of people from different cultures and that change is needed. Service providers at this stage, begin reflecting on how services can be more responsive to a variety of cultural stakeholders.

Despite Tong and Cross (1991) recognising that there is no final end point to cultural competency, they considered the characteristics of the third and final stage of cultural competence as professionals and organisations which demonstrate acceptance and respect for difference; engage in ongoing self-assessment regarding cultural knowledge and learning, and who continue to pay attention to difference.
A Multidimensional Model of Cultural Competence

Sue, Arrendondo and McDavis (1992) presented a model of multicultural competencies and standards for professionals working with clients from different cultural backgrounds. This model expounds a matrix of three dimensions and three characteristics of the culturally competent practitioner. This multidimensional model incorporates the beliefs and attitudes of the worker (including an awareness of their own inherent assumptions, values and biases); knowledge, skills and understanding of the worldview of the client; and the development of appropriate strategies and techniques (or skills) for practice. Sue & Sue (2003) later added further dimensions in practice to incorporate different levels of practice at the individual, group and universal level. This model presents a list of competencies that are required in order to work with people from different cultural backgrounds and encompasses the necessity of an active, developmental and ongoing process. Like others, (McPhatter, 1997; Tong & Cross, 1991), Sue and Sue (2003) recognised cultural competence as an ongoing process rather than a point of attainment in one’s development.

The multi-dimensional model aims to define goals consistent with the cultural values of clients, recognition of specific client identities as well as potential universal application both within and outside specific groups. This model balances the importance of both individualism and collectivism at the assessment, ‘diagnosis’ and ‘treatment’ stages of clinical practice. Further, it addresses not only clients, but systems which impact and exist outside the control of the client. The model therefore incorporates cultural competence as an individual, professional, organisational and societal responsibility. Sue and Sue (2003 see also Sue et al.,1982) consistently argue that is essential for organisations which employ professionals, as well as professionals themselves and their professional groups, to be involved in cultural competency measures in order to impact systemic and societal levels of marginalisation,
dispossession and disenfranchisement of particular groups from the nation state polities in which they are located. Figure 3 represents the multidimensional model of cultural competence which allows for the systematic identification of cultural competence in a number of combinations.

Figure 3. Multidimensional Model of Cultural Competence

![Multidimensional Model of Cultural Competence](image)


**A Framework of Cross Cultural Practice**

In the United States, Lum (1999) developed a model of cultural competence based on a systems theory approach, consisting of cultural awareness, knowledge acquisition, skill development and inductive learning. Next, Lum expanded his initial model to include ‘assessment, intervention and evaluation skills for individuals, families, communities and organisations’ in social work practice with people from different cultural backgrounds (Lum, 2005, p.1). Lum (2005) views the client as an individual, a family, a group, a community or a combination of various elements, and he also considers the client location and context (e.g. geographic and psychological location, setting, social environmental
factors related to the client) (p.3). In 2001, Lum developed the Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice which was adopted by the National Association of Social Workers (2010) in the United States and offers guidelines, goals and objectives of cultural competence for social workers and a learning tool to assist workers to rate and reflect on their level of cultural competence (Lum, 2003).

Lum proposed 'cultural competence requires workers to gain 'mastery of a particular set of knowledge, skills, policies and programs used by the social worker that address the cultural needs of individual, family, group and communities' (Lum, p.4). This consists of four spheres of cultural awareness (self and other), knowledge acquisition (diverse groups), skills development (effective practice), and inductive learning (continuous investigation) (Lum, 2005, p.4). In 2005, Lum brought together four themes into his integrated model: cultural competency, practice stages, client intersectional systems and case studies.

This model recognises, respects, and validates the unique values and needs of specific cultural families and communities. The worker in direct practice is able to be sensitive to the racial, ethnic and cultural environments of the client and simultaneously to gain knowledge in relation to any discriminatory and oppressive practices acting on the clients which emanate externally. He believed it to be the worker's responsibility to understand the client culture and the barriers in communication that may result because of these different perspectives.

Lum (1999) urged a commitment towards inductive learning. His model is practice orientated and based on the belief that cultural competency needs to be manifest at all stages of practice from beginning to end. He believed that understanding in professional relationships is characterised by mutuality, collaboration and respect for the client system. His model focuses on the interrelations of various subsystems, interactions and relationships which are characterised as 'an open system that flows like a river' (Lum,
2005, p. 3). He recognises that factors such as preferred and/or established social patterns, values and social class impact these practices (of mutuality, collaboration, etc.). In addition, he recognises that workers bring with them a set of cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural responses to the helping situation which the worker must recognise. His framework is presented in the following model.

Figure 4. A Framework for Cultural Competence

Cultural Awareness Model

Green (1982; 1999) proposed that to work across cultures in the human services, it is essential to acquire knowledge of the salient aspects of communities in order to advocate and bridge differences in perspectives, values and understanding. He introduced a model based on comparative learning (as opposed to Lum’s inductive learning, above) and action in cross-cultural relationships in the human services in the United States. He believed that many workers knew little of the cultural characteristics of the client communities within which they worked and he argued it was important to recognise ‘theoretical ethnocentrism’ which exists in the human services professions, and
which is detrimental to effective communication. When workers presume that some cultural values are ‘better’ than others this impacts on client-worker interactions. Green (1999) proposed a systematic approach to knowledge acquisition, accepting difference and diversity in different contexts and amongst different cultural groups. Working towards cultural competency implies a commitment that cannot be driven by needs (as proposed, in Lum’s model) but which can be articulated by factors which arise during crises. In practice, Green (1999) proposed the worker must ‘systematically learn and test awareness of the prescribed and proscribed values and behaviour of a specific community’ and be able to ‘carry out professional activities consistent with that awareness’ (p. 87). His Cultural Competence Practice model is presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Cultural Competence as Practice

- Awareness of self limitations
- Interest in cultural differences
- Systematic learning style
- Utilization of cultural resources
- Engagement with diversity

Green (1999) acknowledged that during critical cross cultural interactions, ‘workers who are white have a tendency to turn first (and sometimes only) to minority colleagues’ (p. 93). Although this might have been a ‘safe’ choice, minority group workers viewed infrequent or uninformed ‘cultural’ questions from white workers as ‘another form of tokenism’ (p. 93). Green (1999) was critical of this quick fix approach which sometimes took precedence over the desire to learn something in-depth about the cultural context within which the client’s needs were/may be embedded. Cultural competency, to Green
(1999), entails moving beyond the job description and gaining knowledge about clients through direct observation and participation in their everyday routines in naturalistic settings. Green’s (1999) cultural awareness model proposes background preparation, use of cultural guides and participant observation. His model invites professionals in the human services to reflect on the personal meaning of racial and cultural differences in order to become fully aware of their own biases and prejudices. He believed workers could not understand differences in others without confronting their own limits and capabilities directly. Understanding culturally different world views, and developing analytical insight and appropriate empathy are, in this model, the essential foundations for providing effective responses to people from different cultural backgrounds.

Cultural Competence Attainment Model

McPhatter (1997) developed a model which worked towards a cultural competency model for child welfare workers. McPhatter (1997) believed that despite the multicultural reality of the United States, efforts to enhance the ability of child welfare workers to respond to the needs of children and families from ethnic and racial backgrounds had been sporadic.

The Cultural Competency Attainment Model (CCAM) focused on the development of cultural competency at the site of the individual. It assumes that achieving competency in working across cultures is developmental, and learning occurs in any or all of a person’s thinking, feeling, sensing and behavioural dimensions. The model’s framework advocates systematic, ongoing reflective learning and evaluation. The three components are enlightened consciousness, a grounded knowledge base, and cumulative skill proficiency. Each component represents a substantive goal, and none is sufficient alone to produce cultural competency in practice. McPhatter’s (1997) model is holistic, circular, and interconnected, as shown in Figure 6. The three components are discussed in more detail below.

**Enlightened Consciousness**

For McPhatter (1997), attaining cultural competency involves a fundamental process of re-orienting one’s primary worldview by incorporating an acceptance of others on the basis of equality. This component involves attitudinal and affective dimensions. McPhatter’s (1997) model links the relationship between experience and the development of an individual’s primary worldview. In particular it encompasses a willingness to review and re-orient preconceived attitudes and perceptions, values and ways of behaving that are imbued within a superior/inferior dynamic. This recognises that people from different cultural backgrounds located within the same geo-political realm as the self, may actually be incorporated into that realm differently (socially, economically and politically). McPhatter (1997) recognised that letting go of preconceived perspectives raises levels of discomfort for some, and meets resistance by others who find it difficult to accept the value of cultural diversity and inclusion.
Notions of enlightened consciousness towards cultural competency infer that the individual commences a process of change, which requires a sustained effort and commitment towards self-reflection and acceptance. This consciousness embraces both the positive and negatively perceived aspects of one’s own culture as well as that of others. It includes an intimate familiarity with social problems and privileges, especially as these arise from one’s position within the racial ordering of colonial/settler societies.

**Grounded Knowledge**

A grounded knowledge base was another component of McPhatter’s (1997) CCAM model. This begins with the premise that there is value in expanding cross cultural knowledge by utilising a broad range and variety of different sources including multiple disciplines, related subject matter, and nonmainstream works. McPhatter encouraged child welfare workers who seek a cultural competency approach to their practice, to reflect on and analyse what they know, how they know it, and how they acquired this knowledge. She argued that this needs to occur in order to be critically conscious of Eurocentric bias, which she recognised as deeply entrenched in formal and informal education systems. A Eurocentric bias has in the past been criticised for excluding perspectives that sought to challenge and broaden the views they presented. McPhatter also urged welfare workers to expand their knowledge from the perspectives of those within the communities in which they engaged. This included their perspectives about presenting social problems, conditions and issues but also the dynamics which sustained them. She urged the need to build knowledge about historic practices, the dynamics of oppression, and the ways in which the professionals assessed risk.

A grounded knowledge base aims to link diverse perspectives towards a broader understanding of cultural difference and functioning processes in different cultures. McPhatter believed lacking knowledge of these processes disadvantages child welfare
workers who then have less understanding and capacity to incorporate strengths and resilience of communities into their assessment and interventions.

Using what McPhatter (1997) referred to as a grounded knowledge base broadens and challenges preconceived views. This is an ongoing pursuit. Foundational components to a grounded knowledge base for practicing in child protection systems, for example, includes knowledge and an acceptance of the impacts of past history; diversity and its impacts on inclusion exclusion from particular aspects of socio-political and economic life; social problems and family functioning; and the intersect of each of these with previous child protection interventions. Knowledge can be sourced widely and includes key informants in the communities in which the cross cultural child protection practice is engaged. It is also important to have an understanding and acceptance of the conditions that currently impact the community of engagement.

Without a solid knowledge base and a substantial understanding of the worker’s own and the client’s cultural reality, McPhatter believed distorted and incomplete views arise which lead to confusion and a sense of not reaching anticipated outcomes. The final component of McPhatter’s (1999) model is cumulative skills proficiency.

**Cumulative skill proficiency**

Cumulative skill proficiency is viewed as process, with the gradual development of skills congruent with a cultural different client’s reality. The assessment and intervention process in child protection, according to McPhatter (1997), grew out of and was informed by foundations of knowledge. Knowledge of organisational and institutional dynamics are critical because of their impact on racial and ethnic minority groups, however cross cultural communication skills are also crucial. Proficiency in practice skills leads to more astute accuracy in assessment of problem areas and more effectiveness in strategically targeted interventions.
Effective practice towards cultural competency requires commitment not only at the individual level, but as the worker engages within their organisation and across the service sector. McPhatter and Ganaway (2003) proposed that cultural competency as a goal needs to be assigned to administrators, key decision-makers and staff who are accountable for facilitating this process within the organisation to ensure that services are culturally effective and meet the needs of children and families from diverse racial and ethnic cultural backgrounds.

**Review of the models**

All of the models above are founded on practice that builds knowledge from, and values the strengths of, the cultural groups with whom practice is engaged. Acquiring knowledge encompasses a commitment to ongoing learning which moves beyond training workshops. Alongside learning about other cultures, practitioners are urged to critically reflect on the inherent biases which they have acquired from their own experiences because these impact on their attitudes and approach to practice. All the models presented above recognise that knowledge about culture/s and cultural competency is meaningless without applying this to practice. Skills in communication, relationship building, and receptive attitudes in cross cultural practice are viewed as essential to this process.

Awareness and the desire to provide culturally adequate services is not sufficient to ensure that services are responding to the needs of clients from different cultural backgrounds if practice fails to address issues of institutional power, privilege, and oppression and does not challenge the responsibility of institutions to promote inclusive, culturally competent environments (Bernard & Moriah, 2007). Acquiring knowledge, according to Bernard and Moriah (2007) is the first step, however, organisations and agencies need to institutionalise processes that demonstrate their support for cultural
competency in practice, such as providing guidelines for integrating agency cultural competency protocols and policies into everyday practice.

Despite the above introduction to models of cultural competency which generally focus on their aspirations for practice possibilities and institutional change towards the inclusion of diverse cultures, models of cultural competence have been criticised for their broad terms and there is limited research demonstrating how they have had a direct impact on improving cross-cultural practice (Boyle & Springer, 2001). The following section reviews these critiques of cultural competency.

**Critiques of cultural competency**

Critiques of cultural competency have questioned the possibility that the worker can ever be culturally competent (Dean, 2001; Johnson & Munch, 2009). In considering the relevance of cultural competency to social work practice with clients belonging to different cultural backgrounds Johnson and Munch (2009) drew attention to a number of major flaws in the conceptualisation of cultural competence and contradictions about how it was implemented. These are articulated below:

1. **Knowledge and knowing:** This critique places emphasis on how knowledge has historically been gathered to inform cross cultural practice. Gathering knowledge about cultural groups, without involving them in the learning process, is not sufficient to ensure that the client’s knowledge, strengths and expertise are accounted for in the cross cultural relationship;

2. **Veracity:** Knowledge about ‘others’ gathered by workers has not always been reviewed to ascertain its accuracy, relevance or saliency to practice;

3. **Codifying cultural knowledge:** Because cultural knowledge is complex, fluid and difficult to delineate, attempts at description are, by definition stereotypical, and may not reflect the uniqueness, including the dreams,
desires, wishes and preferred processes of an individual. An oversensitivity to cultural considerations risks privileging group needs at the expense of individual self-determination.

Dean (2001) outlined the difficulty of separating knowledge of different cultures from the individual’s own ‘cultural baggage’ in cross cultural practice, and raised concerns that there was the risk that once those outside of the culture presumed to know about that culture, a dominant egocentric position as expert could be reinforced. He argued that cultural competency was a myth and a more realistic goal was to admit to one’s own lack of competency. Furlong and Wight (2011) agreed with this, stating it was impossible to learn to work cross-culturally without developing a capacity for reflective self-scrutiny.

Critiques of cultural competency have also identified that the primary focus of cultural competency is at the site of individuals (as practitioners or clients). They argued cultural competency should integrate multiple levels of practice, that is, individuals, organisations and systems while at the same time addressing the theory, practice and policy bases of social work engagement. They proposed that without this, oppressive practices continued to be permeated through individual, institutional and cultural racism (Dominelli, 1989, 2002; Weaver, 1999; Yan & Wong, 2005). Feeney (2009) cautioned about the unsuitability of mainstream organisations directing or controlling administrative processes towards healing, especially when they may have previously been instrumental in causing harm through past or present policies and practices. Sakamoto (2007) argued cultural competency lacked or had an inadequate analysis of power, and that the literature was overwhelmingly apolitical or de-political. To him, the models of cultural competency present culture as neutral, which allows systems of oppression to remain unacknowledged. He urged that these systems (rather than individuals) should be the point of focus, and not be allowed to disappear into the background.
Further, cultural competency as a framework is criticised for not addressing oppressive practices which have negatively impacted diverse racial and ethnic groups (Dominelli, 2002; Parrott, 2009). The majority of workers in human services organisations continue to be drawn from mainstream, white, middle class educated backgrounds. Dominelli (1989) argued that white people do not have to face the consequences of being at the receiving end of racist social dynamics. She argued that the presence of cultural (mainstream) racism, which prejudgets racial groups negatively and endorses the superiority of white culture over others, comprises the values, beliefs and ideas of mainstreamers who advocate cultural competency frameworks. She proposes that these are present in the everyday activities of individuals and that individual racism continues to be backed by institutions that employ them. She stated that racism continues in the human services, and personnel do not make the connections between personal, institutional and cultural levels of racism. Without making this connection, many workers do not recognise the existence of racism in their behaviour and therefore are not in a position to combat it effectively.

Despite a commitment to address difference, and to work towards changing practices, Chesler (1994) argued that human service organisations are inadequate to redress social injustice in the work place because they emphasise and seek harmonious consensus despite conflict being an inherent aspect of all organisations. Rather, he thought that more consideration should be placed on exposing negotiations among people of different social, racial or gender categories or statuses. This would then expose an organisation’s intent and commitment to cultural competence since change necessitates strategic planning including process of knowledge building and goal setting. A transparent accounting of the negotiation process would demonstrate any shift towards two-way or multi-party knowledge, planning, and decision making power sharing (Fejo-King & Briskman, 2009).
Others argued that cultural competency as a concept or framework of analysis maintained specific cultural groups as ‘different’; essentialised culture as a marker; thereby a ignored the power imbalances between specific and mainstream cultures (Dean, 2001; Dominelli, 2000; Park, 2005; Pon, 2009; Sakamoto, 2007). The critics argue that the voices of specific cultural groups have not been heard. Social work authors argued that models which necessitate cultural inclusion, such as the Indigenization of curriculum in educational settings and the Indigenisation of social work practice are also resisted (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003; Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2007).

The authors cited above all recognised that Indigenous people have challenged the universality of social work knowledge and have advocated a valuing and acceptance of both Western and non-Western knowledge in finding appropriate ways to work across cultures. Critical of the cultural competency frameworks, they argued that identifying elements of cultural competency in child protection practice is quite different from developing an Indigenous model for child protection practice using Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. Weaver (2004) defined an Indigenous model as one that would arise directly from an Indigenous context rather than be an adaptation of a model from another cultural context.

Dominelli (2000) contended that cultural competency can lead to a tokenistic acquisition of knowledge about another culture. Pon (2009) agreed, claiming that cultural competency was a form of racial discrimination which merely involved a shift away from racially exclusionary practices based on biology, to those based on culture. Similarly, Park (2005) argued that ‘culture’ was inscribed as a marker for difference, and was now being deployed as a marker of deficiency replacing categories of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’. He argued that cultural competency frameworks reinforce the same subjugating practices from which they developed. Baskin (2006) criticised cultural competency frameworks for racialising culture, and for their avoidance in naming racism and other oppressions. She
challenged the notion, that ‘if one learns about someone else’s culture all will be well’, as misleading. Baskin (2006) stated that social workers must practice reflexivity, and must examine their own culture and biases and recognise how the value base of social work itself impacts clients. Herring et al. (2012) identified two key limitations of the cultural competency framework in Australia as the basis for changing practice of mainstream service providers towards Aboriginal people (p.4). First, they state ‘it does not address the ongoing trauma legacies from invasion’, and second, ‘it does not take into account the ongoing experiences of racism experienced by Aboriginal Australians’ (p. 4). Instead, they suggested ‘adopting a trauma and racism-informed cultural competence framework comprising three stages: becoming informed, taking a stance, reaching out (p.8). Other Australian authors identified the need for social workers to reflect on how and why they were working across cultures, and what impact this work may have on them personally and professionally especially those non-Indigenous workers who bring with them the privilege of personal and professional power that comes from being a recognised member of a dominant socio-political group (Zubrzycki & Bennett, 2006).

Advocates for cultural competency approaches, however, contend that understanding and accepting one’s own cultural identity is critical to the achievement of comfort with the cultural identity of others (Pinderhughes, 1989). To empower clients of race and ethnicity, practitioners needed to be knowledgeable about the dynamics of power and powerlessness and how these forces operate in human functioning, and they say this is fundamental to a demonstration of culturally competency (Pinderhughes, 1989). Further, working collaboratively is a fundamental element of practice in which the salience of what is being said is able to be understood and accepted (Zubrzycki & Bennett, 2006). In this sense, models of cultural competence are not so different from anti-racist frameworks which have at their core, an analysis and engagement with notions of the distribution of social, economic, political and linguistic power across race and
As Zubrzycki & Bennett (2006) demonstrated, however, models of cultural competency provide an immediate framework for critically reflexive practice when working across cultures. The next section explores a number of studies which attempt to evaluate cultural competency practice.

**Evaluation of Cultural Competency in Practice**

In Australia, a number of studies have attempted to assess and evaluate the skills, knowledge and attributes required for culturally competent practice. These studies found while models of cultural competency enable cross cultural practice to be engaged, the measurement of their effectiveness is more difficult.

Harrison and Turner (2010) conducted an exploratory study of social workers who had graduated within the last five years of their practice, to elicit their understanding of cultural competence. Practitioners expressed an appreciation of the symbolic value of cultural competency. Critical thinking, openness, reflection, respect and non-judgmentalism were cited as key capacities that workers believed were needed to work effectively with people from different backgrounds. Although there was consensus that it was possible to learn to be culturally competent, establishing how it could be achieved was more difficult to articulate. Participants of this study highlighted constraints from the organisational system that thwarted their ability to practice in a culturally responsive manner. For example, they cited external pressure to perform in particular ways, and the lack of autonomy to respond to issues outside of the parameters of their role descriptions within organisations, as inhibiting of their ability to respond in culturally specific and appropriate ways. Despite having graduated within the previous five years, participants were not confident about the effectiveness that formal training and education had on their preparation for practice.
Other studies considered cultural competent practice goals from the perspective of educators, and professionals who had supervised practitioners in the field. Kwong (2009) interviewed social work educators and practitioners with at least 3 years supervisory experience to better understand their perceptions of how cultural competency was conceptualised and how it operated in practice. This was based on a belief that educators and supervisors were in a position to influence new workers in the field. The study found that educators and supervisors viewed cultural competency development as an integrative process which incorporated personal, professional, attitudinal and cultural experiences. Behavioural indicators for assessing practitioner’s cultural competency did not emerge out of the study. All of the participants were in agreement that it was difficult to incorporate various concepts of cultural competency and demonstrate the ability to implement them in practice. Cultural competency was presented as a debatable and complicated concept. The study report presented participants’ views about what they considered to be concrete practical processes through which practitioners could demonstrate culturally competent practice. They listed: self-knowledge, cultural knowledge building, and the ability of practitioners to position themselves as learners rather than experts. Participants thought that these processes enabled workers to acquire a genuine appreciation of different cultures, and enhanced understanding by accessing and networking within cultural communities to conceptualise understanding about how people expressed their problems, and sought help. Participants said that evaluating cultural competency at the individual level required them to consider other aspects which impacted their practice including the influence of systems such as education and the organisation in which they worked. Although the participants in this study had not had formal multicultural training themselves, they identified this as important to provide a framework for moving from knowledge to practice.
Hill and Augoustinos (2001) conducted a study of the outcomes of three day Cross Cultural Awareness Programs conducted for groups of employees of a large Australian public service organisation who had incorporated cultural training into their induction courses. The course was a compulsory anti-racist education program that had been introduced in Australian government agencies in response to a recommendation by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, that found that representatives of the judiciary had little knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture, society and practices. The course aimed to increase knowledge and reduce prejudice towards Australian Aboriginal people. The evaluation assessed participants’ knowledge of prejudice towards and stereotyping of Australian Aboriginal people at three different stages. The participant’s views were evaluated prior to commencing the program, immediately afterwards and 3 months after completion. Sixty participants participated in the study from six different courses.

The evaluation conducted immediately following the completion of the course found that in the short term knowledge of Aboriginal history had increased, and that the course had contributed towards reinforcing existing positive attitudes towards Aboriginal people whilst decreasing negative stereotypes. Follow-up evaluations three months later found that although participants had retained knowledge presented in the courses, the program had been unsuccessful in reducing negative stereotyping and increasing positive stereotypes. The evaluators concluded that although prejudice reduction programs were needed, they provided only one approach to a comprehensive and systematic attack on prejudice at individual, intergroup and institutional/structural levels. Because prejudice and negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people were found to have been retained in these government workers, Hill and Augoustinos (2001) raised concerns about the long term effectiveness of ‘one off’ training courses aimed towards improving responses to Aboriginal people who came into the court system.
Harms et al. (2011) used focus groups to gather perceptions of 30 Aboriginal community members about their experiences of social workers. They were asked, on the basis of their own experiences, to identify forms of educational preparation and social work practice that could lead to more effective relationships and positive outcomes for Aboriginal peoples. The study found that these Aboriginal community members experienced social workers to be inflexible, culturally excluding, and that they failed to facilitate continuity of care by attempting to do everything for the client. Community members raised attentiveness, availability and practice involvement of workers as central attributes for effective social work practice. They talked about their perceptions of what social workers should know when working with Aboriginal people and within their community. Three themes emerged. These were:

1. knowledge of the Stolen Generations and the impact of forced separations on families and communities;
2. knowledge of the complexity of Aboriginal family and community structure, difference and diversity within and across communities, including different functions and authority roles; and
3. knowledge of the history of social work and welfare intervention with Aboriginal people and communities that was still viewed negatively by people in Aboriginal communities.

As well as historic knowledge, participants raised the importance of social workers having specific cultural knowledge local to the area and the ‘mob’ with whom they are working. Listening and engaging with Aboriginal people was viewed as important in working with Aboriginal people, and community members said that cultural misunderstandings were a major cause of difficulties in relationships with non-Aboriginal social workers. The views of these community members were consistent with the
perceptions of Aboriginal people living in Sydney who also took part in focus groups to share their experiences as clients in the human services (Baldry, Green, & Thorpe, 2006). These community members outlined issues in communicating as clients and their involvement in government consultations with communities. They talked about departmental workers talking in ‘jargon’ and ‘techno-babble’ which they couldn't understand and which they often misinterpreted. Poor communication had caused significant problems due to misunderstanding what was said, and they had felt excluded, shamed and disrespected by workers.

In Canada, a similar exploratory qualitative study was conducted by Yan (2005), providing an opportunity for 30 social workers to talk and reflect on their own cultures when working with people who were culturally different. The majority of these workers were bicultural, and identified themselves ethno-cultural identifies such as Portuguese-Canadian. Being bicultural workers were able to draw on their own cultures and experiences as a means of helping clients, especially those who shared similar cultural backgrounds or experiences. The findings showed that for them, cultural awareness occurred before, during and after interventions with clients. They thought that their own cultural background had a positive impact on their professional identity and their work with clients from different cultural backgrounds. Their issues related to a perceived need to separate their ethnic/racial identity from their professional role, whilst attempting to conform to the dominant culture at work. Regardless of their ethno/racial background, these bicultural workers proposed that the ‘whiteness’ image of the mainstream worker was the standard by which they and their clients measured their level of competence. They affirmed that cultural awareness was an interactive, selective and continuous process between the client and worker. The study offered a preliminary understanding of how some social workers used their own cultural background and experiences as an aid in attaining culturally sensitive social work practice.
Summary

Cultural competency, however defined, has developed in response to the recognition of diverse populations living within the same geo-political space and the need for workers to be responsive to these populations. Models of cultural competency arose out of recognition that practice from a mono-cultural basis does not respond to the needs of specific race and ethnic groups. Culturally competent practice was viewed as broader than knowledge and skills alone, and challenges workers to critically reflect on the behaviour and values they brought with them to their practice.

In this research, the term cultural competency is used to refer to an approach to practice in which there is an acceptance that difference and diversity within and between cultural groups is valued, and that practice responses acknowledge and build upon the integrity of the strengths in diverse worldviews, cultures and practices. In this approach, ongoing knowledge building about cultures underpins the wisdom for attaining specific skills of cross cultural practice. Worldviews, beliefs and attitudes of workers are more effective when they align with the strengths and integrity of clients’ culture.

Although the literature provides frameworks for practice using a culturally competent base, there is little empirical research in Australia on cultural competency particularly in the child protection field with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (Libesman, 2004). It is this gap in research to which this study attends. This study explores child protection practice, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in two rural communities in Queensland. The following chapter sets out the research design, approach and methods used to explore this topic.
Chapter Four: Methodology

Introduction

Chapter two presented the historic and current context of Australian child protection policies and practices with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. This historic context is important because of the legacy left for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons to bear, including the forced removal of children from their families, communities and culture. This legacy is characterised by intergenerational poor socio-economic and political status, the former of which is cited most frequently as the underlying cause of overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the current child welfare system (AIHW, 2012; HREOC, 1997). This chapter also provided a background to the contemporary child protection system. The previous chapter then outlined the development of the concept of cultural competency together with models of practice. In cultural competency approaches, there is an assumption that human service practitioners will provide people from diverse cultural backgrounds, culturally appropriate services which support the integrity and strengths of their own culture (McPhatter, 1997). Cultural competency approaches demand that workers practice with appropriate cross-cultural skills, attitudes and values. Being able to establish how this ‘should’ occur or has occurred in practice across cultures has proved more difficult to ascertain, articulate and evaluate (Boyle & Springer, 2001; Harrison & Turner, 2010; Kwong, 2009; Williams, 2006). This chapter brings these two bodies of literature together, outlining the methodological approach used in this study. It then describes how the research was conducted.

The chapter presents the broad philosophic assumptions about the nature of knowledge, and the decisions that informed the data collection methods of the study. The study utilised the social constructionist paradigm and conceptual framework developed by
Bourdieu (1989) who merged constructivist and structuralist frameworks. Bourdieu’s framework (1989; 1990a; 1993) attempted to make sense of how to understand an individual’s lived experiences from the inside out (i.e. subjectivist). Bourdieu (1989) also pointed out the importance of allowing for the impact of an objective social world. A social constructivist in this view accepts both, the presence of an external reality and an interior subjectively perceived and understood reality.

**Philosophical framework**

Epistemology is concerned with the researcher’s ‘assumptions about the nature of knowledge’, ‘what is knowable’, how knowledge is derived, and ‘the researcher’s relationship with that which they are trying to grasp’ (Daly, 2007, p.21). Whilst objectivist views hold that meaning and meaningful reality exist apart from the operation of any consciousness, subjectivists reject this view, and believe that meaning is not discovered but constructed and comes into existence through one’s engagement with the realities of one’s world (Crotty, 1998). According to Daly (2007), ‘an objectivist epistemology thereby rests on the separation between the knower and the known’, and the epistemological position of subjectivism posits ‘there can be no separation between the knower and the known because all knowledge is constructed through a meaning making process in the mind of the knower’ (p.23). Rather than view these two positions as mutually exclusive, Daly (2007) conceptualises these two positions, as part of a continuum, emphasising that positions taken on this continuum are matters of degree.

‘At an epistemological level, social constructionism lies between the subjectivist and objectivist polar extremes’ (Daly, 2007, p.32). It could be viewed as having a more subjectivist epistemology, whilst, at the same time accepts the ‘belief that there are shared meanings that can be understood and known’ outside of the lived experience of individuals. This holds aspects of an objectivist epistemology because shared meanings are a form of objective reality (Daly, 2007, p. 24).
Constructionism views knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality 'contingent upon human practices, which are constructed in and out of interactions between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty, 1998, p.53). Similarly, Schwandt (2008) stated that people construct meaning from their experiences of living in a complex world and through social interaction, co-construct ways of categorising reality. According to social constructionists, knowledge is inextricably connected to persons, and is constructed through social interaction, dialectical processes and the shared experience of groups (Guba & Lincoln, 2008). Social constructionists recognise that meaning making is subject to interpretation by persons themselves, out of everyday activities. Meaning making therefore is a dynamic rather than a fixed or static process. In order to understand the meaning people derive from their activities, social constructionist theorists rely heavily on talk as the primary medium for research activity. They focus on the meanings participants ascribe to particular words and experiences. For a researcher to understand the meaning that language and actions have for research participants, it is necessary to consider the processes by which meaning is created, negotiated and sustained by persons in a specific context.

Relating this to social work, Blundo and Greene (1999) proposed a social situation is best understood by eliciting the unique experiences of the people who are in that situation. These experiences can be both subjective and objective. Daly (2007) provides examples used by qualitative researchers aimed at ‘letting the data speak’ to capture the essence of objective reality in what is said, without necessary influencing it. This implies data is real outside of the lived experience of individuals, data has agency, and that data has an independent reality that can be heard and understood if closely listened to. This is particularly pertinent to this research which considers the processes through which meaning is created, negotiated and sustained in child protection practice that brings together individuals from different cultural backgrounds.
Using this social constructionist paradigm, culture can be viewed as the way groups of people make sense of the world and form expectations about life out of their shared experiences within a specific social context. Social constructionists, therefore, also acknowledge that social interactions play out through constructs that already exist, such as race, class, gender (etc.), as well as those that emerge between actors, within specific social contexts. Reality then, is created through a lived experience of a perceived external reality and a subjective meaning making process (Daly, 2007). Crotty (1998) defined constructivism as ‘primarily an individualistic understanding of the constructionist positions’ which posits the unique experience of the individual and their way of making sense of the world as valid and worthy of respect (p. 58). The study utilised the social constructivist paradigm and conceptual framework developed by Bourdieu (1989; 1990a) who merged constructivist and structuralist frameworks. To Bourdieu (1989), structuralism proposed that there existed ‘within the social world itself and not only within symbolic systems (language, myths, etc.), objective structures independent of the consciousness and will of agents, which are capable of guiding and constraining their practices or their representations’ (p. 14). Bourdieu’s framework (1989; 1990a; 1993) attempted to make sense of and understand an individual’s lived experiences from the inside out (i.e. subjectivism). He also raised the importance of allowing for the impact of an objective social world (Bourdieu, 1989). Bourdieu (1989) acknowledged on the one hand, ‘the schemes of perception, thought, and action’ which are constitutive of the habitus (of the individual), and on the other, social structures which he refers to as fields and of groups ‘notably those we ordinarily call social classes’ (p. 14). This view accepts both the presence of an external reality and an interior subjectively perceived and understood reality.

It is this external reality with which critical theory is concerned. Critical theorists suggest that reality is produced through historically based social and political processes.
They propose that reality cannot be separated from the historic, social and political processes which have become embedded in structures of society and which serve the purposes of those in power. The problem of providing services to culturally diverse populations has historically been framed by those in power as a problem of culture, or cultural differences that must be overcome or accommodated (Sue et al., 1992). Critical race theorists state that those who do not acknowledge history, and its impacts on particular racial groupings, take a ‘color blind’ approach (Tong & Cross, 1991) which then pathologises persons or groups from particular racial or ethnic minority groups for not living up to what Dominelli (1998) referred to as the ‘white norms measuring rods of life’. Razack and Jeffery (2002) reiterate the complexity of ever shifting historic contexts and the dynamism needed to maintain understanding across impacts on racial and ethnic groups over time.

Critical race theory transformed the study of race and racism by highlighting issues of power. It accounts for how economics, history, geography and dominant individual and group interests impacts on those ‘raced’ by the socially, politically and economic dominant group (Razack & Jeffery, 2002). Critical theorists challenge the notion that racism is a normal human response to difference, and recognised that it is embedded in social, political, economic and linguistic structures of dominant society. Critical theorists argue that particular perspectives and stories perpetuated by people in power about ‘others’, are forms of racism which maintain a ‘social reality’. Through this process, whole racial and ethnic groups are socially constructed and co-constructed by dominant society. This ignores characteristics of ‘raced’ persons as individuals. Persons of colour/culture are therefore only recognised by those in dominant society, as part of a group. This contrasts with the categorisation of white people who in white western democracies are only seen as individuals. Perspectives and stories about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people permeate Australian society and provide consistent
examples of categorical homogenising of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Augoustinos, Tuffin and Sale (1999) suggested that negative stereotypes are so ingrained in Australian society that they can be automatically and spontaneously activated. Their study explored how Indigenous Australians are constructed and problematised in ordinary talk, and how this talk then justifies and legitimates the oppression and powerlessness of Indigenous Australians. This is part of post-modern racism which recognises the importance of language in sustaining preconceived notions of ‘others’ (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Critical race theory is important to this study, because it enables a critical analysis of the taken for granted aspects about race that exist in language and social interactions of social workers in child protection systems.

Epistemologically, researchers play a very significant role in the way meanings are created. Researchers create the parameters through which participants talk about their ‘realities’. Researchers also play a significant part in how the realities of participants are portrayed. Because researchers subject these realities to interpretation in the process of data analysis, they participate actively in shifting meaning from the site of the individual to generic patterns of meaning that contribute to an understanding of the research phenomenon (in this case, child protection). In this regard, it is acknowledged here, that data can be viewed as ‘contrived’ because the process of research profoundly shapes the way participants describe the meanings of their experience (Speer, 2002). For this reason, Daly (2007) proposed that researchers needed to acknowledge that they are eliciting a version of the participants’ reality, and that this ‘reality’ is subject to further interpretation in the analysis phase of research which seeks understanding of the broader patterns of meaning that exists in society or a particular demographic of that society.

This has implications for workers who are required to interact with children and families from cultural backgrounds different to their own. Workers bring with them a ‘reality’ immersed in a different context than that of the clients they serve. Williams (2006)
proposed that since culture can be understood as a set of group-based experiences and expectations that individuals use to make sense of the world, working across cultures requires a readiness to engage with alternative, distinct accounts of reality in order to elicit accurate understandings between persons and particular groupings of persons.

The next section outlines Bourdieu’s theoretical framework (1989; 1990a; 1993), which provides a tool to consider how child protection workers made sense of their experiences within the contexts of their experience, particularly through understanding the structures (policies, organisations, legislation etc.) through which they interact. This study was positioned between the two ends of the continuum referred to by Daly (2007). It used a social constructivist paradigm based on the belief that child protection workers construct meanings that can be understood and known, and a critical paradigm which posits the existence of an external knowable reality; the presence of which exists regardless of one’s own personal consciousness. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus was used to make sense of how participants constructed meaning of their practice. A critical framework was used to elicit the influence and impact of structural forces in society that reflected inequalities between actors in the child protection process. Bourdieu’s framework (1984, 1989, 1990a, 1993) provides a way to consider child protection practice using constructivist and critical analysis.

**Bourdieu’s theoretical framework**

Bourdieu (1989, 1990a) constructed a theoretical model of social research which attempts to understand how the wider patterns of social life, with all of their taken for granted assumptions, impact peoples meaning making or ‘reality’. Whilst exploring the subjective world of the individual, Bourdieu (1989) also considered the objective world in which the individual actively engaged. Bourdieu’s sociology is critical of ‘established patterns of power and privilege as well as of the politics that supports them’ (Wacquant,
His proposes ‘the social order masks its arbitrariness’ and perpetuates itself through a subtly imposing of systems of meaning that ‘legitimize’, rationalise and ‘solidify structures of inequality’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 263). He uses the concepts of *habitus, capital* and *field* which are internally linked to one another. His theoretical model is similar to critical race theory in that both analyse sources of power in society and the ordinariness of life arguing this hides blatant forms of discrimination that serve to advance the interests of some groups of people in society over others.

The object of analysis for Bourdieu, is the *space of positions* individuals, by possessing one or a number of forms of *capital*, occupy within social systems (Bourdieu, 1989; Wacquant, 1993, p. 21). Bourdieu’s theory holds the motivation that drives the behaviour of the individual, is ‘the thirst for dignity’, that is, ‘by being granted a name, a place, a function within a group or institution’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 265). This offers the individual an ‘escape from the contingency, finitude and ultimate absurdity of existence’ (Wacquant, 2006, p. 265). ‘Social existence thus means difference, and difference implies hierarchy, which in turns sets off endless dialectic of distinction and pretension, recognition and misrecognition, arbitrariness and necessity’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 265). According to Bourdieu (1986), difference and irregularities in society could be attributed to the distribution of forms of capital, ‘which is a resource effective in a given social arena’ that enables the individual ‘to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 268). The position the individual occupies in social space, is related to the ‘overall volume of capital they possess’ and ‘the relative weight of the different species of capital’ in the ‘total volume of their assets’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 17).

Bourdieu mapped difference in social space. He found individuals who possess a high volume of forms of capital are inclined to develop similar lifestyles, outlooks, dispositions and a tacit sense of their place in the world. Bourdieu referred to this as a ‘class unconsciousness’; that is, a class *habitus* (see Grenfell, 2008, p. 93). He studied a
sample of 1217 people and mapped a detailed analysis of numbers of economic and
cultural fields in which people engaged, to examine the important mutualities that worked
across fields and created social groupings (Bourdieu, 1984). He studied details about
their educational background and social connectedness. He proposed social interaction
within groups embed them in their relationships, and to particular attitudes, views (beliefs)
and symbolic behaviours (often unconsciously). Automatic gestures such as their ways of
walking, eating or talking were observed, and Bourdieu (1984) found this makes it
possible for individuals to socially orient themselves to a ‘sense of one’s place’ in society.

These behaviours, attitudes and beliefs lead to unquestioned assignation of
‘cultural arbitraries’ which Bourdieu (1989) argued underpin systems, characterised by the
formation of domination and hierarchies between different social classes and racial/ethnic
groupings (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Cicourel, 1993; DiMaggio, 1979). However,
he cautioned against seeking an understanding of how these systems are then
reproduced in society by interpreting people’s interactions from observation alone.
Bourdieu found what was observed in behaviours, masked the influence and existence of
power that was held and maintained within the ‘objective’ structures of society (Bourdieu,
1989, p.16). His theoretical framework attempted to explain how social systems both
reflect inequality and class divisions, while simultaneously reproducing those same
inequalities and class and race divisions.

Central to his theoretical framework relates to the question of ‘how social systems
reproduce hierarchy and domination in culture without mass opposition arising’ (Houston,
2002, p. 155). Bourdieu (1984) found, in his view, although in society there are vested
interests and struggles to attain symbolic and material advantage over others, the power
and drive inherent within all forms of action although sometimes deliberate, is more often
habitual or tacit, and strategizing. Bourdieu (1993) explained this somewhat by suggesting
that all behaviour is situated within a field of action which has its own system of valuation
and practice (see Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). He suggested it is within fields that different classes and class factions engage in symbolic struggles to impose, define and reproduce a society or part of that society to conform and serve their interests (DiMaggio, 1979). Bourdieu developed three primary concepts through which to articulate these struggles, viz, habitus, capital, and field.

Habitus

*Habitus* is a concept which Bourdieu (1989) used to consider how social relations and social positions are internalised and experienced as 'natural' and become taken-for-granted truths (or received wisdom) by an individual, and how these social positions then become expressed and entrenched through distinct behaviours and perceptions, of that individual in their external milieu (see Noble & Watkins, 2003). Bourdieu (1989) sought a link between an individual’s subjective world and the cultural world into which they are born and which they share with others (see Jenkins, 2002). To do this, he developed the term *habitus* to explain how the ways of the world are imprinted and encoded in the person during socialisation, upbringing and in their social experiences. *Habitus* reveals the embodiment of the social location of the speaker, their posture and their ways of behaving which reflects outward signs of their social position (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu (1996) argues that habitus is not habit, even though he lists habits as expressions of habitus (p. 180). Noble and Watkins (2003) propose that ‘habitus cannot develop except via *habituation*’ which is needed to help one make sense of this acquisition. Bourdieu described habitus as a ‘matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions’ which continually adapt in response to what is happening within a certain context, but which also embody sediments of individual and collective history (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.82-83; see Wacquant, 2009). Being in the world, and maintaining a position involves a practical mastery of engaging with the implicit principles of the social world (Bourdieu, 1990a). Bourdieu believed that how individuals actively engage in social
life positions them in relation to others. This process results in an individual developing a sense of their place in the world, and because individuals are connected socially, it provides a sense of this place in relation to that of others.

_Habitus_ can be described as a lens through which an individual unconsciously perceives and makes sense of the world at any time, and which also guides their behaviour and actions. Bourdieu (1990a; 1993) defined the notion of _habitus_ as a system of ‘durable’ and ‘transposable’ dispositions that last over time, and through which the individual perceives, judges, and acts in a variety of theatres of social action. ‘These unconscious schemata are acquired through lasting exposure to particular social conditions and conditionings, via the internalisation of external constraints and possibilities’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 267). Therefore, within the _habitus_ of each individual, there exists a set of dispositions which unconsciously guides them to encompass a ‘way of being’ or a ‘habitual state’ which leads to a ‘tendency’, ‘propensity’ or ‘inclination’ to perceive and act in the social world in a way that categorises or classifies them (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Because _habitus_ is unconsciously acquired, much that occurs in social life is taken for granted, and most of the time people do not consciously think about why they perceive or act in certain ways. _Habitus_ is the mechanism that inculcates in individuals a sense of their place in the social world, defining what actions or plans are acceptable and generating possibilities for action (Bourdieu, 1990b).

Bourdieu did not perceive people as mindless machines, whose social trajectory in life was set (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). He saw _habitus_ as a generative mechanism, and suggested that one’s behaviours, thoughts, and perceptions (etc.) arise not simply as a result of one’s _habitus_, but rather from the interface of one’s _habitus_ and current circumstances (Horvat, 2003). Bourdieu (1993) described this relation as the meeting of two evolving logs or histories. At the same time, he suggested there were ‘patterned,
regular, predictable practices within each field’, and ‘between fields’ that ‘bear striking similarities’ to the kinds of social agents who are dominant in each social field’ (Grenfell, 2008, p. 70). For Bourdieu, an individual’s ability to make sense of the world and to determine a course of acceptable action is influenced through their perception and their experiences in the physical and social spaces they occupy. Bourdieu proposed the habitus as ‘structured’ by one’s past, where an individual’s initial perceptions are both exposed to, and influenced by their early socialising experiences and by present circumstances such as educational experiences (see Grenfell, 2008, p. 51).

Bourdieu (1986) also acknowledged that within society, individuals and groups have differential access to capital or resources and this influences their opportunities, and positions socially. These he referred to as forms of capital, which are discussed in more detail in the following section.

**Capital**

Bourdieu considered the world a place of inequality, where social structures function in ways that systematically maintain social inequalities between persons and particular groups of persons (Calhoun, LiPuma, & Postone, 1993). Bourdieu (1986) stated that ‘the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world ( p. 46). The individual’s socialisation is an introduction to a society in which economic wealth is able to be accumulated and exchanged for other valuable resources in prescribed and inequitable ways. At birth, the individual inherits and accesses from their family, forms of capital which position them within societal structures according to their value and status. Bourdieu (1986) divided these types of capital into four different forms. *Economic capital* relates to material wealth and financial assets. *Cultural capital* which exists in three forms, some of which is inherited and some of it acquired. Bourdieu (1984; 1986) defines these three forms of *cultural capital* as follows: first, the *embodied* state (acquired over time) in
the form of long lasting dispositions of the mind and body; second, the objectified state in the form of cultural goods (for example an aesthetic disposition, the capacity to distinguish objects socially designated as deserving and of value such as in paintings, pictures, and instruments) and finally, in the institutionalised state, (also referred as educational capital), in the form of educational qualifications which confers on its owner a conventional, legally guaranteed value (Bourdieu, 1984, p.80; 1986, p. 48, 50). Although cultural capital encompasses knowledge, experience or connections that enable an individual to succeed, not all individuals possess all forms of cultural capital. The third form of capital is social capital, which is made up of social obligations. Social capital is a relational asset. It differs from social support or social networks, because it is a by-product of these interactions which links individuals, groups and structures (Hawkins & Maurer, 2012). The premise behind social capital is that investment in particular social relations will bring expected and particular returns (Lin, 1999). The fourth form of capital is symbolic capital. Symbolic capital comprises economic or cultural capital when their possession is known and recognised. Symbolic capital, ‘is a credit; it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23).

Bourdieu (1986) proposed that there is a symbolic aspect to all forms of capital which assumes their legitimacy and value, and which affords those who possess them, power and status. This assumption of legitimacy and value in different types of capital has led to groups with similar capital identifying collectively (Grenfell, 2008, p. 93). A taken for granted, ongoing reciprocal or dialectical relationship exists within and between those in particular social groups. For example, ‘Bourdieu demonstrated that those who benefited from the French schooling system were those already possessed of social and economic advantages’ (Grenfell, 2008, p.76). It is this relational aspect of capital which ensures that the structure of privilege and power in society is retained (Wacquant, 2009). The second
aspect of capital relates to the social trajectory of the individual. Bourdieu (1986) acknowledged the individual’s ability and propensity to acquire, accumulate and use the capital that they possess or are able to acquire to improve their position within society. It is this process which separates individuals, who have much the same volume of capital, and which propels them to struggle and compete with each other to improve their position.

Bourdieu’s theory draws two factors regarding the notion of capital in the process of social reproduction. First, although all individuals have different types of capital to invest or activate in a variety of social settings or fields, they determine courses of acceptable action, and develop their practical mastery of their social world. Second, to be of value in a field, forms of capital need to be recognised as valuable. Their value allows them to be converted into different forms of capital, which can be acquired and accumulated (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Used as a method of analysis, the concepts of habitus and capital provide a way of thinking about the social world which invites an understanding of everyday practices as constitutive of social difference (Reay, 1995). Reay (1995) used Bourdieu's theoretical framework to inform her study of children at school to demonstrate how primary school children from different social classes act out the processes of social differentiation in their everyday activities within their classroom. Children from privileged backgrounds, who are capital rich, behave in ways that indicate a connectedness to the economy and reflect a sense of entitlement and privilege, whilst those children from working class backgrounds perceive their position differently and their behaviour and perceptions reflect their position in society as members of the working class.

**Field**

The concept of field refers to the context in which social activity occurs. Bourdieu (1989; 1993) developed the concept of field to refer to both the totality of actors and organisations involved in an arena of social or cultural production and the dynamic
relationships between them (see DiMaggio, 1979). He described these relationships as
dynamic because they are competitive and unpredictable. Different forms of capital are
valued in different social fields and by those actively engaged in those fields. Bourdieu
(1993) claimed that actors are positioned within a field relative to their capital. Within
fields, individuals compete and struggle to maintain the forms of capital that they possess
or are able to acquire or accumulate. Capital is a source of power which can be
exchanged and converted and within fields there are opportunities to do this. This is more
visible for economic capital which can be converted into other forms of capital, but less
visible for less tangible forms of capital. The portfolio of capital that the individual
possesses positions them alongside others within a field. Jenkins (2002) described
Bourdieu’s concept of a field, as ‘a structured system of social positions - occupied either
by individuals or institutions – the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants’
(p.84). A field is ‘structured internally in terms of power relationships’, and ‘positions stand
in relationships of domination, subordination or equivalence to each other by virtue of the
access they afford to the goods or resources (capital) which are at stake’ (Jenkins, 2002,
p.84). In a field individuals are not isolates, they are aware of their position in fields,
relative to others, and understand that they have shared commitments and investments in
particular fields. Bourdieu describes these investments as illusio (Bourdieu, 1998, p.76).
That is, individuals engage in social spaces because they recognise the value and gains
that evolve out of their active engagement. Individuals who enter social spaces ‘pay an
entry fee which consists of recognition of the value of the game, and in (practical)
knowledge of the principles on which it functions (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 74).

In a field, habitus performs a mediating role, since it is one’s habitus that guides
and influences individuals to take up a particular position in a field. Habitus provides an
individual with a perception of what is possible for them in society (Bourdieu, 1989). At
the same time, each field has its own system for determining the practices within it, its
purpose and what forms of capital are of value to it (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Fields are multi-dimensional spaces within which people assume positions. Because fields are not static, and are always being challenged from internal and external forces, individuals are always struggling and competing to retain their position. Therefore, every field is a site of struggles in which individuals seek to improve their positions. Being able to retain a position within a field is influenced by their ability to maintain or alter the distribution of particular forms of capital (Chrichton, 2008; Mahar, Harker, & Wilkes, 1990).

Within each field there are rules of competent performance, rituals for entry and exit, and a value is placed on different forms of knowledge and practice. Socially competent performances are produced routinely, without explicit reference to a body of codified knowledge. These can be considered part of habitus.

One way to understand the interface of field, habitus and capital is through Bourdieu's (1976) analogy of a card game. Bourdieu used the card game to illustrate two points. First as a field of interaction in which individuals are dealt different cards (capital). The analogy draws attention to how individuals in society assume or acquire different resources available to them when they begin to engage in the game, and which they are able to use in play. Second, as in a card game, the value of the cards (or resources) they are dealt (or are able to acquire) differs and changes according to the rules of play, and the game being played. The metaphor of the game demonstrates how players bring different skills and strategies (habitus) into the game. It shows how players choose to play their cards (or activate their capital), to influence how the game is played. It shows how necessary it is for existing players to be conscious of the capital that a new player brings into the game, because this not only influences how that newcomer's play will impact the game, but how existing players in the game may need to adjust their play to in order to remain competitive.
This research used Bourdieu’s framework to explore the *field* of child protection
*field*. It considered the forms of *capital* that are of value within this field, and the *habitus*
of the players who choose to enter this *field*. It explored the impact that a person’s
previous experiences, ways of perceiving the world, and interactions with others
consciously or unconsciously had on their attitudes, perceptions and actions in the *field* of
child protection. Bourdieu’s framework provided a philosophical framework through which
to explore how people (actors), who enter child protection practice, make sense of and
engage in the state of play in their practice within this *field*. This research aimed also, to
explore participants’ views, opinions and experiences within another *field*, that of rural
practice.

**Methodology**

Qualitative researchers study the world from the point of view of research
participants in their own territory (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Qualitative methods therefore align
with Bourdieu’s philosophic framework (as above). They are also particularly suited to
examining the cross cultural practice of workers (different *habitus*, with diverse and fluid
forms of *capital*) within rural contexts of child protection practice (*fields*).
Because qualitative research is:

- idiosyncratic (that is, it looks at specific cases and unique traits or functioning of
  individuals rather than attempting to make broad generalisations); and
- *emic* (it enables an analysis of the structural and functional elements of
  language and/or behaviour);

it is suited to achieving the aims of this research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Constructivists view culture as created through human agency, based on the belief
that people actively organise and create their own reality through social interaction
(Greene, Jensen, & Jones, 1996; Williams, 2006). Knowledge of child protection workers
is co-constructed on the basis of their shared experiences. I sought to participate in knowledge building from data collected from child protection workers who worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, to elicit their work experiences, their construction of meaning around their practice and how they performed their role. The constructivist approach recognises that this knowledge has evolved out of immersion into specific social and geographic contexts, and whilst engaging a culture that may have been different form their own (Williams, 2006). A strength of qualitative research is its ability to elicit naturally occurring data to find the sequences about ‘how’ workers find meaning and ‘what’ actions they employ in the context of the events being explored (Silverman, 2006).

In this research, I attempted to position workers at the centre of this study of cross cultural practice firmly located within the practice context and to listen to those currently involved in child protection practice, in particular in their direct work with clients. I sought to build knowledge from data collected from workers, whose practice required them to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

This research was interpretive and inductive, and used face to face interviews for collecting data across two stages in order to systematically reflect and draw conclusions about meaning for the workers. The research began with child protection workers ‘telling’ about their experiences about practice. They provided stories about their experiences from which they shared their interpretations and meanings. These stories related to their own child protection practice in these rural settings and focused on their experiences. It provided a way of knowing the world and understanding experience from their perspective. Workers did not refer to case files, and did not provide ‘factual’ data, but were provided the opportunity to present their perspectives and opinions. As such the method for collecting data was both a process (allowing them to select what was important to them) and a product (what was said) explored through semi-structured
interviews. This provided an element of continuity as workers talked about how their experience had unfolded over time. Workers were able to talk about their life experiences and employment histories prior to their current role. They were able to discuss the contexts of their work which had them residing in rural areas where populations were smaller, and there was less autonomy, and less resources. They shared the strategies they used to adjust to these changes. They outlined their own realities of engaging and practicing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families who came to the attention of child protection agencies. Finally, they selected a case to discuss in depth from their own caseload in order to demonstrate their views and individual approaches to practice.

There are weaknesses in this methodology since it relies on the interviewer’s ability to present and interpret the reality of the participant through a process of listening (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hayes, 2008). Nonetheless it draws on first-hand accounts of child protection practitioners. Data collection is dependent on the ability of the interviewer to ascertain and help the participants articulate both their implied and inferred knowledge.

Methods

Aims

The aims of this project were:

- To explore the pathways workers used to enter child protection practice
- To explore experiences of child protection practitioners in rural locations
- To consider how workers describe their practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families
- To explore the views of workers on cultural competency as an approach to practice
• To explore how workers were prepared to respond to the demands they faced in their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
• To explore how Indigenous and non-Indigenous child protection workers work together

**Ethical Issues**

This study is part of a broader project which aims to develop models for effective child protection practice in rural areas by exploring how workers construct practice. The study focused on cross cultural child protection practice in rural areas with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children. Ethical approval was obtained from Griffith University Human Ethnics Research Committee for this research which explored the experiences, views and understanding of workers in their cross cultural practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

Careful attention was taken for any issues which arose in dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in particular issues surrounding confidentiality. The Australian Social Work Code of Ethics recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Indigenous people of Australia and acknowledges the historical disadvantage suffered by Indigenous people in Australia and the implications of this for social work practice. The code also recognises and respects racial and cultural diversity of Australian society (AASW, 2004).

The National Health and Medical Research Council developed guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003). I attempted to incorporate the values presented within these guidelines. The study is about helping child protection practice to become congruent and benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The study included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants to give an opportunity for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander peoples to help build cultural competency in practice through actively participating and giving their views in this study. Respect was shown by giving voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, and actively listening, affirming their right to have different values, norms and views in the semi-structured interviews conducted. I negotiated and consulted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants about the research process before it began, and during the data collection. I attempted to ensure accountability in the data collection by sharing with participants the data that had been collected attempting to ensure that it was accurate and representative of their views.

An Expert Advisory Group was established as part of the broader study to advise the researchers of the proposed research and to consult with them to ensure the research is grounded in the experience and perspectives of people from Indigenous culture. The Expert Advisory Committee was comprised of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives who had worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and who had extensive knowledge and skills in service delivery in rural and remote communities. I have met with people from the panel on several occasions throughout this research to consult on my experiences and findings. At all times I respected the confidentiality of all participants and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. I decoded all data, and ensured that storage adhered to the guidelines of Ethics Research Committee.

The aims and objectives of this study were included in the ethics approval sought from the Griffith University Human Ethics Research Committee to convene focus groups as part of the larger study which aimed to explore practice of workers at the two sites (Ethical Clearance HSV/37/09). An extension of this Ethics approval was sought and granted in December, 2009 to conduct semi-structured interviews for this study with
workers employed at the sites selected. The research was conducted in accordance with the approved protocol.

I visited workers employed at the community agency at both sites to consult with workers about the purpose of this study and to provide written and verbal information outlining the purpose and focus of the study. Workers from the community agency indicated their willingness to participate in the data collection for this study. I gave a commitment to provide the results of the research to both the Expert Advisory Committee, and to the staff at both the government and Indigenous community agencies.

It is acknowledged this form of interviewing and data collection is intrusive and may raise issues for participants when considering their practice. For employees, the research interviews may raise issues associated with their decision-making, their relationships with clients, and their relationships with agencies. If this had occurred, I was aware that the statutory agency has an Employment Support Service that would be able to offer counselling for employees should it be required. I was also aware that the community agencies had employed consultants to provide support to staff should any issues arise. To my knowledge, this did not occur during the data collection phases. Careful attention was made to ensure data remained anonymous and that confidentiality was respected with all data collected. Managers at both the statutory agencies and the Indigenous agencies were provided with information about the purpose of the study, orally and in writing, and consented to their employees’ participation.

Employees were asked to provide individual consent on their own behalf prior to providing information on their practice and experience as employees. They were provided with a written information sheet detailing the aims of the study. A copy of this consent is attached to Appendix B. Participants were advised at the outset that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.
Data sources

Sites

The research was embedded in a broader ARC Linkage project, focussed on two rural sites of child protection practice. The sites were selected in consultation with senior managers at the statutory child protection agency. The Department of Child Safety (now the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services) was the lead agency in the State for the delivery of child protection services, and is a partner organisation in the broader ARC study addressing the issue of recruitment and retention of workers in child protection. The final choice of sites reflected the large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children resident within Aboriginal communities and the geographic regions. The geographic contexts of practice are important in terms of both the philosophic framework of this study which focuses on the interrelationships between *habitus* (of the workers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait clientele); *fields* (in terms of child protection and geographic context) and *capital* (resources of child protection workers and clientele). A description of both sites is therefore presented below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Site 1</th>
<th>Site 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population</strong> Total residents</td>
<td>60,216</td>
<td>13262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indigeneity</strong> % of population who identify as Indigenous</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong> Median</td>
<td>35 years</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21% &lt; 14 yrs</td>
<td>36% &lt;14 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14%&lt;65 yrs</td>
<td>3.2%&lt;65 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education level attained</strong></td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5772(9.5%)</td>
<td>2425 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27 (2.85%)</td>
<td>22 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employed</strong> Technical/Trade Labourers</td>
<td>4711</td>
<td>878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not employed</strong></td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Income</strong> For Individual</td>
<td>$588</td>
<td>$285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$1151</td>
<td>$724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing</strong> Rental housing</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ownership</strong> Private Ownership</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. *Child Protection Statistics Site 1 and Site 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2009-2010</th>
<th>Site 1</th>
<th>Site 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Indigenous</td>
<td>Indigenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children subject to Child Protection Orders</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Notified and Investigated</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children assessed to be harmed</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children residing in out of home</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, 2012d)

**Similarities between the sites.**

Sites one and two are two rural locations in Queensland which fall within the geographic boundaries served by two statutory child protection agencies. Statutory agencies are located in larger regional centres within the sites to provide child protection services. Recognised entities receive state government funding to provide child protection services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. One of these community agencies is located in the Aboriginal community and the other in the larger regional centre.

Within the past decade these rural areas, and in particular the regional centres, have experienced a decline in the economy which impacts on employment in the region. Residents within both these sites are predominantly non-Indigenous and whilst historically...
employment was available within rural operations and services at regional centres at the sites, more recently mining and social services have provided greater job opportunities. Tertiary institutions situated at site one provide employment opportunities for graduates, and the retention of young people in education systems has increased as has the number of graduates.

Within each of these sites, situated some distance away from the main centre, is an Aboriginal community where large numbers of residents (92.8% and 97.5% respectively) identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (see Table 1 above). These communities are ‘self-managed’ by locally elected councils under Deeds of Grant In Trust (DOGIT). The communities retain a unique history. The residents in these communities, exhibit health problems that are mirrored in the broader demography for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, for example, high rates of diabetes, heart problems and lower life expectancies (Queensland Health, 2011).

In the early part of the twentieth century the communities were established as government missions. Aboriginal people were moved, sometimes forcibly, to these missions from other parts of the state under the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897. Many of the residents who live in these communities were born in the community, to their parents who were also born here. Some of the current residents had been raised in dormitories (when the community was administered as a mission), and some residents had returned to community after many years living away. Residents express a sense of connection to these communities, which they said gives them a sense of identity and connectedness to their social, cultural and spiritual wellbeing (Queensland Health, 2011).

Health issues are prevalent, and in each of these communities, Community Health Centres operate both preventative and more acute health services (Queensland Health, 2011). Other health and social services agencies exist in these communities to provide
services such as aged care, mental health, schools, child care and drug rehabilitation. Housing shortages lead to over-crowding in available accommodation. All of the housing on these Aboriginal communities is owned by government and rented out to residents (see Table 1 above). There is no private ownership, although outside of these communities more than half the residents in the region own their own houses (see Table 1 above).

The residents who live in these communities are younger than those living within the wider region. The median age for residents is approximately 20 years compared to 35 to 37 years at the regional centres (see Table 1 above). Many of the residents are young parents with children who attend the local primary schools.

There are also higher rates of unemployment in Aboriginal communities compared to the broader region. This is in part the result of limited employment opportunities available and distance and lack of public transport to access centres where there may be more employment opportunities. No public transport is available in and out of these communities. Consequently, many of the residents are reliant on Commonwealth government pensions. More recently increases in employment within the human services sector in the wider region has increased employment opportunities (ABS, 2013)

**Data Collection**

Table 3 summarises the aims, data required and processes used for acquiring data during stage one and stage two of this research.
Table 3. *Stages of Data Collection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Data Required</th>
<th>Process for Acquiring Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collect information that reflects the individual experience of workers, their history, and experiences since commencing employment at this agency, and their views about child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait children and their families</td>
<td>Demographics including: Gender. Qualifications. Length of Experience Residence when recruited Previous work experience Pathways into Employment Recruitment experiences Preparation for Employment Length of Experience Role Knowledge of culture Knowledge of community Decision-making Consultation and collaboration</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews with individual workers at each site</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Data Required</th>
<th>Process for Acquiring Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explore the practice of workers through a case study selected by the practitioner from their caseload of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients</td>
<td>Goals Intervention Expectations Relationships Worker experiences Worker perspectives Decision-making Case plans Resources Outcomes</td>
<td>Semi-structured interview with workers engaged in direct practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The sequences of Stage One**

An Expert Advisory Panel made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives was established as part of the broader study from the ARC Linkage Project to advise and consult on the proposed research. These representatives had extensive knowledge and skills in service delivery in rural areas. This panel was convened to discuss the aims and methods for the data collection for this study. An information sheet was developed subsequent to this, incorporating the advice and
suggestions from the Panel. The information sheet aimed to provide potential participants and management with the reasons why the research was being conducted, and to outline the protocols established as part of the ARC Linkage grant. The information sheet is attached as Appendix A.

After meeting with the Expert Advisory Panel, I made telephone contact with the managers at both the child protection agencies at the two sites to provide oral information about the proposed research and to negotiate an arranged time to visit. Managers agreed to disseminate the information sheet about the project to all current staff through email. Written information was forwarded to managers at the statutory agencies at both sites for distribution to all staff, including an invitation to participate in the project.

Following this, I visited the sites and met with management teams at sites, and with managers of the Indigenous community agencies to talk about the proposed research, the methods planned, and to respond to any questions. Paper copies of the information sheet were provided to the managers at the community agencies at each site (See Appendix A).

Subsequent to these meetings, I received emails from some workers who had received information about the planned research who expressed an interest in participating. I negotiated interview times with these potential participants. I then visited the community agency at site one, and talked with workers at their regular staff meeting to provide information about the aims of the study, the methods I planned to use to gather information, and the type of information I was exploring. During this visit, I again met with the manager of the community agency who informed me that she would discuss the proposed research with staff members, and would then let me know of any workers who may be willing to participate and advise me. The manager consented to me directly approaching participants who had expressed an interest to participate. I then contacted the manager by telephone to follow-up with suitable times to visit these agencies. A
similar process occurred at site two. I visited that site and presented information at the staff meeting at the statutory agency, and met again with the manager at the community agency at site two.

I conducted interviews with participants during stage one by returning to both of the sites over a period of time. I scheduled interviews prior to visiting the sites, and other interviews were scheduled with workers who expressed availability during my visits.

**Methods**

**Data collection**

**Stage One**

The aim of stage one was to interview workers currently employed at the statutory agency and the community agency, using semi-structured interviews.

This stage provided participants with an individual face to face setting. The aim of stage one was to explore the demographics of participants, their employment history, and their practice experiences and perspectives since commencing their role as workers. The study engaged Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural workers at the two sites to explore:

- Participants employment and education history prior to them commencing their current role
- How they were recruited into their current employment
- Training and preparation they received following recruitment to their current role which assisted them in adjusting to their role, in particular in their work with Aboriginal families and children
- Participants knowledge of and understanding of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities within which they work and how this may have impacted on their practice
• How they acquired cultural knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families
• The skills which participants indicate were used in their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families
• Whether participants knew about and how they understood the term ‘cultural competence’
• How participants liaised with other agencies in their practice
• The resources participants have relied on to support them in their practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families
• Whether participants had engaged or planned to pursue further professional development.

The purpose of stage one allowed me to go to the field sites, to observe the context of practice and to interview participants to gather information about their background and views in relation to their current practice. The two field sites provided an opportunity for me to observe two separate communities to acknowledge difference and uniqueness. First hand data was gathered from participants. Both the participants and other workers present were aware of my role, and the purpose of my visit. An interview schedule was developed prior to the interviews. The initial interview schedule was designed to gather information from the participants, their views and opinions which explored the aims presented above. A copy of the interview schedule is contained in Appendix C.

Participants: Stage One

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who were working and had experience in their professional or non-professional roles in the child protection
field with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Purposeful sampling was chosen on the basis that these participants had rich information that could fulfil the purpose and rationale of the study in order to achieve the study’s aims (Patton, 1990). A small ‘snowball’ effect occurred during recruitment when several participants encouraged me to approach other colleagues who had expressed a willingness to participate. Recruitment of participants was purposefully selected based on a combination of the following:

- Gender
- Employment source (for example, statutory or community)
- Cultural background (for example, Indigenous or non-Indigenous)
- Current role (for example, management or frontline)

This attempted to ensure a range of participants with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Primary consideration for sample construction was that participants had knowledge of, and experience in, working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families in the field of child protection. Participants included Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers to allow for exploration of the influence of cultural background on practice.

The sample consisted of 30 child protection workers employed at either a statutory or community child protection agency at each of the sites. Characteristics of the sample group recruited is summarised in Table 4.
### Table 4. Demographics of Participants, Stage 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee Characteristics</th>
<th>Site 1</th>
<th>Site 2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Indigenous</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statutory child protection participants</th>
<th>Site 1</th>
<th>Site 2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Indigenous</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Statutory participants</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community child protection participants</th>
<th>Site 1</th>
<th>Site 2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(All Indigenous)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Number of Workers 16 14 30

Some of the characteristics in the sample are consistent with the profile of the Australian child protection workforce completed by Martin and Healy (2010). The Martin and Healy profile found the majority of workers in the child protection workforce were overwhelmingly female (79%) and employed in government agencies.

The demographics of this study differed in two ways. First, I attempted to recruit a balance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. Sixteen (of 30) participants identified as Indigenous. In the Australian child protection workforce, Indigenous workers make up approximately one-third of the total population (Martin & Healy, 2010). Second, there were more child protection participants recruited from the statutory agency compared to the community agency. Although this reflects the Australian child protection workforce which shows the majority of workers are employed in government agencies (60%) compared to 40% employed in non-profit organisations, the number of participants in this study were not representative of the child protection workforce from the two sites.
All statutory workers employed at both sites were invited to engage in the study, however their participation was not compulsory, and 21 (of 47) statutory workers were interviewed.

A different recruitment strategy was used within each community agency. The reasons for this were based on the following. First, I was aware that historically, Aboriginal people are amongst the most researched people on earth (Scougall, 1997). All of the workers employed at the community agencies identified as Indigenous, and I valued the contribution of their knowledge, including their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge, and the knowledge they possessed about the people and ways of life in Aboriginal communities both past and present. I wanted to build a relationship with these participants based on respect believing that where trust persists research can be sustained. I had minimal previous contact with the participants and was unknown to them. I was conscious that this research project was externally driven. I had ownership of the research, and I had taken responsibility for its purpose. The initial meeting with participants from the community agency aimed to facilitate a discussion and share information with the community agency about the focus of the research, its purpose, and intended outcomes. My observation during these visits was that participants appeared cautious, and that there was some distrust in the research process. As well, I assumed that there was some uncertainty in the minds of the participants about how the data they provided would be perceived. They may have been concerned about how I might use this information towards the outcomes and recommendations in my research, or how the information they provided may be presented. I also acknowledged that the research process was a demand on workers’ time.

Although participants at site one were not currently residing in the Indigenous community, this differed at site two where some of the participants employed at the community agency were also residing in the Aboriginal community. I believed it was important to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were members of
the community and known in the community, because of their understanding and knowledge of the people who live there and their interactions together.

After the initial meeting, the manager at site two informed me that she had discussed the proposed research with her workers, and they had advised her they did not want to be interviewed individually, but preferred to be interviewed as a group. I made a professional judgement and agreed to this request. I wanted to display a willingness to modify the research methodology to comply with the request from the manager as a sign of respect, without fully knowing the reasons behind this. I believed that it would be detrimental to the research to demand the participants at this agency comply with the methods I had proposed in that it would create a rigid power dynamic between me and them. I also made a decision not to tape record the group interview at this site due to my assessment that they were cautious about taking direct personal ownership of what they said – rather this needed to come from the group. The participants were asked for their consent for me to make written notes during the interview and I did this.

In stage one, the five participants from the community agency at site two were interviewed as a group. This enabled sharing of information and views, and provided the opportunity for participants in the group to prompt other participants to discuss different experiences, views and opinions. On the other hand, it presented limits in information sharing where some individuals may not have felt comfortable in sharing information in the group setting and/or in my presence. An example of this occurred when I met with the group. Some participants voiced strong opinions during discussions about a recent incident, whilst others did not. The group agreed to discontinue discussing that topic further, acknowledging not everyone was in agreement. All of the participants employed at this community agency attended and participated in the group interview. It is recognised that these modifications to the methodology, and the data gathered from Indigenous participants at this community agency may not reflect the depth that individual
interviews with statutory participants and other community participants provided about themselves, their views, and child protection practice.

At site one, the manager of the community agency participated in an individual interview with me. She also suggested workers who were willing to participate in interviews. I approached these participants and they provided written consent and were interviewed. A copy of the consent form is contained in Appendix B. I visited this community agency a number of times and spent time at the agency seeking permission from the manager to conduct more interviews with other staff. The manager directed me towards other potential participants who may be available to participate in interviews. It became apparent when I visited the community agency and in observing workers, and talking to workers at this agency that there were a number of workers who could have participated in the study. They chose not to do so, and I respected this decision.

Thirty participants were recruited with the purpose of gathering data on child protection practice from the statutory agencies at two sites. This enabled sufficient depth of understanding in current child protection practice at the two sites. Nine participants were interviewed at the community agencies. All of these participants identified as Indigenous. Three of these participants were male.

**The Sequences of Stage two data collection**

During stage one of the study, data collected from the participants confirmed not all participants at the sites were actively engaged in direct practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families in their current role. Some participants said that they had had limited knowledge and experience in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families and other participants said their roles did not provide them with this opportunity. Because the purpose of this study aimed to explore how workers practice and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
children and families this information was considered, and a decision was made to take this into account in selection of participants for stage two.

Stage two used semi-structured interviews with participants whose practice required them to interact and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. This stage aimed to explore with participants the goals they had developed in their work with families, their experiences and actions in responses to situations or problems that they faced in their practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Stage Two

Stage two of the data collection involved in depth exploration with participants about their work with a particular family. Interviews encouraged them to share their thoughts, actions and experiences in their practice. The underlying aim of stage two was to explore whether or not, and how the data collected in stage one influenced or impacted the participant’s interactions in their practice. Therefore, this stage built on the information provided by participants in stage one. It explored the saliency of their practice from their perspective. This stage aimed to draw out the interface between the local/geographic, practitioner, client and organisational context and identify relationships between context (*field*) and process (*habitus*). All participants who were interviewed during stage one were advised that a further interview was to be conducted as part of the research process, and these participants were invited to participate in stage two. All of the participants in stage one of the study, indicated a willingness to participate in stage two of the study if requested.

A key feature of exploring worker practice with one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family was to elicit the holistic integrity of one case study for each participant. As the case was explored, contents were closely examined. The parts were ultimately
viewed as a whole in relation to each another (Padgett, 2004). In stage two, the following aspects of the case study were considered:

- The types of knowledge participants prioritise in their practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- The ways that participants use this knowledge and how it impacts on their interactions
- Whether there is a difference in the approach of participants to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families compared to non-Indigenous families
- If there were other influences participants perceive as impacting on their practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- The limits (capital) that participants perceive impact on their practice.

**Participants: Stage Two**

Purposeful sampling was again used to select participants for stage two. Participants who were interviewed in stage two were selected from participants who had been interviewed in stage one of the research. Nine (of 30) workers engaged in stage two interviews. Participants were selected to explore their practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in more depth. Participants in stage two were chosen on the following basis:

- Their current roles require them to directly engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- They identified as Indigenous and were employed in community child protection agencies, which required them to participate in decisions relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who come to the attention to the statutory agency
• Participants who as part of their role participate in decision-making in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

During 2009 and 2010, whilst the research was being conducted, changes were made by State government funding bodies to Indigenous recognised entities. Both of the community agencies were required to resubmit tenders for further funding as a result of these changes. The community agency at one site was unsuccessful in their funding tender, and ceased operating with short notice in June, 2010. The employment of all workers at this agency terminated. I maintained contact with the manager. Changes in circumstances, however, made it difficult to contact previous employees as many had relocated or found alternative employment. I was able to approach one participant who agreed to participate in an individual interview.

Data Sources

A semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions was developed for stage one and stage two. Copies of the interview schedules are attached in Appendix C and D. The schedules were used as a prompt during interviews. This method aimed to provide the opportunity for participants to move beyond selective perceptions of others and present their individual understanding and views.

The semi-structured interview encouraged participants to freely discuss their individual experiences of working in the child protection field. I encouraged the participants to talk and provide their views to fulfil a research aim of exploring how practitioners make sense of their role, and their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This approach was used to engage participants to communicate and share their opinions and views without pressure to perform to an anticipated standard (Zaff, 1993). The flexibility of the semi-structured interview was considered very useful as it facilitated the union of interviewing techniques which were
structured and unstructured. The latter was particularly important as the interview process provided the participants an opportunity and enough time to present their views and opinions. Verbal departures from key discussion topics did occur during the interviews. This was allowed in keeping with the need for flexibility, although participants were drawn back to the questions. Open-ended semi-structured questions provided flexibility, and were able to be adapted or elaborated to the individual context. This method supported the conceptual framework of constructivism in that it explored the participant’s experience of social reality through their own interpretations of it.

Data Collection

All of the interviews were held in the workplace of the research participants. A convenient time was negotiated with participants who were asked to designate a place within the office which was private and quiet, to hold the interview. The interviews often took place in the office of the participant, or if the participant shared a workspace, they were able to locate an office or an interview room that was vacant and interviews were conducted in these rooms. Convening the interviews at the workplace of the participant enabled them to retain ownership of the environment and to remain in a familiar setting. In all settings, attention was given to the seating position, with the participant sitting behind the desk, and the interviewer in front of the desk. This allowed the participant to have a more dominant position in the interview.

The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes. The variation in the time reflected the differences in the sample, including the duration of experience of the participants, and preferred communication styles of participants, with some spending more time considering their responses and sharing their experiences.

Each participant was provided with a written information sheet outlining the purposes of the study. Participants were also asked to provide written consent to
participate in the interviews prior to the interview commencing. All participants signed written consent forms. A copy of the consent form is attached in Appendix B.

With the permission of the participants, all individual interviews were audio recorded. Audio recording was deemed to be most suitable as it allowed the session to proceed naturally with minimal interruption, and was able to be transcribed verbatim at a later time. I also took written notes during the interviews with the permission of the participants. Written notes were recorded as a backup. This was found to be of particular importance since, during the first interview, the audio recorder malfunctioned and the written notes became a valuable record of the interview. These notes also provided a reference point when audio tapes were inaudible.

**Analysing the data – Data and procedure**

Corbin and Strauss (2008) proposed the need to analyse the data to display categories and relationships to assist in the identification of conditions that exist and which potentially contribute to actions. This is based on their view that there are multiple meanings that surround an event or experience and categorising is a way of refining or sifting through these meanings. Corbin and Strauss (2008) proposed that in order to understand actions and interactions it is necessary to consider surrounding conditions (in Bourdieu’s terms, *fields* and *capital*) and doing this gives greater insight for understanding consequences that ensue.

In this study into child protection practice, the conditions or circumstances, within which practice occurred, was considered including the relationships between agencies and between participants. To understand the conditions or circumstances that participants experience when they commence their role, participants were asked about the pathways they used to enter the child protection system. This could include, for example, previous work experiences, preparation for the job, and any support and/or training offered. This
provided some insight into the conditions and circumstances that existed when participants commenced work. Second, participants were asked to talk about their practice; how they adjusted to these conditions and circumstances and how they acted in their practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families within Aboriginal communities. Finally, the relationship between these two aspects of practice was considered. The data collection for this study was conducted in two distinct phases to reflect these areas of enquiry.

A thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within the data collected. Thematic analysis is compatible with constructivist paradigms which focus on the ways in which events, realities, meanings, and experiences affect a range of discourses operating within society (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data presented the perceptions and opinions of participants about their practice, and the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings. This approach was selected because of its flexibility as a research tool to provide detail and clarity about the process of the analysis. This process was guided by the six phases of analysis developed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first phase of analysis involved becoming familiar with the data which had been transcribed. To maintain familiarity, I transcribed a random sample of the interviews, and reviewed all of the transcriptions against the audiotapes to check for errors. Each interview was read twice. The analysis attempted to draw on Bourdieu’s framework attempting to move beyond what people took for granted in their interactions, and taking into account what participants said were external pressures and influences on them. This was an attempt to explore the uniqueness of context in this social field and the dynamics that exist within these rural contexts. It also considered the habitus of the individual, the portfolio of capital that they brought with them.
The data contained in stage one was descriptive, and comprised demographic data, and the individual pathways of participants who entered child protection practice at these sites. NVivo software was used in a systematic fashion across the data set, selecting source content and defining it as belonging to a theme. A large number of codes were created and data relevant to each code was collated. Coding aimed to collect data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Tree nodes organised the data in a hierarchical structure moving from a general category (the ‘parent node’) at the top to more specific categories (‘child nodes’). During this phase, I also created a code to break down the elements contained in each question in stage one and collated data from participants reflecting their individual responses to these. This was helpful as it identified gaps in the data provided by participants. In an attempt to reflect the reality and explore the ways in which the broader context impinges on the meanings for participants, themes were also generated that related particular references to the external social contexts.

This stage used open coding which Corbin and Strauss (2008) called ‘fracturing the data’ to identify some categories, their properties and dimensional locations. Codes were grouped together and checked for emerging patterns, variability and consistency. When coding ceased to generate new codes and all data had been imported into existing codes, it was determined that theoretical saturation had been achieved and coding proceeded to the axial phase. This is presented in Figure 7.
The mind map provided key themes that arose from data. These were grouped together in nodes. NVivo was used to perform Matrix Coding Queries which collected nodes together and assisted in identifying themes, and their frequency of use in the data. Themes were reviewed, by a process of reading and re-reading, as well as returning to the literature. The themes that emerged related to different cultural backgrounds and life experiences that participants brought to practice, together with the preparation that participants were offered to support them to commence their roles.

The data collected in stage two was contrasted with the themes that had been grouped together in stage one in order to explore whether these themes had re-emerged in the practice context in the two rural sites. The audio tapes of the interviews during stage two were analysed, to search for text that may have exemplified any of these themes and attention was paid to emerging codes. Thematic analysis illuminated a gap in the knowledge about what participants said was important and of value in their practice, and how they actively participated in the field. This stage of the data collection searched
for what Bourdieu (1993) described as the structural spaces of positions that workers acquire in their roles within contexts. This may occur, of course, through unwritten rules and power dynamics which influence this acquisition (capital). Although the codes developed in stage one were present, the participants gave weight to their value, and to the impact and influence of this on their decisions, their actions, and the way they interpreted their experiences through their interviews. During the final stages of analysis, relationships between categories were speculated and four main themes were developed. These are discussed in Chapter Seven.

**Data Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Most quantitative researchers recognise and document the worth of a project by assessing the reliability and validity of the work (Krefting, 1991). Agar (1986) suggested that reliability and validity are more relevant to the quantitative view and do not fit qualitative research. Nonetheless, qualitative research needs to ensure that research is trustworthy and meets certain standards of research efficacy to lead to peer review and sanction. This section of the thesis uses the conceptual model of Krefting (1991) to evaluate the trustworthiness of this research. To ensure rigor, four aspects of trustworthiness are presented from the Guba’s (1981) model. These are: truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality. Guba’s model recognised that these aspects are defined differently for qualitative and quantitative research. Table 5 compares the criteria by research approach.
Table 5. *Comparison of Criteria By Research Approach*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Qualitative Research</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truth Value</td>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>Internal validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicability</td>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>External validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrality</td>
<td>Confirmability</td>
<td>Objectivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Guba, 1981, p. 217)

These criteria are discussed in relation to this qualitative study, and strategies used to increase their trustworthiness are presented.

**Truth Value**

Truth value calls upon the researcher to establish confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings for the participants within the context in which the study was carried out (Guba, 1981). In qualitative research, truth value is usually obtained from the discovery of human experiences as they are lived (Krefting, 1991). Guba (1981) termed this credibility and related it to internal validity. Sandelowski (1986) suggested that a qualitative study is credible when it represents accurate descriptions or interpretations of human experiences that people who share that experience would immediately recognise. Because the study involved multiple realities of child protection practice from the perspectives of different participants (non-Indigenous and Indigenous at statutory and community agencies) this was critical. To enhance the truth value of this study, I spent extended periods of time
with participants during many visits to the sites over a period of twelve months. Guba (1981) referred to this as prolonged engagement. The purpose was to check and recheck the perspectives of the participants and allow them to become accustomed to my presence. Previous to the study, I was not known to any of the participants.

Being present in the field over a period of time was important because it enabled increased rapport with the participants. At the beginning of the study, participants appeared cautious about their involvement in the study. This was particularly so for Indigenous participants who were distrustful of the research process. Visiting the sites on a number of occasions, and spending time there provided me the opportunity to share with the participants the purpose and aims of the study and reflected a conscious approach to enable participants to ask questions of me in relation to the methods, and purpose of the research. In this way I attempted to be transparent about the process in which participants were engaged in the study. Over the period of the research, participants approached me to provide additional thoughts and opinions in relation to the study. Further, being present at the site provided me the opportunity to clarify responses where participants consistently agreed or disagreed with aspects of the data. The use of more than one interview provided the opportunity to clarify with participants the information they provided in the initial interview. Further, it provided the opportunity to reconnect with the participant after the second interview if further clarification was required. The data was collected within the field where practice occurred, as different situations presented, and I was able to observe the context. This emphasised the importance of context. I was mindful that building rapport with participants presented a possibility that I might become too close and enmeshed with them. Nonetheless, it helped me come to understand descriptions or interpretations of human experiences that people who share that experience would immediately recognise. Guba (1981) suggest this as a
means for enhancing ‘truth value’. This process helped me observe the *habitus* of participants, other workers, managers, administrative staff and clients.

To be able to reflect on these experiences, I kept a journal in which my observations and reflections were recorded. The journal contained thoughts, feelings, ideas, and experiences in the field. I also consulted members of the Expert Advisory Group comprising representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures with an aim to increase awareness of my biases and preconceived assumptions during the data collection stage. Central to this was the importance for me to recognise that participants owned *their* experiences in the research findings. My own experience as a child protection worker provided some familiarity with the context. My role as researcher helped me keep a boundary between myself and child protection practice.

**Applicability**

Applicability refers to the degree to which findings of a study can be applied to other contexts and/or settings and/or other groups. This relates to external validity. Guba (1981) talked about transferability, stating that research meets this criterion when findings fit into contexts outside of the study situation that are determined by the degree of similarity or goodness of fit between the two contexts. During the recruitment of participants, I sought to bring diversity into the sample of participants who were recruited from different cultural backgrounds and agencies. This aimed to bring knowledge of practice and culture into the sample, as well as to reflect the demographic base of the Australian child protection workforce. It provided a framework that recognised and accepted the cultural and gender diversity of child protection practitioners in Australia. The findings of this study can be used either to influence or, given the dearth of Australian studies in this field, provide a backdrop or benchmark to future studies in the wider Queensland and/or Australia field of child protection at this interface with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.
**Consistency**

This criterion relates to whether the finding would be consistent if the study was replicated elsewhere, or with the same subjects or in a similar context. The reliability of the research is concerned with stability, consistency, and equivalence (Sandelowski, 1986). Inherent is the extent of repeatability. Variability, however, is expected in qualitative research, which is to do with people who are unpredictable, and may behave in arbitrary or even illogical ways. Rather, consistency in qualitative research is defined in terms of data dependability. In an attempt to analyse and interpret the data, a systematic thematic analysis of the findings was undertaken. All of the interviews were transcribed, and data was coded and re-coded by me and NVivo to develop the findings (see above). Coding is described in more detail in the next section.

**Neutrality**

The final criterion for trustworthiness is neutrality which is freedom from bias. This is achieved through rigor of methodology and also refers to the distance between the researcher and research participants. In this research views of the participants were prioritised and emphasised rather than the views of the researcher. In this study, this is enhanced through a presentation of data (see the next chapter) outside of a discussion of the same. This allows space for data to be reviewed free of any interpreter bias. In addition, Guba (1981) would have us view neutrality as, interpretational confirmability rather than as research ‘objectivity’. Interpretive confirmability was sought in this study, through presenting data in its own stand-alone chapter, and only engaging a discussion of findings in view of the literature presented. Peer reviewers then have the opportunity to assess for neutrality or interpretive confirmability, by both examining data from the perspective of shared literature, and also to evaluate this from the stand point of any literature review bias. The literature review of this study is also presented in its own stand-alone chapter and data is only analysed from the stand point of the literature presented.
(see chapter 7). This process is open and transparent and enhances interpretive confirmability.

**Conclusion**

The methods used in this study were explicated in this chapter as they applied and were appropriate to the focus of this research. Data collection methods and processes of analysis were also presented. Ethical considerations applied to the study were presented as was the study compliance with criteria for demonstrating academic rigour. At the same time, a researcher’s own cultural values and knowledge can never be value free, since they have been developed within a field of cultural bias. Having an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Expert Reference group provided the opportunity for the research methods and data of this study to be scrutinised for bias and to enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and nuances to be recognised in the research.

The next chapter presents the data collected through this research process. It presents data about participant pathways into employment in the child protection field (*fields*). It considers their readiness for practice and the resources (*capital*) that participants felt assist them in their transition into their roles. It presents the different experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers and how they acquired knowledge to work across cultures with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families living in Aboriginal communities (*habitus*).
Chapter Five: Data Presentation: Pathways into the field

Introduction

The broad aim of this research was to identify implications for culturally competency policy development and practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families in Australia. The data presented in this chapter are what Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners employed in two rural contexts said about their experiences and their perceptions of their practice, as child protection workers working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This chapter also presents data about the previous experiences of participants, which they brought to practice, and the resources they used to gain employment. It specifically presents data about how participants prepared themselves to take up their current roles and considers the recruitment strategies used at each study site. It presents data about participants' initial experiences in Aboriginal communities. Finally, the chapter presents data about the cultural knowledge that participants said they brought with them into practice, and how they built on this knowledge in their roles working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities in the child protection field.

Pathways and preparation for employment

Participants were asked about the resources that assisted them, and the approaches they used as pathways to employment in child protection settings. This section considers the strategies used to recruit workers at site one and site two. It outlines the previous employment history of participants, and outlines the preparation participants said they received following their employment to assist them in meeting the expectations of their role. It presents data about the initial experiences of participants in their practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in their communities.
Pathways to entry

Site one.

Having local knowledge and relationships with the people and services in the local area was raised as an important resource by employers who recruited workers into child protection roles at site one in both statutory and community agencies. The majority of participants, thirteen (of 16) participants advised they had been residing in the local geographic boundaries of the agencies at site one when they applied for their current position. Seven of these participants were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and six were non-Indigenous persons. At the community agency, all of the participants identified as Indigenous persons. Only three (of 16) participants at this site were recruited from outside of the area. These three were Indigenous participants who had previous employment experience in child protection. Their recruitment differed from other workers. Two of them instigated their own recruitment, one of these sought a transfer to this site to move closer to family, and the other applied for an advertised position at this location. The third participant was recruited by the community agency because of his/her knowledge and experience of statutory policies and procedures accumulated from previous employment in a number of statutory and government agencies. All three participants brought experience and expertise in child protection with them to their new roles. All of these three Indigenous participants were recruited into senior positions such as management roles; as such, they supported staff at both the statutory and community agencies, and had minimal direct client contact.

There were a number of reasons the majority of participants at site one were recruited from the resident population. First, site one was a larger regional town, closer to the coast, which had a larger population (see above). Its geographic location provided a flow of people through the area who may have been seeking employment either rurally to the west, or up the coast to the north. The town was a central hub which provided
services and access to the coast and to the outback. Second, there were a number of
government offices located in the town which could explain why health and social
assistance provided a major source of employment. Some of the participants had
relocated from other small outlying areas to secure employment. Third, there was a
university at this site, which offered tertiary courses that provided graduates with the
qualifications to meet the eligibility requirements for employment at both the statutory and
community agencies. Six (of 16) participants employed at site one had completed their
undergraduate qualification at this university. As well as these factors, local knowledge
about history, people and services cultivated as a result of residing locally was raised as
important by management involved in recruiting at site one.

Participants who resided locally prior to their current employment were described
by management as bringing knowledge and familiarity of local people and services to their
roles. There was an assumption from those who recruited, that workers who were local
residents had the acceptance and trust of the community, had knowledge about the
community and had established relationships. A participant stated this view clearly:

*I firmly believe if you have a relationship and an acceptance of that community then
there’s trust … I have recruited locally. I do not go outside the local area because
the wealth of information that local people bring to that organisation and the job is
absolutely immense. Knowing people … It’s about relationships. We always recruit
locally so if we had the opportunity … it would be people who live in that area who
would be asked to apply for that position* (Indigenous community participant H).

Indigenous participants recruited to this site corroborated the benefits of having
previously lived locally, being familiar with local services and having existing relationships
within the local community and in the Aboriginal community. They recognised there was a
difference in having grown up in the area because people already knew them, and it
meant that they did not need to start to build relationships and to build up local
knowledge. Community agencies in this study recruited only Indigenous workers. Those participants who recruited workers to statutory agencies said Indigenous workers brought with them cultural knowledge, connections and links to networks in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. Several statutory participants who had been recruited reflected on their knowledge about the history of the community, and about shared experiences with people who lived there. One participant expressed their view that being seen in the community as a community person gave him/her a sense of being accepted within the community. S/he said:

Growing up here I know the big difference is that knowing the community, knowing the people, you don't think of it that way and you're more accepted (Indigenous statutory participant I).

An additional advantage for people, who live locally and seek employment, is that their relationships and connections to local networks serve as a source of information about positions becoming available. Making their intentions about employment aspirations known to family and friends, and direct approaches to employers in the area, did lead to pathways into employment. Participants said this process did not always provide immediate employment, but for some, existing connections and relationships had assisted them to find their current job. An Indigenous participant told how s/he had used this approach as a pathway into their current role:

For other Indigenous participants, the ‘Murri grapevine’, an informal network of contacts within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community provided a pathway to hearing about when positions were becoming available. The following Indigenous statutory participant first became aware of a traineeship through this informal network of contacts. Whilst already employed s/he applied for another job at the same agency:
On the Murri grapevine I heard that there was a traineeship going ... I must have did really good and then there was another position going there as a family resource worker ... I was relieving ... then I got permanent (Indigenous statutory participant K).

This data indicates that many of the participants actively made approaches to seek employment in the child protection field. Being a larger regional town provided a pool of workers who were able to be recruited into positions. For many of the participants (12 of 16) this was their first experience working in the child protection field. Recruiting workers who lived locally, and who had relationships and connections to local community networks may have indicated to those who recruited that these workers would remain in their roles, and many had. Having connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures was valued because both agencies had a large client population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Site Two.

Site two had a different approach to recruitment. Technical and Further Education colleges (TAFE) at site two, and in nearby locations, offered Diplomas in Community Services which provided graduates with qualifications and a pathway into employment in community and statutory agencies. Some of the participants had attended TAFE, and others had attended workplace training provided by TAFE colleges to complete Diplomas. As well as providing a pathway for Indigenous workers into employment in community and child protection services, it provided a pool of local workers available to work in child protection. Although it was not a necessary criteria to have completed a Diploma to be employed in community agencies at this site, all of the participants at both the statutory and community agencies had completed Diplomas and had attended workplace training offered to them. None of the Indigenous participants at this site had attended University.
All of the Indigenous participants at the community agency recruited from this site were local residents employed as family support workers.

It is a requirement in the statutory agency that child protection workers who are appointed into professional statutory positions hold a Bachelor degree level qualification in an approved discipline from an accredited university. This presented a barrier to Indigenous workers who held a Diploma level qualification. There was no university in this location, and to acquire a university degree meant either relocating to another area, or enrolling externally. The Indigenous participant recruited into the statutory agency at site two did not hold a bachelor degree. However, the statutory agency had recently recognised workers with many years of experience faced a barrier to career advancement without degree level qualifications. It introduced a pilot bridging course which recognises this prior experience. The Indigenous participant at the statutory agency was undertaking this bridging program at the time of this study.

At the statutory agency at site two, the majority of participants were non-Indigenous (eight of nine) and held degree qualifications. Four (of nine) were recruited locally. However, as a result of the limited availability of workers in this geographic area, who hold the necessary degree level qualifications and who seek to pursue a career in child protection, the statutory agency has been unable to recruit sufficient local residents to fill vacancies. They recruit from Head Office which is located in the capital city four hours drive away. As a result of this recruitment strategy, many of the statutory participants (five of nine) recruited had, prior to taking up their positions, resided outside of the local area. These participants had all applied to transfer from their current employment, and had indicated a willingness to transfer to a rural site. These staff brought with them child protection experience but minimal knowledge of the local area services and resources. They said they had, before relocating, few or no relationships and connections with residents or other staff in the area. The most recent participant
recruited from Head Office was a new employee who had no previous child protection experience, but had previously worked a government agency in the human services field. S/he had applied for a statutory position at Head Office and had also expressed an interest in taking up a rural position. As there were no current employees on the transfer list, this participant had been recruited from a list of new applicants. The participant had rural employment experience, but like many of the other participants who transferred to this rural location from other offices in the state, possessed limited knowledge of the resources and networks in the local area when they began their new role.

Site two is designated as a rural location. This means that workers who relocate to this site from other areas are eligible for the Rural and Regional Financial Incentive. Six years ago this financial incentive was increased. The scheme provides child protection workers subsidised accommodation, funding for professional development, and an annual financial supplement. The majority of workers recruited to the statutory agency at site two had been recruited from outside the local area and were receiving this financial incentive. Participants agreed that the Rural and Regional Financial Incentive had assisted them with the financial cost of adjusting and relocating to living and working in a rural area. Two of the participants advised the financial incentive had financially supported them to bring their partners and children with them when they relocated to this rural area. Other participants said they were living in shared accommodation subsidised from the financial incentive. As a single parent, one participant, who had relocated from an urban area, said the rental subsidy, and the financial bonus alleviated some of the financial pressure on the family compared to the city. Most participants had made use of the financial incentive towards professional supervision, and development workshops and training. An example of this support was provided by this participant who had relocated from outside the local area.
I had nowhere else to live. They had a place for people to stay. It wasn’t one that I chose myself … So I moved into that premises for a year … I came out on my own and left my husband and children in Brisbane (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z).

Another worker commented on the Financial Incentive. She/he said:

They get free rent for three years from when they start and a 10,000-dollar-a-year bonus indefinitely. That helps. That can’t not help … And that’s indefinite (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Q).

The introduction of the Rural and Regional Financial Incentive is a recruitment strategy that aims to provide an incentive for workers to take up statutory positions in rural locations. It also aims to address issues of poor retention of statutory workers in rural areas. At site two, there had been an historic pattern of poor retention of child protection workers which is reflected in an average turnover rate of approximately eight (out of 30) staff per year. Since the Rural and Regional Incentive Scheme has been introduced, retention at site two has shown a marked improvement. The number of staff who had resigned or transferred during the past four years matched the number of staff who had previously vacated positions in one year prior to the Incentive being introduced. Site two attracted experienced child protection workers to the statutory agency from other statutory offices. These workers were familiar with statutory policies and procedures and as existing employees within the statutory system, had completed induction training. After relocating, they did not need to attend further training outside of this location, as other inexperienced workers who were required to complete three weeks induction training at urban locations.

Generally, the statutory agency at site two differed from site one, because most of the participants at this site, and those who transferred to this location had previous child protection experience. However, although they were familiar in their role as child
protection workers, they were less familiar with the local context, and needed to build relationships and acquire knowledge of the local community and services. The next section considers the previous employment experience of the participants at both sites.

**Previous experience working in government**

The majority of participants (20 of 30) had previous employment in at least one government agency, over a number of years, before commencing their current role. For five (of 30) participants, their current role was their first role following their graduation from university, and they had continued to work in this role for a number of years. The remaining five (of 30) participants did not provide any information about whether they had previously worked in a government agency.

The majority of participants said that their previous knowledge of government bureaucratic systems was helpful in providing them approaches about how to manoeuvre themselves within these systems and where to access knowledge about the expectations of their role. This participant said:

*Yeah, because [refers to working in a previous government agency] you need to know that. When I used to be an acting supervisor that’s what I had to train staff about. Go to your policies, look at them, do this do that. That’s what tells you how to do your job correctly and what you can and can’t do. Same as here, there’s no real difference (Indigenous statutory participant I).*

Statutory participants, who had previous government employment, said this had provided them with the skills and strategies that they used in their current roles. Participants who had previously worked in different professional roles, for example in education, used the skills they brought with them from that employment. This is demonstrated in the comment from this statutory participant:
[In] teaching you’re planning all the time, you’re reporting so you know the value of
documentation. You know about predictive planning. So I found it quite easy to
structure myself in a way to be an effective caseworker. You knew that if you didn’t
know something, there were people that you could seek out ... It was just figuring
what process best worked for you ... it’s about finding a system that works and you
can function in, which is pretty much the same here I think (Non-Indigenous
statutory participant T).

Another statutory worker said:

I did three years with Psych Services ... and some of our clients through there were
Indigenous ... well a lot of those skills and knowledge and all that is relevant to
working in any organisation (Non-Indigenous statutory participant E).

Community participants also shared their previous experience in child protection
and other government agencies. For example:

I have got a broad range of dealing with Indigenous issues. Now what brought me to
this job here was that, well it is an Indigenous identified position and I always work
with an Act in some form or fashion whether it’s a Federal Act, the local Act or a
State Act.

So I applied for this job on the basis I can work with ... I know the structures of the
public service and I can work within those structures (Indigenous community
participant O).

Previous knowledge of statutory policies and procedures therefore, was viewed as
important by community participants, who knew that in their current employment they
would work alongside these systems. Community participants talked about protocol
documents that outlined policies and processes between community agencies and
statutory agencies that required them to be consulted in decision-making with statutory
workers about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. They valued their expertise, and believed their employers and colleagues did too. They said:

There isn't a place in Queensland that I haven't been and been part of the negotiations and consultations. I have been to the borders of every state in Australia, edging on the Queensland border. I did the Torres Strait, the Gulf ... so I guess when I was approached by [the manager at the recognised entity] to come on board, having a background in just about everything really. ... I come from a background in the public service where you are controlled by policies and procedures (Indigenous community participant V).

However, many of the participants also believed that the onus had been on them to self-direct their learning once they began their role in order to familiarise themselves with their role descriptions and responsibilities. For example:

When I first started I didn't understand much about child protection and frameworks and practice and all that type of stuff like that. So I came in and then sort of was thrown into the deep end round stuff. So I was trying to really grasp onto any type of practice and sort of made my own up at the end of the day. Because that was the only thing that I could do, because nobody taught me anything (Indigenous statutory participant W).

For statutory employees, the internet and Practice Manuals available to them assisted them in this process. He/she said:

At CSO training, there's a philosophy of being self sufficient. So you don't go to a team leader for advice, you go to the Practice Manual. Go to the Practice Manual, that's what training is all about (Non-Indigenous statutory participant J).

And this participant said:
Coming here I did a lot of research myself with using the computers ... on the InfoNet, just using that and finding information what you can do, what you can’t do (Indigenous statutory participant I).

The Practice Manual provided a guide to statutory workers about what was expected of their performance in their role, as well as the roles of others, and the aims of the agency. Indigenous participants observed that non-Indigenous workers relied on the Practice Manual to guide their practice. This participant talked about their observations of non-Indigenous workers:

Everything’s by the book ... when they come out ... so it’s like this is what’s in our Practice Manual, or this is what’s in our procedures and policies, so this is how I am going to approach it when I go out there ... I’ve worked really well within that IPA team because I have been able to then give the CSOs, the non-Indigenous workers, that type of cultural knowledge when they are going out to [names the Aboriginal community], so they know more about the family history or what’s happening with that family (Indigenous statutory participant W).

Indigenous participants were aware that they needed to be able to provide evidence to demonstrate their role performance in order to maintain funding necessary for their community agencies to continue. They were expected by statutory agencies and statutory workers to fulfil their funding requirements and there were Memorandums of Understanding outlining how agencies would work together. They stated previous government experience was an advantage in community agencies because it introduced them to the necessity of complying with funding requirements of the community agency. This participant said:

I come from a background in the public service where you are controlled by policies and procedures, so it’s just my experience that can ... It’s not that hard. You have just got to make sure you dot your “I”s and cross your “t”s. Make sure that you base everything on evidence, and became familiar with procedures. It’s about how we
conduct our business and how we can justify our business to our funding agencies ... We have to run a tier between what the government is ... has to do, and what we have to do in terms of reporting. Are we managing to meet our targeted funded service (Indigenous community participant V).

Even though community workers were not constrained by statutory policies and procedures, participants stated that their ability to perform their role was impacted if statutory workers went outside the boundaries of their role. The provisions for placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care stipulate that the statutory worker ‘must ensure a recognised entity for the child is given an opportunity to participate in the process for making a decision about where or with whom the child will live’ (Section 83 (2) The Child Protection Act 1999). Indigenous participants talked about incidents when statutory workers made autonomous decisions without consulting with them. Workers at the recognised entity would find the child had been placed without their knowledge. A participant from the recognised entity talked about finding out a child had been placed in a residential without their knowledge. She/he said:

Now, we followed up with [staff at the residential] “Well, why didn’t you communicate with us ... They couldn’t give an explanation as to why not. So we went through the motions of telling them that, in future, that if Child Safety act in this way and place a [Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander] child at [name of the residential], that they need to tell us who that child is. The response we got from [the residential] was “We don’t have to because this is our facility. We are in charge and you don’t need to know.” (Indigenous community participant H)

This community participant was aware that when placing Indigenous children, statutory workers were required to ‘give proper consideration to placing the child’ in compliance with the Child Placement Principle in an Indigenous placement (Section 83 (4)
Knowledge of policies and legislation did not always lead to compliance with these in practice. She/he said:

“Put it this way. One child had extreme behaviours towards women. Very violent towards women. I told [refers to the statutory worker’s name]. I can’t place him with one of my carers if he is going to carry on like this ... I said I wanted this boy classified as complex you know.

“Oh no [refers to participant O by name] I don’t know what the words were. We won’t classify him as complex”.

They will give it to me and I will go through the protocol to place the child with or not, an appropriate carer. This child’s placement is extreme and we have no suitable carer. I can’t have this child. I can’t have this with us.

They have gone out directly last week to one of my carers and placed a child there without talking to the Placement Support Unit. That’s the Department breaking their own guidelines. So I have got Child Safety Officers sort of not following their own department guidelines and are going directly to carers ...

You know that’s really frustrating, the breaching of government around their own regulations. I can’t say much about them going behind my back because they do that anyhow, but when they breach their own service agreement, their own guidelines that is just like ... and that’s a regular thing (Indigenous community participant O).

He/she expressed that having knowledge of systems was important for holding statutory workers accountable for their actions when they acted outside of protocol agreements (and legislation). He/she advocated the necessity to have knowledge of the expectations of roles both in community and in statutory agencies who often dealt with the same client base. However, there he/she also recognised that this did not always result in him/her being listened to in attempts to ensure that policies based on legislation was adhered to.
In summary, in both statutory and community agencies, participants said that their previous government employment and their knowledge of policies and procedures in other government agencies had assisted them to approach and acquire knowledge of the expectations and requirements for their current role within statutory systems and alongside them. Twenty-five (of 30) participants had worked in a government agency prior to taking up their current role. They said this provided them with an understanding about the boundaries and expectations of their role. Ten (of 30) participants had previously been employed within the child protection field.

**Being prepared to begin the role**

Participants were asked to talk about the preparation that they received from employers prior to commencing their current role. None of the participants had been provided with, nor were they expected, to do any preparation from their employers before taking up their current position. A few participants had accessed the statutory agency’s website, and one participant had completed a placement at the agency whilst still at university. They said:

*I guess the onus was on us, or me, to research the role a bit. There was a question you had to respond to, like what a child safety officer is. So I sort of looked at the website, the department website, and sourced other information to respond to that. I'm guessing I responded quite well by the response I got from the job offer within a week, I was probably quite happy about that (Non-Indigenous statutory participant J).*

*So I actually completed a 7 week placement as part of my degree with Child Safety. I also completed 7 weeks with the Recognized Entity (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).*
Not all participants knew what was expected of them in their role or how to perform their role before they commenced employment. Despite having a previous history of working in a government agency, commencing work as a child protection worker in a rural area required them to engage in an unfamiliar role, sometimes in an unfamiliar context. Some participants said they commenced their roles with little training. For example:

*Nah, when I was family resource worker, okay, you've got to go ... straight up - you've got to go pick up the kids and take them to a visit. I didn't have no training or nothing. The only reason why I learnt is when I watched other people in the office, the other family resource workers (Indigenous statutory participant K).*

Although participants acknowledged that workers relocating to rural areas may be unfamiliar in their new context, providing an orientation to the context did not always happen. This participant acknowledged the importance of this, but also admitted that this did always occur on a regular basis, and that this had not occurred during the previous 12 months. She/he recalled:

*We've done a lot of stuff in this office - mind you some of our new workers (pause) ... We haven't done anything too much for the last 12 months. So some people will be missing in some of that but we do try and focus on individual, being more self aware in their own abilities ... their own values and their own learning preference, and then we try to focus on what might that look like if we're working with Indigenous families and understanding they themselves, it's not one thing fits all (Indigenous statutory participant M).*

Indigenous participants and non-Indianenous participants experienced difficulties knowing what to do, and what was expected of them in their role. They said:

*I came in and then sort of was thrown into the deep end ... nobody taught me anything. The only orientation was to get on the computer and do this electronic*
orientation. Nobody sat with me, nobody spoke to me and then ... within a day I was out there doing stuff in the community (Indigenous statutory participant W).

On my first day, I wasn't even introduced to my team leader or she didn't introduce herself to me until mid-afternoon. That's when she just dumped 5 files on my desk. I guess, it was just learning a different culture of a workplace. I was told that peer group discussions were unrealistic and I was seated well away from the team that I was put in. So I was separated already from assistance. It was just very bad (Non-Indigenous statutory participant J).

Participants said they turned to colleagues, who they relied on, to help them transition and learn how to perform in their new role. They said:

*I think it’s from your colleagues, basically, and I think the senior prac is a really good support. Manager and Team Leader have definitely been extreme supports, very much so. My other trusting colleagues, the ones that I know that I can trust (Non-Indigenous statutory participant U).*

And:

*A lot of shadowing again ... Shadowing with team leaders, talking, being amongst them and learning the jargon, listening to their discussions. Best practice - what do you call it? Good practice in regards to just the processes and just learning the terminologies in how they go about their work, yeah. ... I got to learn a lot just by listening and just by asking a lot of questions within staff, being able to ask those questions and not be made a - you know [laughs] being laughed at. So those sorts of things too really helped in learning (Indigenous statutory participant F).*

Being Indigenous and being able to access Indigenous colleagues who had an understanding and knowledge of clients from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures was viewed as important.
I got a lot of respect too from my boss whose name was XX. I got a lot of respect from him/her, 'cause he/she knew all the Murris too. It helped too when I could go and talk to him/him ... This office has got the highest percentage of Indigenous staff, which I'm so proud of. It just makes me want to come to work everyday ... just seeing the Murri faces. They've got the support here (Indigenous statutory worker K).

Indigenous participants said they also sought support from Indigenous workers at other agencies. This participant said:

When you're the only Indigenous worker in this office, it's very hard because you don't have any supports yourself like another fellow Indigenous worker or anything like that. So, I'm relying on people that are working in NGO's [non government organisations] and other Indigenous workers like with Queensland Health and that ... and just grounding for yourself as a worker, you know.

The support that I feel is very important to my position, is the support I get from my Indigenous reference group, because they are Indigenous workers working in this field also, and I feel that I get more out of that, and more satisfaction because, these are Aboriginal people as well, they're my people, and they're experiencing what I'm experiencing, so we all sorta on the same level there you know, and I, yeah, I feel that I get a lot of support and advice from them (Indigenous statutory worker W).

Some participants chose to access support from family and friends. This participant said:

I have my own mentors and people that I bounce off so I've got what I call spiritual elders (Indigenous statutory participant N).

I get support from my family (Indigenous statutory participant W).
One participant who had relocated to rural areas said that there was an absence of support for her in her new role, and that she had sought support by telephone from family some distance away. She said:

*Don’t have any family or friends [here]. I get support from ... One colleague in here in another team. Really that’s it ... and supervision ... I haven’t had it recently though. Someone is away and the team leader is acting manager so there’s been a bit of disruption here.*

*So yeah there’s no other support ... By phone. By phone with my family.*

*I’ve gone back a couple of times but it’s really hard because I can only go on the weekend.* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant R).

Other participants said if they were unable to resolve issues, they used their online supervisors when they needed support. For example, this participant said:

*If I still don’t get what I want I’ll go up the ladder, sort of seek it out.* (Indigenous statutory participant Y).

Another said:

*I have a lot of confidence in his/her [refers to her online supervisor] so I want to discuss anything with her, I feel free to do that and I feel that I’ve got confidence in his/her judgement and the way he/she manages people.* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant X).

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants acknowledged the value of having worked in the child protection field, and some participants attempted to link newer workers with more experienced workers as mentors.

*Very conscious of you need to have some preparation. That’s why I always put them with someone who’s experienced and can mentor them as well. Pretty well much probably micro-manage more than I would anybody else just to help them*
Indigenous participants provided support for non-Indigenous participants in assisting them to adjust to their new role, and in preparing them to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This participant recalled the following support she/he had received from an Indigenous colleague:

*I remember I was very lucky because I had an Aboriginal worker working with me, a CSSO, but I was terrified about going into [names the Aboriginal] community … I worked alongside the Aboriginal worker. Worked very closely. Her and I worked together like glue for 18 months … She was my best teacher. I don’t know how I would have managed without her … I actually haven’t asked other workers how they feel and whether they’re as paranoid, maybe they are, about getting it right. I don’t know how comfortable they feel, I don’t know, and I haven’t actually been out on jobs with other workers to know (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z).*

Another participant shared a similar experience:

*I used to work with an Aboriginal girl going out there [refers to the Aboriginal community] … She was very good. I did learn a lot from her too in my early days cause she’d been around a bit longer than me in the department and we did our training together. And we worked out there together so we had a pretty good working relationship (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P)*

Within the statutory system that places high demands on participants’ time, some newer statutory participants said that they experienced a lack of support from colleagues who were too busy to assist them. This was especially the case when participants were required to adjust to a new role after relocating. One new participant said that she/he found their transition into the role very stressful because they lacked experience as a child.
protection worker and were uncertain about what was expected of them from their employers and colleagues. At first, s/he said:

*I didn't know what my job is [sic]. I was there for three days before I found out ... I didn't know. I guess I came with different expectations of what it would be to be a new person again ... I think it's a culture where the people are busy, extremely busy, as I am now and there's no time for mentoring or shadowing ... It was disgusting ... my introduction to the office was so bad ... I was ignored ... A new person started the other day. I didn't introduce myself* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant J).

Despite this participant expressing a commitment to remain in their new role, within several months, they left their position to transfer to another office outside of the geographic area under study. It is possible that their perceived lack of support impacted on their retention.

**Additional demands on Indigenous participants**

Indigenous participants said as well as responding to the expectations of their employers they also were required to respond to the expectations from families and communities. This Indigenous participant talked about the influence of history on her role as a child protection worker:

*My family are from XX so there's a lot of history still. It was very hard for me to start working in Child Safety because I am Murri ... A lot of them [refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients] didn't understand what Child Safety was (sic). I'm like you, when I started it was hard for me, when I started out it was hard for me as a Murri and going in to a Murri home. You know. And you know I actually knock first, my parents brought me up with respect, you know ... They all know where I live, they can come and visit me ... I'm not in danger, they just got that respect* (Indigenous statutory participant K).

Being Indigenous and engaging in rural practice within the Aboriginal community placed them in a difficult position. Indigenous participants juggled a number of roles, not
only as a child protection worker, colleague, and team member, but also in the community as a friend, relative or neighbour. This participant said:

‘Cause I know ’em. I know everyone. That’s the hardest thing working in a small community, is that every Murri people that comes into this office, I’m basically - 90 per cent I know them all. But that could be a good thing or it could be a bad thing ...

A good thing, they say, oh [Participant K]’s here. They feel more relaxed ... Then it could be a bad thing because then they think, oh she’ll go tell everyone, you know, but I know their confidentiality, you know (Indigenous statutory participant K).

Indigenous workers juggled these roles. This participant said:

It’s very hard because even though you’re working for the government ... you’re still seen as an Indigenous person. I don’t walk out of that gate out there and all of a sudden I change. I’m a blackfella (sic). It’s the same as you’re black, you’re black and people see you that way, they don’t see anything else. We’ve got to live within the community so when they’re out there in the yard or even in this job here you’ve still got to interact with your community (Indigenous statutory participant I).

Sometimes this meant being privy to information that they would not necessarily be aware of. For example:

I’m related to half of [refers to the residents in the Aboriginal community] so I’d been out to one of my cousins and we were doing an investigation into this one family and her son was involved with this woman and so the girl’s stepmother came along and started talking about this girl’s sexual abuse and all the rest of it and I’m sitting there and my sister is sitting there thinking ‘I bet you just want the ground to open up’ (Non-Indigenous statutory participant G).

These roles resulted in them having dual relationships. This participant said:

I was very straight forward and told them, you know, well when the case worker would ask me to pass on a message to them, I would make sure that they
understood and would break it down for them, you know, in plain English so they would understand it, but also, I think they become very ... they started to become very trusting with me, so it was good in that way, but sometimes it’s not good in another way, because if I did have to give them bad news or whatever, then they start to feel a bit funny about me (Indigenous statutory worker W).

Indigenous participants said they felt additional expectations on them by the employer, since they are expected to be abreast of events and occurrences in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This worker explained how they did this. She/he said:

We made sure that we stayed involved by letting [the workers from the recognised entity] know around any decisions any new information that we might know, any information we might need from them, like community information ... Like if I would have heard from, you know like a few times I did hear from other clients They would say oh, you know, the mother and father had a fight on the week end, and she’s got a big black eye or whatever, and then I would ring [the worker from the recognised entity] and say this, like you know, have you heard anything on the grapevine, or have you seen this mother lately to find out whether or no she does have a black eye. So it was just about, yeah, getting that information (Indigenous statutory worker W).

Separating their work role and their lives outside of work is difficult. It presents difficulties and tensions for Indigenous workers bridging both contexts because different roles brought with them different expectations. Non-Indigenous participants (below) also talked about the invisible boundary that exists between roles:

The majority of the notification starts with a bit of a ‘just need to tell you something’ and pulling [workers] aside. And usually it’s senior people in the community who only want to tell management first and that can be tricky because it’s cutting out our processes because the standard response to that is ‘I don’t do intake, it’s not my business’ ... we come back ... and say ‘Would you ring Auntie so and so, she’s told
me some things – can you follow that up’. Or the school rang and told me these things – can you call and get more? So often it is a bit roundabout isn't it? That’s possibly a trust issue (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Q).

Performing these roles means that Indigenous workers have access to knowledge and information from a range of sources. They have cultural knowledge about ways of life and expectations in Aboriginal communities and organisational knowledge such as the policies and procedures in the statutory agencies. Difficulties emerge when demands from different sources lead to an expectation that they will share information, and be part of the process in both contexts. Indigenous participants stated that they were at times approached by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people they knew in the community who would demand to know what the department was planning in relation to a client, or asked why that participant had not influenced decisions that were made. Indigenous participants recognised that to comply with these demands would breach confidentiality, however, community people were reticent to accept that they were not involved or did not know about outcomes or incidences. Community people made assumptions that these participants should know what was going on with Indigenous clients. Participants stated that if they did not agree with a decision made by the agency in which they worked, it was difficult for them to defend it. Here’s what one Indigenous statutory participant said:

When I go down town they [people in the community] will ask me "What is happening? Why did those kids get taken? ... You know, you work there ... you see those people every day." They assume I will know, I should know. They don't believe me when I tell them I didn't. They say, “You must be lying” (Indigenous statutory participant W).

Indigenous participants were also aware that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families do not want them knowing their ‘family business’. They stated that for some families this causes them ‘shame’, especially if their actions are perceived as
contributing to their children being removed. Some families were resistant to having Indigenous workers involved in their cases because there were family connections, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families did not want the workers from the community agencies knowing their family business.

*If we’re being honest, a lot of our RE workers have a lot of family connections so there are some families out at [names the Aboriginal community] that don’t want anything to do with our RE because of the politicalness [sic] and they don’t want them knowing their family business and so on, which can be quite hard (Non-Indigenous participant Y).*

There was some apprehension about the use to which Indigenous child protection workers’ cultural knowledge and information would be put. If it appeared this information was being used towards child removal, then there was some reticence, especially from some community agency based participants, to share information. Such requests were likened to the native police. The Indigenous participant’s comment below demonstrates this:

*What happens with government workers they immediately go to the reactory. And it’s always a crisis and as soon as the parent exhibits any kind of aggressive behaviour it’s the cops on the phone. We’re having trouble with this mother.

And that’s got to stop.

And so it’s putting the blackfella first. We almost feel like the blackfella police like historical times. They sent the black police to track our kids (Indigenous community participant H).*

Non-Indigenous participants of this study did not raise issues about the need to balance their personal lives, and professional roles. They were more able to keep their
professional lives separate from their home life. This was a difference that existed between the experiences of Indigenous participants and non-Indigenous participants. Whilst many non-Indigenous participants did not interact or have contact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in their lives outside of work, this was not the case for Indigenous participants whose work and home life overlapped. For example this Indigenous participant said:

*Even though we got elders, and they’re the grandmothers of the clients, we got the respect to say “Hello Aunty how you going?” If I’m going around the street, and it’s 90 degrees and I’m in a government car, I would pick her up and give her a lift and take her. Little things like that build a good relationship with our clients.*

*Even if I’m doing my shopping and I would say “Aunty do you want a lift?” It’s like … Aunty only lives up the corner but you still give her a lift* (Indigenous statutory participant K).

Indigenous participants, who worked in community agencies, were often visited by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Participants said they accepted this contact as in their role. Community agencies were located in or close to Aboriginal communities and were physically accessible to people from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Participants described their experiences as follows:

*We are a black. Children and parents come into the office. They see black faces … We have relationships with clients, make them feel comfortable. If possible we encourage the foster carer and mum to meet. We get the carer to bring the child up to the office … We make that familiarity with Aboriginality. Our staff don’t judge them. We talk to the children about Mum and Dad. Often departmental workers don’t do this* (Indigenous community participant H).

And another participant described the environment at the community agency in this way:
But it’s much more. It’s much more relaxed. The framework’s the same. The same outcomes are expected to be achieved. That doesn’t differ. It’s how you deliver it that becomes a little bit different. And be expected to be abused by some of them old people, expect the drunken mother to turn up and abuse you. You know you take it on (Indigenous community worker H).

In summary, many participants commenced their rural employment unfamiliar with difference, the expectations of their role, and their unpreparedness to respond to this. Despite this, there was an expectation from employers and sometimes colleagues that workers would be able to manage the demands that confronted them in practice. There were additional demands on Indigenous participants who were expected to have, or be able to acquire, knowledge about what was happening in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. This created ethical dilemmas for Indigenous participants who compared this to being like the ‘blackfella police’ who were historically employed to increase personal supervision and enforce behaviour changes on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Indigenous participants said they were less able to separate their professional life from their home lives. They were both Indigenous child protection workers, and members of the Aboriginal community. Non-Indigenous participants did not face the need to balance the demands and expectations on them from their employment, and from their social networks as did Indigenous participants.

**Commencing work**

Participants were asked about their initial experiences in practice following their employment. They expressed a lack of preparedness for the realities which confronted them. Non-Indigenous participants talked about their initial shock when they observed the realities of life in Aboriginal communities. However, these communities were familiar to many Indigenous participants who recalled that they themselves had been ‘growed’ in them. Several of the Indigenous participants said that they had expected that working in
the child protection system, intervening in the lives of these families to keep children out of the system. This participant presented this view as follows:

*My goal way back then was that I wanted to get in and make a difference and see how the system worked ... and then work at trying to get children, well mainly our Indigenous children out of the system. So that's been my passion and it still is my passion to this day (Indigenous statutory participant N).*

However, for some participants their initial observations challenged these goals. For example:

*I think what else shocked me as well is how little there was in intervention trying to actually get it before it gets any worse ... the early intervention stuff. I thought that was something that I thought with the over-representation within this department that that's an area that they should be putting more resources and more money into ... so we can stop these children coming into care, if we support those families better and do what we can do to help them, then their kids wouldn't come into the system (Indigenous statutory participant W).*

**The practice experiences of non-Indigenous participants**

Even non-Indigenous participants who had worked in the field of child protection for several years recalled a sense of unpreparedness for the physical conditions which confronted them when they visited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These communities are established in areas segregated from other towns, and therefore, out of view of the general population. This means that the majority of people who visit these communities either live there, or go there for a specific reason. Non-Indigenous participants said when they initially visited these communities they had not anticipated the levels of poverty that they observed, and the conditions in which families and children were living. Education modules on Indigenous studies which some participants had
completed at university did not prepare them for the reality of their experience. They had known that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia had poorer health outcomes, higher levels of unemployment compared to non-Indigenous Australia people, and that drug and alcohol misuse was a problem. Tertiary education had enhanced this awareness but had not been sufficient to prepare them for the reality and difference which they observed when placed to work in those communities. One participant said:

*Cultural studies gives you an awareness and I have to say that my previous university where I did my first degree was very Aboriginal ... the whole Aboriginal culture was quite embedded in every course that I did. So I thought that I had my head around it, and I had done a cultural awareness study at the University ... I thought I had a bit of an idea and I'd worked in another statutory agency for two to three years previously where I'd worked with Aboriginal people ... but it doesn't prepare you for going into people’s homes and the reality of actually working with Aboriginal people ... on a mission (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z).*

Participants talked about what they observed such as the living conditions, the lack of furniture and material possessions, overcrowding, and the injuries which they observed on women as a result of domestic violence. The participant below described his/her thoughts when he/she first visited an Aboriginal community. He/she had worked previously as a child protection worker at another location. However, his/her previous practice experience did not prepare him/her for the realities he/she was confronted with in the living conditions of Aboriginal people. This participant said that although he/she had visited families in lower socio-economic communities, in comparison, the non-Indigenous families he/she had visited in that location, had had more material possessions than these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. He/she described the current conditions in the homes he/she visited as having the absolute basics: no rugs, and minimal second-hand furniture. This participant recalled being shocked and unprepared for the poverty that they witnessed:
I was shocked by the poverty, I wasn’t prepared for the poverty in [refers to the name of the community]. I guess the way people lived, the very spartan (sic) furniture; second hand furniture ... yeah ... like no rugs or carpet ... The absolute basics that we would not, I’d never seen, never, not in [refers to the name of a low socio-economic suburb of an urban area]. I have never seen a white family live like that, live with that amount of spartaness (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z).

Data from this participant highlights that knowledge from educational modules, previous experience working with clients from lower socio-economic communities does not assist in preparing the worker for a very different reality of working with Aboriginal people in community contexts. These types of experiences, together with a lack of understanding, led other participants to develop a sense of trepidation about visiting these communities. Their previous experiences did not prepare them for the complex situations which they now faced and described as ‘unpredictable’. This worker said:

You just don’t know what people are going to be like, and that’s the worst part. And even more so when you walk into an Indigenous home. Like there’s no use me lying. I feel more anxious walking into an Indigenous home than I would into a white person’s home (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

Their inability to make sense of these experiences left them feeling intimidated, and sometimes frightened. A participant provides the following example:

It can be difficult. It can be quite scary because I guess you have those expectations that what's going to happen, they've been drinking, are they going to start hurling abuse at me. Just those kind of feelings.

It is nerve wracking, it's just really really ... sometimes it can be really stressful and you've only got to get one person. And I've had it happen to me personally where they stand over you and I honestly thought I'm going to get hit ... any minute now I'm going to get hit. And it was just ... you know you come back and you do your
Critical Incident Report and you don't realise how much it affects you (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

The visits child protection workers made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were more often than not unannounced, and domestic violence and alcohol misuse was often a contributing factor in alleged child protection concerns. Participants said they felt there was an imminent threat of violence which could erupt. They presented a lack of understanding about how and why these conditions prevail and did not make sense of the reaction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. This worker talked his/her observations during a joint investigation with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family. S/he said:

He had a bit of resistance plus his mum was ranting and raving and quite enraged that the Department was doing this to her family and she was going to go to the Minister and [the situation] really escalated, so that was only one of I think 3 interviews that I had with that family.

... Getting abused and yelled at and I would not have sat there for that long and listened to the ranting and the raving from his mother, I can guarantee I wouldn't have sat there for that long if it was a white family ... I would cut them off a lot quicker and I would probably have come out and made another time to interview them because she escalated to a point where really I should have shut down the interview, but I thought, no, I'll just let it go. Because of the cultural considerations, because [the grandmother] is like a mother to those children so I just tolerated her (Non-Indigenous statutory participant R).

Participants who had been employed in their roles for a number of years noted that this sense of unpredictability lingers. These participants explicate this below:

Well you can walk into a home and there can be four or five families in the home. They can be drinking or whatever. You don't know. You just don't know what you are walking into because they're such large families. It's quite intimidating, very intimidating. You're just always prepared for ... ah what is going to happen here
because there is a lot of alcohol in that community (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

You gotta really, yeah you just gotta stand up and do it and take it and keep going ... that’s when your adrenalin kicks in because you know that you’re it. The spotlight’s on you, and don’t make a mistake because anything, everything you say and everything you do from here on in while you’re with this family, can turn to shit really quickly. So it’s like you’re always on edge, so yeah, you’re always thinking ahead, thinking on how you’re going to say it. Yeah, so being very, very careful (Non-Indigenous statutory participant R).

Indigenous participants had a different perspective. They did not say they were frightened by the behaviours that they observed on visits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. They did notice, however, that their non-Indigenous colleagues did not know how to behave in these situations. They saw that the behaviours of non-Indigenous workers often unintentionally escalated situations. This was particularly evident in situations when behaviour of non-Indigenous workers was perceived by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as intrusive or blaming. This participant advised:

Take [refers to the name of the recognised entity] along for your initial meetings with them and if you’re touching on tough subjects, which we usually are, really take notice of any signals that [refers to the name of the recognised entity] staff are giving you. Because the clients might be getting very hostile without you realising it.

[Refers to the name of the recognised entity] will just say something like, well maybe we’ll talk about that at another time. Then, if they say that, well stop talking about that. Or if [the worker from the recognised entity] says, perhaps we’ll leave and come back another time. Because we had one CSO ignore that and almost got a punch in the face. I’d also advise them just to ... regardless of what education levels they’ve got or how they first see the community with its problems ... You’re walking in their world, so tread respectfully. You’re in their world and you’re on their country, so be respectful about it (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Y).
This worker observed ignoring the advice of the worker from the recognised entity had at times resulted in workers igniting some families who became angry and aggressive towards them. Indigenous participants said non-Indigenous participants viewed their role as investigators, and Indigenous participants raised concerns that these workers were placing themselves at risk of physical harm in their lack of sensitivity to the unacceptability of their behaviours within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Indigenous participants raised concerns that non-Indigenous workers presented themselves as 'knowing it all' yet, in reality having little understanding of cultural signals. A community participant observed incidents where they had taken non-Indigenous workers away from potentially dangerous situations. This Indigenous participant said:

At times we have had to steer people away [refers to Non-Indigenous child protection workers]. We’re black and understand that, but some white workers don’t seem to realise they are putting themselves in a dangerous situation. We can hear it in their [refers to Aboriginal family] voice. The department cannot read it. Once I said, “Come back at another time.” Because I thought [the family] were going to hit them (Indigenous community participants S).

Data from non-Indigenous participants demonstrate that they were unprepared for the reality with which they are confronted when visiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The realities they observed left them shocked. Alongside this, they were at times unaware about how their own behaviour was perceived by clients and Indigenous colleagues. Being unprepared to work across cultures led to a lack of understanding and lack of awareness. Non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants, perceived their experiences in these contexts from the perspectives of their own cultural backgrounds.
The practice experiences of Indigenous participants

Indigenous participants talked less about being shocked by what they observed of the physical conditions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in communities. They were more familiar with this context. However, they said they were surprised at the extent of power that statutory workers had in their role. This power, they said, permitted child protection workers to make decisions as to whether an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child should be removed from their family. These participants were aware of the impact of breaking up families and changing their lives. He/she said:

*I think what opened my eyes is ... the decisions ... I mean ... the power that these people have ... yeah ... I mean that was something that sort of took me back ... just knowing that these people actually do have the power to remove these children, or to not break up families, you know ... they have the power to maybe take these children out of their families and to put them into a safe environment you know ... so that opened my eyes up* (Indigenous statutory participant W).

Indigenous participants often knew these families and were committed to advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to remain living with their families and in their communities. Decisions, however, were made by child protection workers, children were removed and families were broken up. Indigenous participants expressed a clear view that they did not want to participate in interventions where children were removed from their families in Aboriginal communities. This worker presented this view. She said:

*The CSO asked me to go out with her yesterday for that, and I said I'll go out with you on that, then I'd spoken to the Team Leader, cause she said it may turn into a TAO [Temporary Assessment Order], a removal, and I said well I won't be involved with a removal. I said I worked with this family previously for a few years and I said I just refuse to be involved with a removal, especially of Aboriginal children, especially in my community, and that was something I made very clear to the*
Department when I first started here, that I would not be involved in that at all (Indigenous statutory participant W).

They did not agree with these decisions on occasions, and believed the family and children could have remained at home with increased support. Indigenous participants attempted to suggest other strategies to keep children safe rather than removal from family. They did not believe they always were listened to and that they had been able to influence decisions. This participant provided an example of this:

*I was trying to explore other avenues which was in regard to you know, I was saying if the baby was looked after, then why is it a risk, you know, cause yeah, the baby wasn't there, the baby didn't witness it. The baby's only one and a bit, you know, I think in that way mum and dad were acting protectively because they did you know, if they were drinking and they left the baby with her sister or with another adult to look after it, then I didn't see that there was an issue there. But what was coming out that was around the long history that the family has with the Department, the risk of if this was to happen next time, you know, what if the children would get involved and then the children would get physically hurt. So any options that I sort of came up with were getting knocked back. You know my options were around you know, like placing the children within family, as a Family Agreement, where the children would be ... but then the Team Leader was saying well that's happened before, and it didn't work (Indigenous statutory participant W).*

**Summary**

In summary, the practice experiences of participants exposed them to differences that existed in this context and to the authority that exists in child protection work. When participants commenced their practice in these rural contexts, they said they felt unprepared and lacked understanding to make sense of and to respond in an informed way to the experiences that confronted them. Some participants had had minimal or no experience of employment in this area of work. The majority of participants however, had
previous government employment history. Acquiring knowledge occurred after they commenced their roles.

Cultural knowledge use and acquisition

The next section explores the range of sources of knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their cultures that participants said they used or acquired in child protection practice working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. This section outlines the knowledge and experiences that participants said they brought with them to cross cultural practice, and the strategies they used to acquire knowledge when they began their current roles. It presents the influence of formal education and cultural workshops, as well as the strategies participants used in their cross cultural practice. These strategies included regularly visiting and being visible in Aboriginal communities, working jointly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, and learning through experience. Finally, this section considers how participants communicated to assist in bridging differences and to acquire cultural knowledge and learning.

What did they already know?

Participants were asked about cultural knowledge and their experiences with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that they brought with them to practice.

The experiences of non-Indigenous Participants

Compared to Indigenous participants, many non-Indigenous participants acknowledged that prior to their current employment, they had very few experiences engaging and interacting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These participants said they became aware, usually through their tertiary education, of their lack of knowledge about the history and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
people in Australia despite having grown up here. This is what one non-Indigenous participant said:

*I am horrified that I was born in Australia, grown up in Australia and I didn’t know most of it* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant G).

Even non-Indigenous participants who had relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as they were growing up spoke about their lack of awareness of how these families close to them might have been discriminated against on the basis of their race whilst they were not. The participant below, said:

*I have an uncle and auntie who are Indigenous. Not, blood relatives, but they’ve always been Uncle and Auntie you know ... our relationship with them was as equals. I didn’t even know there was such a thing as racism or anything probably until I got, I don’t know, up at primary into teens maybe ... just because they had a darker skin you know, it just didn’t register you know, didn’t feature* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant E).

Another participant said:

*Growing up here [in this rural area], my family’s actually had quite a lot to do with community people and it was always very positive. It was always a very positive relationship for me growing up. The biggest insight I had was actually becoming part of an Indigenous family and actually hearing their side of what it was like to actually grow up - be born and grow up on [refers to the name of the Aboriginal community] and the racism and the segregation and stuff that I wasn’t even aware of and yet I just thought everybody was the same and everything was wonderful but obviously it wasn’t* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant G).

Other non-Indigenous participants from rural communities had witnessed firsthand racist treatment of Aboriginal people who lived in those areas. They said:
I lived on a cattle station all my life where there were a lot of Aboriginal people in the town that I went to school with ... And also a lot of Aboriginal workers on our station ... I saw myself, this is when I was about a nine year old, the local council bulldozing their homes into the ground, you know, because they didn't want them there. But there was never any thought of providing them with better conditions to live in, they just bulldozed them. They [Refers to what was said by those responsible for these actions] said, “Off you go find somewhere else to live we don't want you here”.

That to me always struck a chord, of unfairness I suppose, in my mind ... I think your life experiences especially over a long time do equip you to work in a particular way (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).

Although non-Indigenous participants spoke about wanting to engage in practice that was culturally appropriate, and respectful, they were often unsure about how to interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Indigenous participants said that they observed changes over time when non-Indigenous workers had had more contact with these families and became more accustomed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Aboriginal communities. They thought that non-Indigenous workers gained confidence over time. This is described by an Indigenous statutory participant:

At first you can see that they’re frightened because they don’t know, because their experiences and the whole one brush thing, like with Indigenous people they’re assuming everyone’s like that, the whole community. When they see the differences and when they start talking to people and get more involved they see a big difference. You see them coming out of their shell and being more confident with Indigenous people, so that’s a good thing (Indigenous statutory participant I).

Non-Indigenous participants said feeling unprepared and lacking knowledge about ways to engage in practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities did contribute to a sense of fear about whether they were behaving
appropriately. In addition, they were aware that within smaller rural communities informal networks exist. A non-Indigenous participant said:

*I guess it was more my fear of insulting a family; my fear of being unaware of protocol and stepping over a boundary that I didn't know existed. They were my fears in first dealing with the families because it's a small community and I think that word travels quickly and you can gain a reputation. I think that if you gain a negative reputation, that would be difficult to repair* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z).

In summary, many non-Indigenous participants came to practice with little previous experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Even non-Indigenous participants who had contact and involvement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when they were young were not conscious of racist and discriminatory practices experienced by Indigenous peoples. Despite wanting to approach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in a culturally appropriate and respectful manner, many of the participants said they lacked the knowledge and confidence about knowing how interact in ways that were respectful and congruent with the expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**Being taught – how did they learn? (Non-Indigenous participants)**

Because many of the non-Indigenous participants said they had very little previous experience of interacting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, they were asked about how their knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and how they had acquired this knowledge. Many of the non-Indigenous participants said that they acquired knowledge through university training, although not all participants were required or had completed modules on Indigenous studies. Some participants said they had chosen to complete modules integrating knowledge of Indigenous cultures into their curriculum. Those participants who had completed cultural studies at university said it
gave them a greater understanding of both historic and contemporary issues in Australian Indigenous culture. These participants stated that having a greater understanding of the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia was important to understand the current context. This is exemplified in the comment by a participant, below:

*A lot of my uni training ... focussed on that Aboriginal history which I think gave me a pretty good understanding and I think that’s important to have that. Know that context for what’s happening today ... I don’t think you can solve the problems unless you know where they’ve come from* (Non-Indigenous participant P).

Many non-Indigenous statutory participants had also attended workplace induction training since commencing their employment. In 2004, the Crime and Misconduct Inquiry recommended the need for statutory child protection agencies to enhance the training and professional development provided to workers, and to include ongoing Indigenous cross cultural training as an obligation of fundamental importance (Crime & Misconduct Commission, 2004). The statutory department commenced ongoing cross cultural training for all staff as part of its implementation of the recommendations from this report in September 2004 (Forster, 2004). Statutory workers who commenced employment since this time are required to complete induction training to prepare them for fieldwork. Within this training, a two day cultural competency component is included.

Twelve (of 30) statutory participants from this study completed the enhanced induction training and two days of Indigenous cross cultural training. Non-Indigenous participants who had commenced their employment prior to this time, stated they had attended Indigenous cross-cultural training at some time during their employment, although most said that this had been one-off training many years ago, and they had not attended or been provided with ongoing or additional cross cultural training. The twelve statutory participants who attended the cultural competency training as part of their
induction, described it as foundational, basic, and interesting, but indicated that the knowledge presented to them was not context specific. Despite this, some of the non-Indigenous participants said that they had learnt a lot about the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. Participants who attended training as part of the Child Safety Officer (CSO) induction training said:

*In the cultural awareness training through the CSO, I learnt a lot. And I think all this was happening while I was growing up in this country and going to school here and I didn’t know squat of it. I think it is terrible that we don’t learn as we are growing up how badly we’ve treated the Indigenous population in Australia and why they are different. It was interesting, I started [work] at [another community agency] and I got accused of being biased and I went, no – but I treat them all the same. And they said – exactly. So that made think (Non-Indigenous statutory participant R).*

*We do cultural awareness training for a couple of days in our CSO training but I probably would like it to be more local. I’ve met some elders in different places that I’ve worked. I’d really like to have … to take on a relationship as a CSO with the elders in this community, whether we have regular meetings, whether we have them involved with our kids somehow, probably like to have more of an in-depth knowledge of Darambil, and Wadga Wadga and other mobs that are from around here. Because I think that what we do is so shallow, so superficial, that yeah, we need to be more part of that … because culture is living, you know we need to be part of that as it grows within our own region (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).*

*It’s so long ago. I suppose it gave you a very general overview of the history - after colonisation or invasion depending on your political view of the way this country is now. So yeah it gave a very general overview of the history. It obviously didn’t make a great impact on me because I don’t recall very much about that - that two day training (Non-Indigenous statutory participant G).*
Other non-Indigenous participants had attended training provided locally at the two sites. They said:

*The only external learning resource is obviously the cultural training that the department does, which is definitely worthwhile. It's just not the be-all and end-all, but is definitely a good, strong foundation. But sending people to [names the Aboriginal community] to a place called [refer to the training centre] or to council or to different positive parts of the community to just listen and learn ... It's just a nice way for people to learn something about the history of the community. I don't think you can understand [this Aboriginal community] without a historical reference point, which is not the same as an urban communities (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Q).*

*The training in [the Aboriginal community] actually spoke about the current issues in [the local context] more than the other [training course on cultural competency] but even then that's not what stood out to me. I do remember that they covered it - I just can't remember what they spoke about very much (Non-Indigenous statutory participant D).*

Localised training was offered by Community Health workers for health workers, and child protection workers were invited to attend. These workshops aimed to present workers information about the lived experiences of Aboriginal people in these Indigenous communities. These workshops were context specific, however, they were not held regularly due to the work demands on health workers, and at one of the sites, none had been held during the twelve months prior to this study. Non-Indigenous participants had been encouraged by employers to attend private workshops addressing issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cross cultural practice when they became available at the sites. Some of the non-Indigenous participants had attended these workshops which addressed issues such as suicide prevention and mental health,
but these were not always directly related to the issues they faced in their practice in child protection.

A newer non-Indigenous participant recently graduated from university had completed induction training offered by the statutory agency. This had included the compulsory cultural competency component. In discussing her understanding of cultural competency training he/she said:

_We talked about loss of identity and we talked about problems facing the Indigenous community and the history of it. How the history is impacting on relationships today, what sort of struggles we’re going to have in the future I guess, and how that is going to affect our communication between communities and what to be aware of when we’re going out doing child safety work in the Indigenous community (Non-Indigenous statutory participant A)._ 

When he/she was asked about their initial experiences of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this participant said:

_I don’t know that I have any special skills in dealing with Indigenous communities and I wouldn’t even have a clue what they would be. I don’t see how they would be any different from working with other people (Non-Indigenous statutory participant A)._ 

In summary, many of the non-Indigenous participants acquired their knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through formal training. Some did attend training both at university, and as part of their induction training at the statutory agencies. This training provided a source of knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and peoples. Many of these non-Indigenous participants had limited prior experience with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Participants said of their training, that it offered little to prepare them for the contexts of their practice. Localised
cultural training in the form of short term, was more relevant to contextual issues when available.

**Getting to know – yarning (Indigenous participants)**

Indigenous participants were asked about how they acquired their knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures. None of the Indigenous participants had attended induction training or cultural competency training. Most of the Indigenous participants had not attended university and did not complete Indigenous module studies. Indigenous participants acquired their knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture informally. They viewed themselves as bi-culturally located because of their birth into Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures and their life experiences of interacting in both their own cultural contexts and in non-Indigenous contexts. Indigenous participants explained that as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, they were required to function in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts. For example when they commenced school, and these experiences had taught them to understand non-Indigenous ways. Indigenous participants said that these experiences began when they were children, and provided them with the ability to function in two different cultural worlds. Many Indigenous participants had travelled and worked in other contexts, and had relationships with people from cultural backgrounds other than their own. They had built rich cultural knowledges about their own culture and that of others. Here’s what participants said:

*I feel part of both those societies. But that’s practice over many years of adapting. It’s like I always akin my life to a set of railway tracks. I’ll walk very carefully with one foot on the right side and one foot on the left side because I have to. We had to adapt to schooling for starters. When you went to school, it was automatically you had to adapt to the white way of doing it ... I’m proud of who I am as an Aboriginal (person) ... There needs to be an acceptance and understanding in both worlds*
basically because we are, we are living in two different worlds trying to do the same thing (Indigenous community participant H).

And this participant said:

_The reality whether you go from Mornington to the Torres Straits down to Brisbane and all in between, we are all different. We all have our own way of communicating and dealing with our problems as they arise. And I think that’s where you need to be able to build relationships where you are at, so wherever you’re, your relationships with the Indigenous staff, relationships with the Indigenous services, and that comes with a lot of listening rather than going out and plodding ... coming and sitting and listening (Indigenous statutory participant N)._

Indigenous participants talked about having an awareness of different ways of living, the values that underpin this, and being able to accept that people from different cultures have different values, and different beliefs about what is important in their lives. This Indigenous participant presented the following view:

_To me it’s just having a good understanding of ... knowing that Indigenous people live different ways and have different values and different views on life and what they believe is important and what’s not important to them (Indigenous statutory participant I)._

Indigenous participants said they drew on their early socialisation experiences to inform their practice. Their experiences of growing up in a predominately non-Indigenous society had exposed them to different values and ways of life, and they said it had prepared them as workers to work with both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people and families. The expressed the need for acceptance and understanding of diversity and difference. One worker said:
It’s our experiences and what we bring to the service centre in terms of sharing our knowledge and culture and that in itself has helped to reduce some families from coming back in and out.

I think it’s just having that understanding about their history. I think history plays a significant effect and your childhood, and the way you were brought up and what you’ve been taught. What, you know how your parents parent you, and all those sort of things, and the community and your extended family because basically your identity comes from that (Indigenous statutory participant N).

Indigenous participants said they had a responsibility to share their knowledge and experience with non-Indigenous workers. They said:

Come and talk to people like us. Absolutely ... I think we have a responsibility in some form or another to ensure that workers, key workers that we are working with, understand ... Tell them their experiences let them know what it’s like, to walk into [an Aboriginal community] on a pension night and to expect to see ... expect to see something (Indigenous community participant V)

Another worker said:

It’s our experiences and what we bring to the service centre in terms of sharing our knowledge and culture ... It comes from that conversation ... I think that that's where people have the opportunity ... we don't induct people. We usually just sit around and we talk about it and it comes up as we, we say look, we just start talking ... We'll talk about some of the connections that we have and then some of the relationships you need to be aware not to be too ... to run things by us where you think that ... it might be a neglect issue but for us, let's say well you know that could be ... but we might have another piece of the story or a piece of the puzzle that we can go behind. We don't really do any inductions as such (Indigenous statutory participant N).

Another approach to acquiring cultural knowledge about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families who lived in Aboriginal communities was to visit, to be seen as active and visible in these communities.
Being active and visible in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

Some participants stated that it was important to make a commitment to forming relationships and to getting to know the families and communities with whom they work by visiting them regularly. Being able to visit regularly was influenced by the role that Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants held. Indigenous participants who provided family support services were more likely to visit families on a regular basis and keep in touch with families either informally or formally. Non-Indigenous participants who worked with families on an ongoing basis may visit more often, however, non-Indigenous participants responsible for intervention into allegations of harm would only visit families when their role required them to, and would not maintain contact after their assessment was complete. One participant said:

*I'd like to see more of the other workers getting pro-active in that area ... physically going out to [refers to the name of the Aboriginal community]. Sometimes they [refers to non-Indigenous statutory workers] only go out there when something goes wrong ... whereas I am there when the kids are running at a running event, or the kids are swimming in the swimming carnival or they're having a breakup party or they're having a birthday party, then I'm there you know what I mean. Cause that's how I like to build my relationship up with people, you know and that's just not with the child, that's with the carer, that's with their family, I think it's really important that it's something that needs to be a whole of office thing ... I mean because the only way you are going to learn is if you get out there and you start talking to people, and that's the only way you are going to find out information you know. If you're out there hearing it first hand from people. If you stuck in here and you're only just getting phone calls and stuff like that I mean something that's third, fourth hand information you know. I just think it's very vital that yeah. And for a department where we have had a very bad history with Aboriginal people ... we need to be out there, we need to be seen out there on the ground doing ground work with people (Indigenous statutory participant W).*
Whilst this participant added:

*To really work with and communicate with indigenous communities, you need to immerse yourself in the community, not just drive in and out. The rewards of truly knowing the people is worth the effort (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Y).*

For those participants who did visit families regularly, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants agreed that visiting regularly showed the community that they were committed to spending time in their role, and positively impacted on building relationships to the children and families living there. Indigenous participants said that residents were aware of their ongoing presence in the community and it was important to be seen.

For example:

*If you were out there and you are trying to make an effort they [refers to families in the Aboriginal community] won’t put you down as much. Because I go out there and I get families that swear about the caseworkers and say they’re such and such, they don’t come out here, they only come out here when the child is out of control or the child is doing something wrong. That's where we only get the bad news we never get the good news. And they don't want to know us. Whereas I was brought up where ... I was told that if you were to get out there, you have to work with people, that means you have to sit down and you have to listen to them. And even if you’re sitting there for an hour or so and there’s complete silence, at least you’re getting somewhere with that (Indigenous statutory participant W).*

*I used to go out almost every week, several days a week. Now I go out once a fortnight. What I would like to do is go out there maybe 3 days consecutive data per fortnight. I think if I could go out there every 3 weeks stay for 3 or 4 days then they think “She doesn’t mind being here” (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).*
There was a commitment from Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers who visited these communities regularly that encompassed a desire to learn and acquire knowledge. This was outlined in the comment by this non-Indigenous participant:

*I make a point to go out and know the families. To go out and visit with them, get to talk with them. Build a relationship with them. I think the relationship you build with the family is vitally important otherwise they are not going to share with you the information that really is useful for learning. No one is ever going to have the knowledge but the parents, so without that knowledge you can’t move forward. So it has been my aim to get to know the families* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant *P*).

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants stated that spending time was an important element in this process. They stated that after working in their current role over a period of time, they developed a greater understanding of the family networks, and that this enhanced their understanding of the local community and how it functioned. This is reflected in the following statement which reveals the network of supports and relationships within these small Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This participant described the difference they experienced over a period of time working in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

*I’ve found that the longer I’ve been here, the more and more you can connect people to certain groups within family structures and units that makes your work with them a lot easier because you’ve got an understanding of their family system. So, as an individual, or as a nuclear part of that system, they may be experiencing a problem or an issue that you can understand on a level of respect for other parts of the system or the family* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant *Q*).
One participant said this has the potential to change attitudes. She/he said:

“Attitude comes from different life experiences too, but I think you can change your attitude over time by exposure ... Another important thing is continuity (Indigenous community participant V).”

Another participant talked about setting the foundation. She/he said:

*Being white too and working in the black community ... I think ...You got to go that little bit further to making sure that you set the foundations for your interactions with those people. Even more so (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).*

Nonetheless, as well as immersing themselves in communities and making a commitment to regular contact and being visible in the community, participants said they had to complete organisational demands which did impact their ability to do this. At one of the sites, the Aboriginal community was a four hour round trip from the office. This meant participants who travelled to this community could only do so if the amount of active cases allocated to them could justify this travel time. When workers visited regularly, some of their cases were closed. Participants said that with fewer cases, it was difficult to justify to supervisors, travel time spent frequently visiting these communities. This participant said:

*I had 10 families when I first went out there [names the Aboriginal community] – There are four now. It’s because of the work we are doing there (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).*

However, some non-Indigenous participants did not enjoy travelling to Aboriginal communities, and their visits to these communities were driven by the need to conduct investigations and assessments. This participant provided his/her views and said:
Some people say they love going out there, I personally don’t. I think it’s just depressing ... There’s graffiti all around it, there’s a million dogs everywhere, it’s just depressing (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

**Working jointly – Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers**

Working jointly with Indigenous workers was another approach non-Indigenous participants said they used to acquire knowledge and learn about Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

**Non-Indigenous workers**

Non-Indigenous participants who visited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in their practice said they acquired knowledge from working jointly with Indigenous colleagues. They stated they actively sought to work jointly to learn from their non-Indigenous colleague’s knowledge. Non-Indigenous participants who chose this approach recognised the wealth of cultural knowledge of Indigenous staff, and actively sought their assistance as mentors and cultural guides. A non-Indigenous participant who used this approach reflected back over the period of time that she/he worked with an Indigenous child protection participant. The participant recognised that this involved learning, working closely to build relationships and demonstrate respect. At the same time, this participant appreciated and acknowledged the opportunity to learn from this Indigenous participant. She/he said:

*I was also lucky enough to have [refers to name of Indigenous colleague] here who came out and we worked as a team for nearly a year. She was my best teacher. I don’t know how I would have managed without her ... I now look back and realise that that was actually very important. I think it was very important, when I look at the relationships I have now. [Refers to name of the Indigenous worker] that I worked with has an enormous respect in the community, so I guess ... by working*
hand in hand with her, and I guess another part of that is ... I have tried very hard to be respectful and culturally competent (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z).

Non-Indigenous participants who worked jointly with Indigenous workers stated they had learnt a lot from their experiences. They said that they were able to observe the skills that Indigenous workers used in their interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Here’s what a non-Indigenous participant said:

She was able to (pause) because she was Aboriginal she was able to perhaps move a little bit more quickly than I was able to in certain areas. She was doing investigations too and I was doing IPAs [family support work] but we would often be together. But she was one of the best investigation officers I saw out there too. I did learn a lot from her too in the early days cause she’d been around a lot longer than me in the department (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).

However, the decision to engage and work jointly with Indigenous child protection workers appears to be at the discretion of non-Indigenous child protection workers and usually occurs when new workers arrive and are keen to learn and seek knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Although non-Indigenous participants who did work jointly with Indigenous child protection workers found this process very helpful, and spoke positively in regard to this, it seemed working jointly was not ongoing for a variety of reasons. This could be because of changes in agency staff, such as if the worker had resigned from their position or transferred into a new position, or when workload demands did not allow time available for this to continue. When cases were transferred or closed, non-Indigenous workers ceased contact with client families. For example:

I would do my investigation and assessment, write it up, I would be the applicant for the order, and then hand it over to the [other] team and I guess that’s it. I would try
and make time to go and see that family even though it was all finished. You know done and dusted (Non-Indigenous statutory participant R).

**Indigenous workers**

However, Indigenous workers who were connected to Aboriginal communities, or those who had worked for many years with families and had built relationships with them continued to be a point of contact between the family and the agency even after they no longer had case responsibility, or were not asked by non-Indigenous families to accompany them on visits. Indigenous families would sometimes make contact with these Indigenous workers for advice, or see them at different cultural gatherings. This worker said:

*Worked with them for two and a half years. The case was closed … then I've moved over to another team, so I didn't have much involvement but, living here locally, and seeing them, I always had involvement with them ... when I'd see them at community events, when I seen them in [names the Aboriginal community] I'd always drop in and I'd always say, you know, how's everything going, and have a yak with them ... and ask how the kids were going, and talk to the kids ... so it was never that I lost contact with them you know what I mean. And the family would ring me, you know. When ... her mother would ring and say, “He's hit her again and he's gone in the Watch House or whatever”, so I sorta (sic) moved teams (Indigenous statutory worker W).*

Indigenous workers felt connected to what was happening in families and in Aboriginal communities. This connectedness was separate from the demands and expectations on them as child protection workers. They were often aware of what was happening within Aboriginal communities and Indigenous workers were a source of information for non-Indigenous workers. They talked about the break in this connectedness when they were away from their jobs on leave, or training this flow of information cease. This Indigenous participant said:
But where that fell down is when I had leave, and when I wasn't there, and whatever, then that would all fall down because a lot of ... that responsibility would lie with me. It would be relying on my information (Indigenous statutory participant W).

And another said:

If I ever left this job - I even tried but I couldn't work anywhere else. I feel as a Murri person I've got to stay here (Indigenous statutory participant K).

This continuity was not always recognised in the statutory agency. Indigenous workers were sometimes excluded or not consulted in decisions about families that came to the attention of the statutory agency, but did not directly involve their current roles. For example:

So this all happened, I didn't know anything, because I'm working in another team ... They don't consult no. They didn't consult with me. Even though I'd been working with them for a long time, they didn't consult with me. I didn't find out, I actually found out from [names another non-government agency]. They told me about that. No one in this office told me. I feel a bit disappointed in that, cause I think ... if they'd needed to get advice ... when they should have come to me and said, well what other options do you see would work here (Indigenous statutory participant W).

Indigenous participants valued the cultural knowledge, and information that they had accumulated about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and the Aboriginal communities in which they lived. They expressed a commitment to continue to share this with non-Indigenous workers in their cross cultural practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. Non-Indigenous participants said that the knowledge and support of Indigenous workers during their initial practice was helpful, and was positive in increasing their understanding and knowledge when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. However, jointly engaging with families was
not always ongoing, and when it did occur, it was often at the discretion of the non-
Indigenous worker. For example, the following participants said:

*I haven't used them* [refers to the recognised entity]. *If I ask them they'll go out and
check on a family. Like I'll just say have you seen such-and-such? Are the kids
okay? But they [refers to the name of the recognised entity] don't actually engage
with the family. Not with mine anyway. But they'll come on home visits or we'll have
meetings at [the recognised entity] and they'll be part of those so that they can
explain things to the family in a different way, or I'll consult with them if I want to
know stuff about a family and I'm not able to find that out* (Indigenous statutory
participant Z).

*Well I decided. I notified, ran the tools, and the outcome of that was, whatever the
choices are, was not to return them home.*

[Interviewer asks] *Was there consultation with the recognised entity then at that
time?*

*They would have agreed with us. Well maybe they didn't, I can't remember. They
... I think they agreed with us at that time* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).

**Learning by experience (non-Indigenous workers)**

Other non-Indigenous participants said that they built their knowledge from their
practice experiences, which provided them opportunities to learn. These participants said
engaging in cross cultural practice at times raised issues which they talked about with
their colleagues, and their supervisors. Their learning however was more self-directed,
and related to issues that confronted them in their practice rather than an ongoing
learning process to build knowledge. These workers said their experiences brought to the
surface unconscious differences in perspectives, and opinions. For example, the
participant below talked about ‘sharing’ in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
communities, which s/he described as a pattern s/he had observed in most of the families
s/he had worked with. This caused the participant to reflect and compare their own perceptions, with those they encountered. s/he said:

I found not only with this family, but with every single family I've dealt with in [refers to the name of the Aboriginal community] it's that sharing kinda behaviour ... I sort of can draw parallels with my family ... my own life ... I know that if I was to constantly go to my sister or my cousins and go ... so who's done my shopping, whose going to give me my groceries for the week, I've got no food. That would be a problem. They just wouldn't instantly share and go “Oh sure, here you go have a box of weetbix, and have milk and have sugar and have everything.” They'd go “What? Get off your arse and go and get your own shopping. What's your problem? What have you done with your money?” ... it's foreign to me (Non-statutory participant R).

Another participant described the perceptions about what they observed in Aboriginal communities:

You see a level of neglect and things like that, you possibly don't see so much of anywhere else. And you've got to look at it. You've got to take into consideration, there's not much food here, what are the kids eating, and it's like, we're going somewhere else for dinner, or the kids go over there, have dinner over there, so you have to look at all these things and you don't know, you don't seriously know if that's the truth unless you are walking over, asking everyone. So you know what I mean, you have to take some things at face value but the other side it's like. It just does make it difficult. It's a lot more things to consider (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

This illuminates the gulf of experiences that workers bring with them to practice. Being able to reconcile difference and diversity is impacted by the worker's openness and ability to re-orient and re-evaluate these assumptions and beliefs. Although non-Indigenous participants who used their experience to reflect on their practice did reflect on the views they brought to practice, there was a tendency to use these perceptions as a
benchmark and standard with which they compared their observations and their experiences in Aboriginal communities.

I had seen the state of the home ... OK this house is a complete mess... I could smell an odour in the house that was like rotting food. I could see that the floors just had bits and pieces on it you know like, potentially which could have been hazardous, like broken stuff especially for the 3 year old. I saw in the fridge there wasn’t really much food that was able to sustain the family for any longer than a day. I knew that he wasn’t getting any money in the next couple of days. So it’s not as if the children would have had enough food probably for the next 48 hours ... the clear lack of provisions in the home (Non-Indigenous statutory participant R).

Preconceived attitudes and views were prevalent in discussions with them about differences in their cross cultural practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This was particularly relevant in the field where non-Indigenous participants saw their role as assessing the welfare and safety of children.

The children could not stay in that home until there had been some major changes in regard to alcohol consumption. And I also had huge concerns in relation to their basic care needs ... to be honest, not impressed at all. To think that this is how some people raise their children, if you can call it that. It’s not even raising your children. It’s just sort of ... these children are just being dragged up basically. That was my thoughts (Indigenous statutory participant B).

Accepting difference (non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants)

Most of the participants viewed their role as protecting children whether they were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous. These participants said:

I am about making sure kids are safe ... we are just so willing, because we employ people who have a passion to help kids, and not just necessarily our own kids, because our kids are hard done by, because their parents were hard done by, because their grandparents were hard done by (Indigenous community participant H).
Another said:

*So I had in mind that I wanted to help children who were being harmed in family situations (Indigenous statutory participant D).*

Changes observed in children was viewed by this participant as fulfilling his/her goal to protect children and advocate on their behalf. She/he said:

*I just love kids, yeah, I really do. It’s good. And you know there are times when you can see a real benefit and a big change. Like these two little kids that I moved with their grandmother they have just blossomed since they’re been in care. Just two different kids now. One of them wasn’t even talking, and you can just see such a big change (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).*

During the interviews, non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants talked about the value of the child’s connectedness with family and culture. This was important for Indigenous children who were often removed to placements out of their community. This non-Indigenous participant talked about having a respect for difference demonstrated within the workgroup by a congruence of values and respect. The non-Indigenous statutory participant proposed the importance of leadership that mentored and modelled these values within the team at the statutory agency in which they worked. He/she said:

*We have a good congruence of values, though, which probably would be one of the success factors worth considering. So if you’ve got congruent values and respect - underlying respect for all client families and their humanity and particularly for Indigenous people and their experiences, then the rest of it is things you do, but you’ve got to have the attitude, I reckon, at a fairly fundamental level in a leadership team that values respect, self-determination, community capacity (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Q).*
However, the same participant, despite espousing respect, self-determination and community capacity as important values in child protection practice knew the realities in practice presented difficulties for some of the non-Indigenous participants when they were confronted with different living conditions and ways of life in their practice in Aboriginal communities.

*It's actually about understanding the social context of all the people we work with - adults and children ... a lot of people have a lot of culture shock when they go to [Aboriginal] communities like [names the community] and it draws to the surface a lot of judgmental attitudes about poverty and opportunity and where children fit (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Q).*

This participant said accepting difference was more difficult for those workers who had had limited exposure to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their own lives. He/she said:

*It's about the validity of different lifestyles ... I don't like the word “tolerance” because tolerance really emphasises difference and says, you know, "We’re legitimate, but we’ll tolerate, accept” - “grudgingly accept something else.” That’s not the right word at all (Non-Indigenous participants Q).*

The participant recognised that workers brought with them different values, and judgemental attitudes, but s/he believed it was important to reflect on these, whilst at the same time accepting the validity of different lifestyles. S/he knew many child protection workers were initially shocked when they were visually exposed to poverty in Aboriginal communities.

In describing their experiences during their initial visits to Aboriginal communities, non-Indigenous participants compared their observations to their own cultural standards. Therefore, in an attempt to learn from, and make sense of the differences they observed, they made judgements about what they observed. For example, non-Indigenous participants assessed children who lived in homes where food was in short supply as
neglected, and they had limited understanding of the underlying reasons and causes that led to these circumstances in isolated Aboriginal communities. The participant below presents their observations on a visit to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family living in an Aboriginal community. Whilst attempting to describe and make sense of the ‘level of neglect’ observed, comparison is made to the number of people living in the house, graffiti on the walls, the sparseness of the furnishings, and the cleanliness observed:

You see a level of neglect and things like that. Every single wall in the home was just riddled with writing ... all over every wall. There was a lounge chair sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor that had no cushions in it so if you sat in it you sat on the slats of the lounge chair ... There was another male living in the back of the home who had a fridge with a padlock on it, and apparently the reason for that was that a lot of people ... apparently do steal food out there from other people. Every stick of furniture was dirty. There was hardly any furniture to begin with, but it was just filthy. Absolutely filthy. You've got to take into consideration, there's not much food here. What are the kids eating? ... It just does make it difficult. There's a lot more things to consider (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

Indigenous community workers observed the differences in out of home care placements for children in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous placements. This Indigenous community participant told the following story:

I guess it's about how people think and ... It's about four little Aboriginal children being placed with an Aboriginal foster carer. Now that carer neglected their needs, further traumatised them not meeting their health needs. That foster carer then left and the department had to find another placement. Now that placement was with one of our newly registered white foster carers and they are wonderful people. You know irrespective of their colour they are just fantastic. Now they were actually traumatised by the state those kids came to them in. There was boils, there was ear infections which had not been treated to the extent that one little fellow had an ear infection which had an abscess which had burst and it looks like that little fellow is
going to lose hearing in that ear. The boils have left scars all over them. They were malnourished. The carer was so concerned that the carer telephoned the Child Safety office on more than one occasion to seek medical assistance. You have no idea the state these kids came to us. And the CSO stated to them. “Well I do understand the state the kids came to them because you’ve got to understand it’s a cultural thing.” That’s a blasphemous thing. It’s 2010 for goodness sake. It’s the twenty-first century (Indigenous community participant H).

Indigenous participants viewed some non-Indigenous child protection workers as judgemental because their assessments compared Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to a different standard, one which non-Indigenous workers believed people living in these communities should (or even could!) aspire. Some Indigenous community participants reflected on the judgemental attitudes of non-Indigenous workers. They said that although they found some of these workers would claim they “treat all people Aboriginal people the same”, other non-Indigenous workers would “swing between saying there is no difference in Aboriginal people and white people and then treating Aboriginal people like poor little blackfellas” (Indigenous community participants S). These participants saw non-Indigenous workers taking on the role as “saviour”. They explained this view, stating that these workers saw themselves on a “crusade” to “save” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their plight (Indigenous community participants S).

Community based participants said they had observed non-Indigenous workers brought into their work their views having been raised in non-Indigenous families and living in communities which were predominantly white. Their beliefs about standards then became the benchmark for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families they worked with. This view was shared by an Indigenous statutory participant, who said:

*Some of them [refers to non-Indigenous workers] may have come from a high class family that they see certain things as ... if there is mess on the floor, then that’s a very messy house or an untidy house. So, they just ... when ... values are instilled*
Child protection workers, however, are required to make judgements about the safety of children. The child protection concerns which workers are required to assess are often complex. Making assumptions based on preconceived values that workers bring with them to practice fails to deal with difference and diversity, perhaps even about notions of space and home. The following excerpt provides an example of this. The participant presented a scenario where a child had been playing on the road unsupervised. On the one hand, the non-Indigenous participant presented the view that it was very dangerous for children to play on the road, because of the risk of harm from cars. On the other, the Indigenous participant presented the view that in rural Aboriginal communities children often play on the road. The non-Indigenous participant, in considering this information, was unable to ignore the element of risk to the child who played on the road. The non-Indigenous participant described the following incident:

The non-Indigenous participant asks the Indigenous community worker:

“*What’s the go with the parent? ... Didn’t even worry about the fact the child was on the road.*”

Indigenous worker responds:

“Well you know in our communities ... kids ... well that’s their life. They do just play on the road, and they do things and there’s an assumption that they’re just OK, they’re just mucking around and playing. That there’s someone looking out.”

Non-Indigenous worker states:

“That just doesn’t sit well with me. That is so different in what I believe in and what I would expect. That’s not normal, how can you think like that ... I start thinking of the risks ... they could get run over, they could have been taken” (Non-Indigenous statutory participant R).
The difficulty then is that there are two different perspectives about the same situation and each could lead to a different response. This scenario provides an example of how openness and the ability to re-evaluate assumptions and beliefs that workers bring with them in practice can influence outcomes. Indigenous participants consistently advocated the need for non-Indigenous workers to consider the broader pressures on families, to consider what was contributing to the presenting problems for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and not to judge situations on face value.

Indigenous participants urged non-Indigenous workers to consider the broader issues when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, such as what is creating and impacting on the current issues rather than viewing the presenting problem in isolation. For example, this Indigenous community worker said:

*There’s a combination of factors, never one issue. Like, there is never one single issue. Why are those children out on the streets you know? There’s never one single issue. You can say the parents aren’t feeding them or they did … They [refers to the statutory workers] never look at what’s creating this environment. You can’t just look at face value and apply cause and effect (Indigenous community participant O).*

Indigenous participants described a naivety in non-Indigenous workers who place families in positions of having to prove their innocence before being found guilty of child abuse or neglect. In the example provided below, the Indigenous participant suggested that the non-Indigenous statutory worker acted on the belief that the parent was drinking. The non-Indigenous worker ignored the notifier’s violent behaviour. Instead, the non-Indigenous workers was observed to challenge the mother, assuming that because she had a history of alcohol use, she must have been drinking. The Indigenous participant
used this example to demonstrate how non-Indigenous workers at times rely on the history of the family to inform their current assessment. The mother was found bashed up.

The statutory non-Indigenous worker said [to the Aboriginal parent]

“*You were drinking?*”

She wasn’t drinking.

The Indigenous worker asked the worker: “*Who stated she was drinking?*”

The non-Indigenous worker replied: “*The notifier.*”

Well this happened to be the fellow who bashed her up (*Indigenous community participant L*).

Attempting to bring together differences in perceptions raises issues about the ability to accept that ways of life in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are underpinned by different belief systems. This raises differences in expectations between non-Indigenous and Indigenous workers. There are particular life and cultural experiences that workers bring with them to practice and which impact their views. Reflecting on the experiences that workers are confronted with in their cross-cultural practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families has the potential to reinforce mainstream standards and views. It also provided the opportunity to re-evaluate and re-orient the views of participants about the realities that exist in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where broader socio-economic and political issues impact on presenting problems.

**Communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families**

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants were asked how they bridged differences they experienced when working across cultures. Being able to communicate and talk about differences and diversity was important for Indigenous participants. They
said that being able to communicate was a basis for increasing cultural knowledge and understanding of the differences that existed between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous cultures. For example, the following Indigenous participants said:

_Unless you can communicate you don’t get to know and accept the culture_ (Indigenous community participant H).

_We all have our own way of communicating and dealing with our problems as they arise. And I think that's where you need to be able to build relationships where you are at, so wherever you are, your relationships with the Indigenous staff, relationships with the Indigenous services, and that comes with a lot of listening rather than going out and prodding_ (Indigenous statutory participant N).

_You got to be a good communicator it doesn’t matter what colour you are you ... communicate, mediate and you facilitate change that is one of the things I have brought into this job here. You got to talk. It’s being open and honest with [refers to parents] without being arrogant to them and speaking down to them_ (Indigenous community participant O).

Indigenous workers also expressed the importance of being Indigenous and being able to communicate with statutory workers. This participant said:

_It has taken me a while to get to that communicating level with [refers to workers from the statutory agency] if you know what I mean. Now that we are communicating I'm negotiating with them, and there is facilitative change. If you can't talk you can't express yourself. You have to articulate yourself, articulate government policy into their language. That's the biggest thing I think, being able to talk at their level of understanding_ (Indigenous community participant O).

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants talked about incidences when information had been miscommunicated. For example, when information actually intended to be communicated by the speaker was misunderstood by families. This created
problems. Indigenous participants who spent time with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families after statutory child protection workers had visited found that rushing the process with these families did not always result in families having a clear understanding of the process. An Indigenous participant shared their experiences of speaking with families after interviews with non-Indigenous statutory workers:

"We talked about what was actually said, what messages were received [refers to what messages were received by the family], and what we received from [refers to the non-Indigenous statutory worker] and a lot of times the parents didn't understand."

[Refers to the response from the family] “That’s a lie. I didn’t do this, and I didn’t do that.” … and yeah, you’ve got a slight (sic), it’s not only a one way traffic link (Indigenous non-statutory participant L).

When Indigenous participants were asked to articulate how their communication styles were different, they talked about using familiar terms and words, and ways of speaking. Listening to not only what was said but the way it was said, the accent and ways information was presented could hold different meanings. Indigenous participants talked about changing the way they themselves talked when they were talking to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For example one participant said:

"My English will change when I talk to my mob (Indigenous statutory participant F)."

Another worker said:

"Well, if I’m going to a Murri family and they [refers to the non-Indigenous statutory worker] ask me to come I’ll say, let me do the talking, ’cause I break that barrier again where we talk silly, introduce ourselves. That’s the ice breaker. That breaks the little cycle and then we sit down and have a yarn … You’re straight out and open and honest with them … ’cause you’re messing with babies’ and children’s lives."
When you’re straight out and honest and open - that’s how I work and I have such a good relationship with my clients (Indigenous statutory participant K).

Indigenous participants talked about the importance of spending the time to talk, listening to the other person in order to understand something about the history of the person, where they had come from, who they were related to, and something about where they saw themselves moving to in the future. They referred to this as “having a yarn”.


Just focusing in on, not so much the problem but where they can get support and you know not looking for a solution straightaway and finding out about the person themselves, finding out about where they come from, where they want to get to and if you need to get there, well what can I do to help, that sort of thing yeah ...

Well I will talk to my Murri family as if I would be talking to them and make it as informal as possible ... Well you know we’re here to yarn today and this yarn’s going to be really hard sometimes throughout our meeting today. If you feel it’s going to be difficult or hard for you just let me know (Indigenous statutory participant F).

Like XX [refers to the name of the worker], one of the ladies, she works at [refers to the agency], having a yarn about what she does and because then we talk about families ... I’m going to go on what I’ve been brought up and how I was taught. But youse don’t have to take it, but this is what I would do (Indigenous statutory participant K).

Some of the non-Indigenous participants shared their experiences of interviewing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and acknowledged the importance of being able to communicate in intervention processes. This non-Indigenous participant recalled the importance of developing rapport:

You really do have to watch what you say, and say it in a manner that is easily understood. There’s no use walking out there in a big suit and start spruiking words, cause it’s not just acceptable like. You do have to try and create some
rapport with them to begin with, otherwise you’re going to get nothing from them (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

Indigenous participants who had been engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the field of child protection over longer periods expressed an awareness of the importance of listening, and allowing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients to have the opportunity to think about their responses. They said:

I was told that if you were to get out there, you have to work with people. That means you have to sit down and you have to listen to them. And even if you're sitting there for an hour or so and there’s complete silence, at least you’re getting somewhere with that. And it's not a time thing, you know what I mean. It seems to be a time thing with other workers,[refers to what workers say] “I can only spend 40 minutes here”, “I've got to ... be at another appointment in another 40 minutes”... time should not be a factor. It does with Indigenous and non-Indigenous families. It should never ever be a factor (Indigenous statutory participant W).

I always say to them [refers to CSOs] “Okay you need to take time to calm down, settle down and understand that most communities - or Indigenous communities - or people need time to be heard and let them speak” (Indigenous statutory participant C).

Ways of communicating were an introduction to cultural knowledge, as well as a form of cultural knowledge. Although this form of communicating was familiar to Indigenous participants, non-Indigenous participants realised they communicated differently. Some participants said that they experienced difficulties in conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, especially with children who could be quite closed in what they said, and non-Indigenous participants said they lacked knowledge about how they could improve this aspect of their practice. The following quotes from non-Indigenous participants exemplify this:
I think that that's a gap that I've got. Information comes out in dribs and drabs ... and questioning, there's like a real closure. Like you go "How's this going?"

[Refers to an example of Indigenous client’s response] “Fine.”

So it's a real dampener. People don’t open up. But just how the story unfolds to me is different from working with white families. You know, white families sort of tell it all, whereas [for Indigenous families] you get a bit here and then you go away and then you get another bit. The way you connect is different (Non-Indigenous statutory participant X).

And:

I didn't know whether I was actually getting through or she just didn't want to speak to me because I wasn't an Indigenous person; whether she didn't want to acknowledge anything, or take responsibility for anything ... it was that communication barrier. I guess with a white mainstream kind of family I would expect a lot better communication to be occurring (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

Being able to acquire knowledge through communicating is a time-consuming process. Participants said that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will often say “Yes”, rather than disagree or challenge workers. Non-Indigenous participants talked about times when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families would agree, say “Yes”, when they did not agree, or did not understand. It would become apparent over time that some of these families did not and had never agreed. The non-Indigenous participants below talked about this pattern of communicating, and advocated for the use of silence in interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to provide them an opportunity to think and comprehend. They said:
You might have to spend more time with them without asking direct questions, like you would with non-Indigenous clients. Not saying anything is much more acceptable in [refers to the Aboriginal community] than just speaking all the time. You've got to be aware of things like sometimes the Murris will just say “Yes”, when they might mean no. If they don't understand anything, they'll often just say “Yes” and nod (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Y).

For me it's about actually sitting and listening to people. Sitting and listening and actually hearing what people are saying to you, what they're actually telling you and allowing for that silence (Non-Indigenous statutory participant G).

An Indigenous worker suggested an approach to engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to gain respect. She/he said:

Get to know the people. Get to understand them. Get to understand their culture. Understand what happened with everything in their past. Straighten everything out with them that way ... But then sit down and have a chat with them. Have a talk with them ... Show them you are thinking of them, you're not only thinking about taking sides, but you're thinking about resolving all these problems (Indigenous statutory participant C).

But some non-Indigenous child protection participants said that they do not have time and spend minimal time talking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Child protection investigations often focus on the task at hand, to investigate child protection concerns and complete the intervention process. One non-Indigenous participant recalled observing investigations. She/he said:

I know some workers and I've been a second for a lot of even my current worker. Some workers like to just get in there and get the job done. It's just flick off the questions and you can see like our families are sitting there going “What are these fellas on? What are you on about?” Just so very fast and not actually prepared to
actually sit and just let the silence be silent and giving people the opportunity to actually think about what they’ve asked (Non-Indigenous statutory participant G).

And another said:

*It's extremely hard to talk to Indigenous children, they're very, very, very closed. And you get the feeling there's something going on here, but they're not telling me and you don't have that time to actually put in with them to get that trust and everything so that they can tell you* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants spoke about communicating and listening as important to their practice. However, Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants used different skills and ways of communicating in their cross cultural practice which results in different responses. Although non-Indigenous participants encountered difficulties in communicating, they agreed it was a time-consuming process alongside the many demands and pressures on them to perform their roles.

**Summary**

Non-Indigenous participants were not prepared for the complexity and demands they faced in their roles as child protection workers. University training provided an awareness of the historic experiences and contemporary issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but this did not prepare them for the realities they observed in practice. Indigenous participants acquired qualifications which provided them pathways into the child protection field, but did not have sufficient knowledge to equip them to deal with and manage the myriad demands they faced from employers, families, community members and colleagues. Induction training offered to professional statutory participants oriented them to policies and procedural expectations but did not focus on the contexts in which child protection practice was engaged. Indigenous participants often did not attend induction training nor cultural competency training. Localised context specific training
offered was more relevant, but not held regularly. Non-Indigenous participants were conscious that the knowledge and experiences they brought with them to practice were different and sometimes not appropriate to help them to understand or make sense of their current cultural contexts and experiences.

The sources of knowledge that Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants drew on in their practice influenced the way they conducted their practice. For example, non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants who actively spent time building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and workers, listening to them, getting to know them, developed insight into their lives and experiences and had more understanding of differences they observed. Some non-Indigenous participants compared their experiences to their own beliefs and standards and found it difficult to make sense of what they observed in the lower socio-economic contexts in which they were operating. Many of the non-Indigenous participants viewed the issues that presented in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as cultural, rather than socio-political and economic. Overall, participants did not evidence a long term, ongoing, personal or organisation strategy for engaging a comprehensive and sustained approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This chapter presented the pathways participants used in getting into their current employment and their initial experiences of, and approaches to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It concludes that although participants sought employment in child protection agencies, they were unprepared for the complex challenges that confronted them within their practice in Aboriginal communities and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. In addition to this, organisational demands, policies and procedures, and different role expectations impacted their practice intervention. These are discussed further in the following chapter.
Chapter Six: Data Presentation: Cross Cultural Practice in Child Protection

Introduction

The previous chapter presented the findings about the recruitment of participants, how they were prepared by employers to use the resources and knowledge that they brought with them to the field to begin their current roles. It outlined their initial experiences in practice at the two rural sites. This chapter considers the perspectives of child protection participants about their ongoing practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. It considers the impact of organisational factors, and the power inequalities in their roles. Although not all research participants had engaged in direct practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, as part of their role, all had participated in consultations and meetings where decisions were made about these families. In order to fulfil the aim of contributing to better child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, participants were asked to talk about how they perceived the impact of their interventions on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Organisational Factors

There was a relationship between the qualification of participants and their role in the child protection field. In the statutory agency child protection workers who are appointed as authorised officers are required to hold a bachelor degree level qualification in an approved discipline from an accredited university. An authorised officer is delegated under the state child protection legislation, to make decisions about children who they assess are subject to or are likely to experience harm whilst in the care of their parents. These decisions determine whether child/ren are safe to continue to reside with their family or need to be placed away from the family. As such, authorised officers hold considerable power. Staff who do not hold degree level qualifications are not delegated
the authority in their role to make decisions and most are employed in roles such as family support workers.

At the same time, *The Child Protection Act 1999* (The Act) requires ‘When making a significant decision about an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child, the chief executive or an authorised officer must give an opportunity to a recognised entity for the child to participate in the decision-making process’ (Section 6(1)). For a ‘decision, other than a significant decision about an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child, the chief executive or an authorised officer must consult with a recognised entity for the child before making the decision’ (Section 6 (2)). The term recognised entity (RE) is defined in Definition of Terms at the beginning of this thesis. There is no requirement under the legislation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed at these agencies need to hold a qualification. Nonetheless, all of the participants of this study hold Diploma level qualifications.

The community agencies in this study were recognised entities. Workers at these community agencies are guided by protocols and agreements developed in negotiation with the statutory agencies, which recognise their consultative roles and engage them in decisions relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Table 6 presents the highest educational qualification of the participants across both study sites.

Table 6. *Qualifications of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University or higher qualification</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE qualification up to Diploma level</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table shows that all of the non-Indigenous participants (14 of 14) and three (of 16) Indigenous participants hold a degree level qualification. Three Indigenous participants hold a degree, and two (of 14) non-Indigenous participants are employed in senior positions and performed supervisory, and specialised roles and are not engaged in direct practice. Five (of 13) Indigenous participants who do not hold a degree are also employed in management positions. Eleven (of 14) non-Indigenous participants are authorised child protection officers and work in direct frontline practice. One non-Indigenous participant was not an authorised officer because their university qualification is not from an approved discipline. All of the participants are involved in aspects of case management, and have contact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander client families. The majority of participants are engaged directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in their roles.

The roles of Indigenous workers employed in the community agencies are less structured than in the statutory agency. Eight (of 16) Indigenous participants are employed in family support roles. In these roles they visit families who live in the Aboriginal communities, and nearby towns and support them in their parenting responsibilities. Indigenous participants viewed themselves as offering support to the community and sometimes this implied responding to issues and incidents that happened within families living in these communities.

Qualifications had a direct bearing on the financial remuneration of child protection workers. Workers who hold a degree are classified and paid on a professional salary scale by the statutory agency, whereas the majority of workers, who do not hold an approved degree, receive lower rates of pay. The majority of participants from statutory agencies were university qualified non-Indigenous staff employed as authorised officers. The majority of Indigenous participants had completed their training to a Diploma level, and were employed in community agencies or as non-authorised officers in statutory
agencies. They received less pay, participated and were consulted in child protection decisions but had no decision-making authority.

Holding a degree from a tertiary institution and employment within the statutory agency enables delegated workers authority to make decisions which provide them considerable power regardless of their cultural knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Participants of this study and in these roles used policies and procedures to inform them about the expectations of their roles.

**Policies and Procedures**

Statutory child protection agencies are mandated by the *Child Protection Act 1999* which includes the functions of the chief executive of the Department in administering it (Section 7). These functions include: (f) helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to establish programs for preventing or reducing incidences of harm to children in the communities; (i) promoting a partnership between the State, local government, non-government agencies and families in taking responsibility for, and dealing with the problem of, harm to children; (o) consulting with recognised entities about the administration of this Act in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. It is the responsibility of the statutory agency to administer this Act and provide these functions. Policies and procedures within this agency set out the roles and responsibilities of staff. These policies and procedures outline the hierarchical structure in the agency, and determine the eligibility for clients who access the service. They also state how services are to be provided, establish the roles of external agencies, and prescribe essential tasks of employees.

Within a statutory agency, these policies and procedures are reinforced through induction training. The Practice Manual is used by senior workers and supervisors to determine the responses of frontline workers in the performance of their role as child
protection workers (Department of Communities, Child Safety & Disability services, 2012c). This relationship is understood by staff. One participant in this study, stated:

My opinion is team leaders are a walking practice manual and I don’t have the time to seek it out and sit on a computer looking for these things (Non-Indigenous statutory participant J).

Some participants of this study expressed feeling limited in their responses to concerns of child neglect and/or abuse, by statutory processes. The participant below said:

Child protection service delivery depends always on individualised narrow interventions with specific systems or families around specific identified issues. I mean that’s the legal framework. The statutory framework couldn’t be more narrow. You know, what can you define and prove to a court, and that’s what you can intervene about (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Q).

Statutory participants were conscious of the impact of statutory processes in constricting their practice. One participant, said:

I jokingly say, we go process, process, process. [Laughs] So I find sometimes you can be hemmed in by process ... and legislative processes and all that. I know we work within the legislation and we have to do that and I do that, but sometimes I think it can handicap and it's not just the legislation it's the processes we build so that we can work within that legislation (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).

In rural areas, travel and time constraints place additional pressures on being able to comply with procedural expectations. A participant described it this way:

You’re on a time limit if you know what I mean, it’s like rushed, in a lot of the work that you do because you’re out there. You’re investigating. You need to make a decision, and you need to get back into town one way or another, and I find that
sometimes, we don’t have the time to sit down properly and explain to people thoroughly enough that this is why these children are being removed (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

An example of the procedural aspects of their role is depicted in Drawing 1 below which was drawn by a participant during the interview to outline the demands, issues and pressures the statutory participant faced in being able to perform their role. The words “deadlines”, “paperwork”, “memos” and “DG (Director General) approval” were mentioned as additional administration demands which needed to be attended to as part of their role:

Drawing 1. Pressures and demands faced by a statutory participant

(Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z)
Drawing two depicts how another participant outlines the demands on her time.

Drawing 2. Pie Graph depicting time allocated to work tasks

(Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

This participant presented “paperwork”, “background checks”, “court”, “discussions” as taking up the majority of her time compared with the amount of time she spends in client contact and supervising contact visits with children. Much of this work involves responding to bureaucratic systems within which these workers are employed.

Recording evidence of performance is an important aspect of practice. Statutory workers are required to keep records of their interventions, cases and the processes they used to work towards planned outcomes. They provide these to management within their organisation rather than laterally, to the community in which they engage. These records provided statistical data to the statutory funder about the volume of work they do. These
records are contained in statutory data bases which are not accessible to workers at the community agencies.

Community participants employed by recognised entities, in the non-government sector, are outside of the statutory system. They express frustration that statutory workers at times lack accountability to them in their decision making. This perspective was presented by this participant who said:

_We can’t seem to break this code of silence, or this togetherness, or this ill-fated workplace culture that they have within themselves. They never acknowledged that they’ve done wrong. That they’ve made a decision that has impacted on the child. They lie. They manipulate. We challenge we get berated. We lodge complaints with the Children’s Commission. We get told by Child Safety we shouldn’t do that because the Children’s Commission is adversarial to Child Safety. We make notifications which are ignored ... I call it a cycle of violence because, you know, when you remove one child the chain’s not broken it leads on to that child’s family. And so we challenge their decisions, we challenge the unethical manner in which they make decisions (Indigenous community participant H)._  

Community participants stated that statutory workers refuse to review decisions or consider alternative intervention strategies, based on their advice. At times statutory workers ignored their advice, and went ahead and placed children against their views. This is demonstrated in the comments presented by a non-Indigenous participant who said:

_The recognised entity, didn’t want to consider this person because of the family’s background. I was the placement officer ... I thought that’s what we did, I thought we judged people on their background and their histories ... I had to actually advocate, because this person was actually his cousin ... I said why can’t we consider her for a kinship carer? Why?_
The history of the family. Drinking, DV, all that, plus personalities.

That’s when I recognised people need to get themselves out of the way, because they’re the biggest obstacle ... So this family was up against that because of their history.

[The participant presented her response in this case] He’s [placed] back with family ... That boy’s now been there for two and a half years (Indigenous statutory participant U).

At other times, Indigenous participants said they felt manipulated and misrepresented by statutory workers. They have no way of checking records, but sometimes find out about this misrepresentation inadvertently. Here’s what an Indigenous participant said:

I did go to one court proceedings and it’s like. [Refers to the name of the statutory agency] actually done something malicious themself. They stated that I’d told them this and that I’d told them that, and that I’d given the wrong information ... I was working with a client who had their children taken away from them. They blamed me and said everything I’d given them was incorrect ... everything was in the email, everything was correct ... I had the email to back me up ... That sort of puts me down and made me look bad ... and that’s what was going to go to court when I wasn’t there (Indigenous community participant L).

Organisational factors drives practice and statutory participants rely on policies and procedures to guide them to perform their role. Participants employed in community agencies outside of these statutory systems are reliant on their funding and are required to justify their role performance to these statutory bodies. Community participants in this study believed some of the workers within statutory systems lack accountability and do
not listen to them, even when their performance is challenged in cases where they are supposed to be working jointly.

**Practice Experiences**

When statutory workers receive child protection notifications about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within families, they contact community based workers to visit families and jointly investigate the concerns. Statutory participants acknowledged there was a difference in the ways community workers at the recognised entities approached their roles compared to statutory workers. This worker said:

_We don’t expect our RE’s to do things in the same way as a white agency or with a white world view. We accept that some of the viewpoints are different. And if you can accept that and work with it, there is a lot of mutual respect. And if you can’t accept that and if you expect them to conform to western concepts of confidentiality or legal decision making we’d just be frustrated. So we tend to give and take I guess. The good thing out of that is the relationship_ (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Q).

This view was supported by this participant:

[Names the workers from the recognised entity]’s been pretty good, of late, in regard to providing that support and that Murri community knowledge for the service centre. She/he’s been really strong in bringing about community knowledge to these communities - to this centre for the CSOs, so that’s been a good – she/he’s taken it upon herself/himself to do all that (Indigenous statutory participant F).

However, other non-Indigenous workers expressed frustration about consultation that occurred in joint investigations with community based workers. Some workers stated community workers from the recognised entities do not actively engage in the intervention process, thus:
It’s not really consultation. I am trying to consult with them but they’re not. The information that they are providing is almost, you know I hate to say it but it’s almost useless. I can get the address of the person from Police if I need to, or from our records. I don’t need [names the recognised entity] to tell me that. I want to know the family dynamics, I want to know that’s happening. I want to know the cultural considerations and that’s really what they’re supposed to do. That’s not happening. It’s not as if I’m not asking, I’m requesting that information. And most of the time it’s, “I don’t know” (Non-Indigenous statutory participant R).

And another said:

In terms of the recognized entity I don’t think I’ve got a lot of positive comments to say. I have met some staff there that have been absolutely wonderful, but the majority of the time I feel like, “Well why are you here why did you even come if you are not going to say a word, why did you come?” Like they’re meant to make people feel at ease, help them understand what’s happening. Yeah. Very frustrating (Non-Indigenous participant B).

Those statutory participants, who were of this view, said that they felt there was a burden of responsibility on them to conduct the investigation, to ascertain whether the child was safe within the family and to determine the response. One statutory participant said:

If all someone (worker from the RE) is going to do is walk out behind you when you’re doing an investigation and just trail around behind you, I don’t’ even see the point of them coming. It just looks like a big influx of people and yeah (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

Statutory participants expected Indigenous workers to take a more active role as an investigator, to work jointly with them to assess the alleged child protection concerns and the family circumstances during interviews. One statutory participant said:
To be perfectly honest and I know this is terrible, but because they play ... you do an IA [Investigation and Assessment] and because there's not a lot of input or anything, it's hard not to overlook the RE, in terms of what you're going to do, and what interventions because I've tried to get information, what can we do here, do you know anything about this family, can you give me any information about this family, and there's nothing back, you get nothing back (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

Another said:

I've had one close her eyes and fall asleep ... the other one is actually not from here ... she always says “I don’t know. It’s nothing to do with me. I’m not from Child Safety. You know. I’m just here just for your support, for the family support” but won’t actually contribute in any way and I just think that’s a waste of time (Non-Indigenous participant R).

A further participant presented this view:

I would have thought that the recognised entity would have a lot more impact in my family group meetings in that, yes they come along for moral support for our Indigenous families but have never been able to give a lot of input into the decisions made on behalf of that family (Indigenous statutory participant F).

However, community participants do not operate within the policies and procedures required of statutory workers. Neither do they have the authority to do so. Community participants perceived that their role was as a mediator between families and statutory workers. Community based participants try to ensure that families know what they are being asked, and that statutory workers seek to know what is happening for families. This community participant's view is presented below:
When they did ask us ... we had to go along with, we had to be, what's the word? We had to go there with the Child Safety and be part of it, like we had to try and speak to the parents and let them know. “This is the reason why, when and how, and how they can, you know ... try to straighten themselves up to get their children back”.

Child Safety’s ... going in with the attitude “We’re going to remove this child”.

We go along, and we say “Look hang on. We just want to talk to the parent. We just want to speak with the parent. We just want to see what’s going on.” So we ask the parent, we sit in on the interview with Child Safety and we talk (Indigenous community participant L).

The difference in role expectations resulted in non-Indigenous statutory participants feeling that Indigenous workers were not actively contributing in the process.

When I first came here I thought I would need to do a bit of prep work. Find out the normal procedures. Find out and ask people “What’s the normal procedures? Who are the people I need to contact? Who are the elders the council and that sort of thing. I asked people ... They sort of looked at me strange and said “What are you talking about?” and I said “Aah well I’m going into [names the Aboriginal community] in a couple of days and I need to find out what I need to do. And they went “Drive there” and I went “Oh really?” (Indigenous statutory participant R)

However, Indigenous participants, both from statutory and community agencies, said it was important to develop relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families with whom they work to develop trust, and to facilitate more honest and accurate lines of communication with them. They said:

I think the relationships are the most important thing really in terms of how we can do or keep improving our service. You still need systems, you still need practices,
you need frameworks, you need policies and procedures but you need all of those things about how you build relationships ... I'm looking for people who want to connect with people and try and understand the value of diversity and know that, or at least can identify that their personal values might be different or that their customs might be different. What I'm looking for is staff who seem to be very open and are interested in people and not in a patronising way (Indigenous statutory participant M)

I think my approach and strategy with every family is first and foremost, I think, about developing a relationship, and trying to get to know the family. And I think especially with some Aboriginal families, because it's very easy to agree to do things and it's very easy to just say yes, and then it's that they don't do anything with it, and half the time it's because there's – it doesn't mean anything (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z).

Their relationships with client families, however, also lead to the emergence of ethical dilemmas for participants when families confide to them about incidents in their lives. One non-Indigenous participant said:

*I'm not here to tell [families] what to do, I'm here to understand, and support them, and yes I am Child Safety, so I guess, it's about ... not telling, but laying, giving some idea of, I guess an example, I'm trying to think what I'm saying – if someone's saying

'Oh I've been told not to say too much to you and you know that's very good advice because at the end of the day I am Child Safety, and you know that, and when you tell me different stuff I have to pass that on. However, sometimes if you don't tell me stuff, I don't know how to support you (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z).

Indigenous participants raised concerns with families who in forming relationships with caseworkers told them information that was later used against them in court proceedings. For example, this worker said:
The worker befriended the mother and she [the mother] told her [the caseworker] things. I told the mother ‘Don’t do that’. She would have recorded this and used it against her in court (Indigenous statutory participant S).

Many of the Indigenous participants stated that in order to deal with these issues, they adopt a transparent upfront dialogue with their clients and also with their colleagues. For example:

Murri family’s - you can tell them straight out. ‘Cause I know ‘em. I know everyone ... they ask me to come I’ll say, let me do the talking, ‘cause I break that barrier again where we talk silly, introduce ourselves ... That breaks the little cycle and then we sit down and have a yarn. In my team they always ask for all the Murri staff for their advice ... when you’re straight out and open and honest with them ... ‘cause you’re messing with babies’ and children’s lives. When you’re straight out and honest and open - that’s how I work and I have such a good relationship with my clients (Indigenous statutory participant K).

Indigenous participants said that this resulted in more honest interactions between them and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that they had contact with. However, it also meant that being part of the community and knowing community people could also be viewed negatively. This is demonstrated below in the comments made by an Indigenous participant.

It’s a good thing, they say “Oh, [refers to her own name]’s here. They feel more relaxed ... They know you, and they know who you are ... Then it could be a bad thing because then they think, “Oh [refers to her own name] will go and tell everyone ... but I know their confidentiality, you know. The Murri ones, they know you ... they’ll tell you straight out (Indigenous statutory participant K).
Expectations of their role in the child protection mandate, led statutory participants to perceive of community participants as lacking capacity and not contributing to the intervention process.

The RE did speak to mum briefly, but when it come to identifying and asking questions around all the issues that had been raised in this Notification, and what we were going to do, that basically got left to our role, the Department’s role. I find the RE are more there to support what we’re doing, not support the Dept., but to support the parent, to help them understand what we’re doing. I don’t think I’ve ever been on a job where they’ve actually said that this is not appropriate . . . Since I’ve been working here, it seems to be given that the department does basically all the interviewing (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

Other participants accepted that the recognised entity’s role was to assist families, mediate and facilitate communication in intervention processes. They said:

[The recognised entity] were very much about how to engage with these people, which I think is more their role, not so much about the child protection concerns that was our business, but how to communicate and how to engage the people (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).

An Indigenous worker said:

Well when we were there it was . . . they were sort of . . . they had to watch what they said . . . We got a lot of feedback from parents, that you know, Child Safety was very rude. The parents yes, they did ask for us to be there . . . Yes, they told me quite a few things . . . about Child Safety . . . Things you know that Child Safety’s done to them . . . Well what they got to do is they got to sit down and talk to them and . . . you don’t have to sort of go out there with the intent to take the child . . . But when you get Child Safety to go out there, fences are up, barriers are up. “You are out here to steal our children”
I've actually sat in on an interview where the parent of this family was getting upset with Child Safety, and because we were there, and she wanted to speak to us and she didn’t want to speak to Child Safety, and Child Safety said “No, you’ve got to answer to us.” And she threatened Child Safety that if they didn’t leave the house she was going to toss them out (Indigenous community participant L).

Explaining the differences observed in practice

Many of the Indigenous participants in this study recognised that the knowledge that they take for granted, due to their connections and experiences in Aboriginal communities, distinguishes them from their non-Indigenous counterparts in child protection practice. Indigenous participants talked about the differences drawing on their own knowledge and life experience. They know that they have information to contribute that is relevant in the decision-making process. Indigenous participants said:

“It’s the differences. Well I think it comes back to ... how I see it is because ... it’s like ... people see them as they are DOGIT (Deed of Grant in Trust) communities ... but ... it’s the isolation. But, also they’ve survived in an environment where there is abuse, and alcohol abuse, and relationship break downs and things like that. But while you’ve got those negative effects there is also a lot of strength in those communities. And strength in terms of elders or women, that or even young people that are coming through that come back and try to lead by example, and become role models so and there's a lot of strength in terms of that connection to family and culture and community. I sense that in each different community, but the difference is I suppose is how they relate to and interact then with government people because of their own personal histories and experiences. Yeah (Indigenous community participant N).

Another participant said:

The community that I seen as I was growing up in my family and the community I grew up in ... people tend to come to you if you know what I mean ... and that’s what you’ve got to lock on to, when they come to you ... I have had mothers come in
here and sort of really get aggro with me. I know that I have got to talk to them. I have got to calm them down ... This is what has happened. This is where we are right now (Indigenous community participant O).

This Indigenous participant said:

This is what the non-Indigenous people don’t understand. They’re disrespecting us. The drinking business on the riverbank. People go on the riverbank you know, take their children and things like that. Culturally years and years ago, we didn’t have houses, we didn’t have anything, what did we do with our children, we had our children with us all the time. Then they say, you got children on the riverbank, you know. They look down on it. With myself, if I went down to the riverbank fishing with my kids, and we’re having fun and making noise or something like that, the Police would be saying “What are you doing on the river?” Fishing, we’re having a good time. Fishing. That’s what I mean about looking down on us, on the Aboriginal people. Because we are Aboriginal and on the riverbank if we’re there doing something, they’re saying “Hey, you’re doing something wrong.” But the non-Indigenous ones, they’re at the riverbank and making a noise and having a good time, you don’t see the Police coming down and saying “What are you doing?”

So we’ve got to watch ourselves when we go out with our children, because people are watching us and that’s what we have got, sort of, a burning sensation in the back of our heads, that people are watching us all the time, every time we move, do something, people want to know what we are doing. Especially when it comes to our children (Indigenous community participant L).

Non-Indigenous statutory participants seemed to deal with cross cultural differences, by absorbing them into categorical, rather than socio-political, explanations, such as:

I don’t think the Aboriginal families have what we consider the skills. If you trace it back to the culture. The things that we see important are owning a home, that stuff. I think we’re a bit more materialistic. For me, the Indigenous people ... they’re more family focused people ... I know that every child that is in care, their parents are from poverty ... and maybe they just don’t have good budgeting skills. They don’t
have what probably comes a bit more natural to the white man because we’ve grown up in that culture ... If we look at our Indigenous families, those skills haven’t been demonstrated, like living in a house and keeping it so it looks good ... I think our Indigenous families are still trying to live like the white fella really, don’t you? (Non-Indigenous participant U).

A number of Indigenous participants in their observations of some of the non-Indigenous workers stated that many non-Indigenous workers judge what they see in and of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, rather than attempting to understand the cultural knowledge and broader context that impacts these circumstances and the workers’ sense-making of their observations. The majority of Indigenous participants consistently encouraged non-Indigenous workers to take a broader perspective which incorporates obligations of relationship, and other pressures on those who reside within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Indigenous participants were aware of the presence and influence of extended family, but found it more difficult to explain the complexity that presented in the families they observed. The issues that arose, they said, had at times related to unresolved intergenerational issues existing in communities which often fuelled conflict that flares up from time to time. Many of these participants described incidents which may appear confusing, but make sense in a broader socio-political-cultural context. An Indigenous participant described the behaviours observed in families living in the Aboriginal community:

Even though they [refers to the paternal extended family] were supportive of her they didn’t help a lot, like they were ... one day they’d be there helping her with the children, the next day they’d be fighting with them telling her like, she’s a shit of a mother and that they’re going to put her in to [refers to the statutory agency] (Indigenous statutory participant W).
Although this may have appeared to present a lack of consistency in the support offered to this young mother, the observations conceal the pressures this family is experiencing. The participant explained the broader implications for this parent, thus:

Very, very young parents ... I don't think [refers to the department worker] actually knew a lot about the family, like the history and all that ... I mean around like, around the extended family, what type of people they are, you know, what happened in her childhood, the mother's childhood, also what happened with him. You know there was grief and loss issues happening for both of them ... Two of her children were placed in a cultural adoption, with her sisters, and that was information that the Department didn't know about. She had 9 children all up.

Other people were living there [refers to the family home]. So she had her niece living there, she had her mother living there. The house was actually his mother's house ... So there's a lot of control there with that ... when she comes there he'll say like, get out of my house, this is my mother's house, and sometimes they will create family disputes ... then his family will come on board (Indigenous statutory participant W).

Indigenous participants were familiar with pressures and tensions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where there are intergenerational histories, pressures on families from overcrowding, health problems, and high unemployment. Many Indigenous participants believed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were safe in Aboriginal communities where they viewed family and community networks as providing a safety net for them. The Indigenous participant said:

I was actually doing more like family support role ... like going into the home ... talking to them, listening to them.

But they [refers to the department worker] also added on around the safety of the children, the emphasis around that, and also how this is a high risk case because the children are still at home with mum and dad ... As we were working through the case, there were some physical assault to the children, so I think that's where the risk levels jumped from being high up to very high.
I didn’t think it was a high risk because they both have a big family, and I found protective factors ... like her mother, the children’s grandmother and also their aunty, and his family, and the uncles there ... they’d be protective because they’d come there, they’d take the children (Indigenous statutory participant W).

Some of the non-Indigenous participants had more difficulty accepting that children are safe and supported in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where they see overcrowded houses, frequent conflict resulting in incidences of domestic violence, substance and alcohol misuse. These participants said:

The concerns were in relation to alcohol, ongoing alcohol abuse within the family, not only between the parents but also between some of the children. There were concerns of significant neglect and harm to the children that we investigated. ... there was a significant history of ongoing chronic alcohol abuse in the family ... There was also a significant history of ongoing domestic violence within the home ... A history of significant neglect in relation to the children’s basic care needs, such as clothing, food, supervision, schooling.

My first thoughts? That these children would possibly have to be removed from this home (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

Who are the clients – a broader context

Indigenous participants presented a worldview that encompasses an individual within the broader context of family, extended family and community. In this worldview (habitus) it is difficult to build a relationship with an individual without considering the influence and impact of the broader familial and place based context. To explain and understand an individual within this broader context implies the need to listen, and understand different pressures that impact individuals from a variety of sources. This is demonstrated in this statement by an Aboriginal community based participant:
They never look at what’s creating this environment. You can’t just look at face value and apply cause and effect. The child’s out on the street because of da de da de da. Sometimes its intergenerational that comes into it (Indigenous community participant O).

It is the influence of extended family on specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that many non-Indigenous participants have difficulty understanding. Most of the non-Indigenous participants recognised the importance of extended family in the Aboriginal communities in which they worked, especially in rural areas where everybody knows each other, and where people often have relatives living in the local area if not the same house. The non-Indigenous participant, below, tries to work this out, from their own frame of reference, that of their own experiences of and interactions with family:

Extended family ... they all have so much contact ... they’re in such a closed community I suppose. The views of grandparents, and aunts and uncles and all that they get passed on to the kids so much. So as a group they do have a lot of shared values more so than most white families I think. Although a lot of us we don’t really have a lot of contact with extended family, and then when you do it’s sort of just catching up with what you’ve been doing it’s not sharing about attitudes and opinions and things like that a lot. Not like when you live and ... your whole life is bound up with the extended family and the cultural group. So they’re forced to be more cohesive because of ... their cultural identity and their experience and where they live (Non-Indigenous statutory participant E).

Despite this recognition of extended family, however, few non-Indigenous participants actively involved extended family members in ongoing interventions. Although grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives were invited to family group meetings in the early stages of the intervention process, there was a silence about them over time. Indigenous participants noticed this, and raised the importance of extended family
involvement, yet, the primary focus for intervention remained on the parents. Indigenous participants believed external family could and did provide much support to families, especially families with children, however, when, to whom and how this support was provided was guided by unspoken cultural rules within communities which were more understood by those within these communities rather than those outside them. A non-Indigenous participant provided their views of involving extended family in interventions. She/he said:

*I have interviewed the extended family and that, especially if they're in some way implicated in what's happened or they may be a possibility as a carer, whatever ... but probably not without their [the parent's] consent. I think that might be a breach of confidentiality. So unless I thought it was of benefit in some way, and I got their permission then yes I might. Yeah. I'd be a bit careful about that (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).*

Therefore, there was a difference in how non-Indigenous participants viewed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Their focus continued to be on the parents who they held responsibility for protecting their children, and actioning what was required of them in case plans. Indigenous participants viewed parenting as a shared responsibility within the extended family. This point of view was presented by an Indigenous statutory participant who outlined the importance of extended family in close-knit communities where food sharing, and shared parenting is a way of life in that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. S/he said:

*Because sometimes the [refers to the statutory workers] will just take on board what the mother and father have to say ... the biological parents ... and sometimes if there is a significant person in that child's life, like if it's the grandmother or the auntie or something like that they will take that on board. But most of it will be ... the points of view of the mother or the father and not considering how important that extended family is. Because it's a very important and ... especially in [names the community] being a close-knit community ... [participant refers to other people in the community] Even though we may not be related to this family next door but this*
family next door will provide us with food when we don't have no food, they'll provide us with supervising our children when we have to go into town to do something, so ... that's the community thing then, do you know what I mean (Indigenous statutory participant W).

Indigenous participants were aware of the complexity of issues surrounding extended family contact and pressures that potentially impact on situations that present. They had knowledge of relationships, history, and current pressures facing families living in these communities, and accepted these with a sense of familiarity about how people interacted and resolved issues in Aboriginal communities. Non-Indigenous participants did not have enough knowledge to make sense of what they observed, and found the behaviours they observed in families to be inconsistent, unpredictable and confusing. Non-Indigenous participants looked to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents to be responsible for parenting and protecting their children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities whereas Indigenous participants saw parenting as a role shared by relatives and others within the community, and viewed parenting as a shared responsibility.

Consultation and Decision-making

Research participants talked about their experiences of consulting and being consulted in decisions relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Meetings were convened for this purpose and many participants employed in both agencies had attended and participated and were consulted in discussions prior to decisions being made. Many community participants said that they had been consulted about their views as to whether the concerns were serious enough to investigate and assess, and they supported outcomes of these discussions. One said:
The department here do make good decisions, they ask before they decide to make it a notification (Indigenous community participants S).

However, some community participants raised concerns about what constitutes a consultation process. In placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care, the legislation states “the chief executive must give property consideration to (a) the views of a recognised entity for the child; and (b) ensuring the decision provides for the optimal retention of the child’s relationships with parents, siblings and other people of significance under Aboriginal tradition or Island custom (Section 83 (5)). Indigenous participants said that statutory child protection workers would at times advise them of the outcome of decisions after they were made, or would fax this information to them, suggesting that this was a form of consultation. The legislation has made provision for situations where REs are unable to be consulted prior to decision-making, acknowledging that there are ‘urgent circumstances’ where no worker or individual is available, that decisions without the participation of the chief executive may need to occur (Section 83 (3)). However, in these instances, the legislation requires the authorised officer to consult with the identified Indigenous agency as soon as practicable after making the decision. When community participants challenge statutory workers about decisions being made prior to any consultation, their experience is that statutory workers are difficult to hold to account, especially when action had been taken as a result of this decision, that is, children had been removed from the family.

They’ll take on board other information but they won’t take on someone else’s point of view or recommendation. I think one of the things around the department is that once they’ve made their mind up, that’s it (Indigenous community participant H).

Some of the Indigenous participants viewed consultation as involving key decision makers, often face to face, in discussions around key issues for a shared outcome
acceptable to all parties. They expressed a strong view that they want to be consulted. For these participants, consultation involves having the opportunity to talk about a situation and discussing the issues. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants agreed that this did not always happen. Indigenous participants were conscious that during these consultations disagreements arise, however, they believe being able to physically sit down and talk through the issues was a necessary process towards an agreed outcome. An Indigenous participant said:

*Consultation is about, either face to face. It’s about having a frank discussion with key players with the same ... for an outcome. Whether that outcome is agreeable or not it is still an outcome. It isn’t about telling someone about it ... that’s not the true meaning of consultation (Indigenous community participant V).*

Indigenous participants said when they weren’t consulted, tension and disharmony emerged in relationships between statutory and community agencies at the sites. Statutory participants spoke about the need to consult and include recognised entities in decisions relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. However, when non-Indigenous participants recalled their recollections of consultations in the cases they presented, they were uncertain and found it difficult to recall how this had been initiated, whether it had occurred, and what the views of these workers had been in decisions that had been made. The process reflected the onus on statutory workers to include community workers in the process. A few non-Indigenous statutory participants acknowledged that conflict had arisen, and linked this to a sense of superiority which they said was reflected in the attitudes and behaviours of some non-Indigenous statutory workers. A non-Indigenous statutory participant spoke about this:

*I think it came back to attitude, we knew too much. And we weren’t ... a lot of people weren’t willing to accept that these people had really good knowledge that*
they could pass on to us about how to work specifically with Aboriginal people (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).

Indigenous participants from community agencies do not hold case responsibility and do not always agree with planned outcomes. They raise their objections, and challenge statutory workers at meetings. They believe that their knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families is not always heard. When they do not agree with decisions, they make their views known to statutory workers, and a few Indigenous participants said they had refused to participate in investigations. One community participant had made complaints to the Commission for Children and Young People and Adult Guardian, which is a government agency whose function is to monitor and review systems, policies and practices of the statutory agency (Commissioner for Young People and Adult Guardian, 2012). This participant felt frustrated, and believed what they were contributing to the decision-making process was ignored:

We didn’t agree with the decision and wouldn’t participate in the investigation ... we set out actually going through the information ... to try and actually put us in a good place as to actually formulating (sic) the right recommendation ... following it up with the information that the parent had given us, finding out ... what was happening ... trying to get contact happening (Indigenous community participant H).

Some Indigenous participants employed at statutory agencies also experienced feeling excluded in consultations in relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families even though they were employed by the agency. Some of these participants said that there were times when they became aware of incidents and events in families through their social network, either from other community people or agencies. One of these Indigenous participant expressed feeling frustrated at not being consulted, and finding out from a community participant that there had been a recent incident which had led to the children being removed from the family. The participant felt
confident that the knowledge s/he had about the family, and the relationships s/he had built with the parents, may have influenced a different outcome for the family if s/he had been involved in the decision-making process that had led to removal. S/he said:

*Even though I'd been working with them for a long time, they [colleagues at the statutory agency] didn't consult with me. I didn't find out about it. I actually found out about it through [refers to the name of another agency]. They told me about that (Indigenous statutory participant W).*

Indigenous participants who worked in Aboriginal communities expressed frustration when they were not involved in decision making processes about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families who lived there. Their inclusion continued to be at the discretion of statutory workers who were the primary decision-makers. At times community participants were not included in decision-making, however, when they were, they believed they were provided opportunities to discuss and consult towards outcomes that incorporated more diverse views and better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

**Determining outcomes**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families came to the attention of both statutory and community agencies when concerns are raised about their care of their children. Child protection workers are required to make decisions and determine responses to the complex problems confronting Aboriginal families and communities. Workers also face problems of *capital* created by a lack of resources (e.g. lack of available carers, time, and child care options).

Assessment processes involve reviewing the history of previous departmental contact and the current situation, while consulting with recognised entities for Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander children and developing case plans for these children. Participants in this study talked about their involvement and experiences during the intervention process.

**Reviewing the history of departmental contact**

In order to place context around alleged child protection concerns, statutory workers access historic data bases held at their office. Statutory participants place a high priority on information recorded on the statutory database which, although accessible to them, is not accessible by community workers. This departmental history is reviewed prior to decision-making discussions, and the information contained in these data bases has a major influence on the decisions made by workers. A statutory participant presents this process thus:

> My preparation is to go through the child protection history and do up a table ... it's still a very helpful way of having everything there in front of you. The history can determine the direction the interview takes and what the outcome’s going to be (Non-Indigenous statutory participant E).

Two other participants also said they comprehensively review the departmental history as the first stage of the investigation process, and formulate their views from this about potential directions for intervention. Even though participants might not have met families, they rely on statutory data bases to decide whether children may need to be removed from their family.

Another participant demonstrated this process quite clearly and bluntly. This participant had explored the current living arrangements of the family, had worked out who was living in the home and how they were related. S/he had read their individual history contained in the data bases. S/he found herself saying, at the time:
How are these kids still in [the parent’s] care? These kids need to be removed. That’s my recommendation. Already I can tell even before I go out there (Non-Indigenous statutory participant R).

These children were known to the department and a caseworker had been visiting the family on a regular basis over a number of years and was still engaged with them at the time this worker began her investigation. Over the years, there had been meetings and consultations involving decisions about the children. This caseworker’s view did not appear to be as influential on the investigative officer as their reading of the data base.

In both of the cases presented, the participants acted on their views, largely ascertained from data bases, that children be removed from their families. Since community participants had no access to records held in departmental data bases they relied on their knowledge of the family, and current circumstances, to form their views of intervention.

Differentiating roles

All of the cases that participants chose to select from their caseload involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families who were residing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The roles of the workers differed. Participants stated that, within the statutory agency, there is a separation between the roles of personnel. There is a team of workers engaged in the assessment and investigation of child protection concerns, and other teams provide ongoing support to families. Workers whose primary role is to assess and investigate child protection concerns do not maintain ongoing contact with their client families. If families require ongoing support, the responsibility for these cases transfers to workers on the alternative team.
Participants from both statutory and community agencies who are not employed as authorised officers, saw their roles as visiting families, maintaining contact with them, providing ongoing practical support, and ensuring, as far as they are able, that children living in the family home are protected. In community agencies, there was less structured division between the role responsibilities of workers, and workers would engage in different roles with families who accessed the service. This didn't happen in the statutory agency. Statutory workers did not continue to engage with clients once their cases were transferred to another team.

Despite families working in Interventions with Parental Agreements, which meant families had agreed to voluntarily work with the statutory caseworkers to continue to parent their children and address child protection concerns, incidents did arise, and sometimes these were recorded as new child protection notifications which were required to be investigated. The responsibility for investigating these concerns was allocated to investigative workers who were different workers than the caseworker, who may have been engaging with the family on a regular basis. However, during investigations, caseworkers were required to participate jointly with workers from investigation and assessment teams to assess the child protection concerns raised in the notification. Caseworkers did not, despite their presence, take the lead role in investigations. Participants acknowledged that at times, this was confusing for clients who turned to caseworkers, familiar to them, and who they had often built a relationship with, to advocate on their behalf in the investigations. This brought to the surface the openness in communication between statutory workers and families. One participant recalled how a parent had challenged the department about this:

*He said it’s not any different to what it’s been for the last two years and you know, and you fellers haven’t been out here to say nothing like this before you know, and if it’s a problem why didn’t you come and tell* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant H).
Statutory participants who engage in direct practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, when there was ongoing intervention, said that their aim was to support parents to address child protection concerns and to continue to parent their children. There were clear expectations on parents during this process. One participant described the aim of their work with the family as follows:

*Keeping the children safe and seeing what could be done to support the family to manage their alcohol and domestic violence issues (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z).*

In order to achieve these expectations, case plans are developed in consultation with significant stakeholders, including community workers, where the concerns are outlined and decisions made about what actions are required of the parents. The outcomes for these case plans often reinforce the goals of the statutory agency, focussed as they are on changing behaviours, linking to supports available in the community and maintaining contact with families to monitor whether children are being exposed to harm. A participant outlined their expectations of intervention:

*I was expecting her to engage with ... services ... making sure they went to school, and that she wasn’t drinking (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).*

Statutory participants, who were engaged in supporting families to address the child protection concerns, use case plans to guide their work. Case plans are developed at Family Group meetings where all stakeholders and significant people in the child’s life are invited to attend. Workers from the recognised entity are invited to attend Family Group Meetings. Community workers, however, do not always take an active role in these discussions. This statutory participant presented one perspective of the recognised entity’s participation at these meetings:
I have said to [names the person at the community agency] they need to be a little bit more proactive in the family group meeting. They need to be able to talk up a little bit more on behalf of these families. I've said it to the child protection officer that they come - because I'm related to her - you need to speak up a little bit more. But, unfortunately, it's a directive from their own internal processes over there that they're not to say too much, just to come along and listen basically (Indigenous statutory participant F).

Most of the Indigenous statutory participants also did not have decision-making authority. Many of them said they did not attend Family Group Meetings unless it was necessary. When they did, they often did not take an active role. When asked why this was, the majority of Indigenous statutory participants said that this impacted on their working relationship with the family. An Indigenous statutory participant presented this view:

The reason why I don't go to many Family Group Meetings is that I have a better relationship if I don't see them [refers to the name of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family] at meetings. Cause they see the Child Safety Officers as the baddies ... 'cause you're messing with babies' and children's lives ... When you're straight out and honest and open - that's how I work and I have such a good relationship with my clients (Indigenous statutory participant K).

A small number of community participants did raise objections to decisions made at these meetings, and on a few occasions challenged other decisions of statutory workers. Whilst they believed their knowledge about the family could have been of influence, they said that they had not always felt that they were listened to, and they had little power to influence decisions towards different outcomes. An example of this was provided in the case presented by a community participant who believed that the department had made the decision to investigate an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family prior to involving the community agency. The community agency, on the basis of
not being consulted and not provided with sufficient information, did not support the actions that the statutory workers had planned. The community agency refused to participate in the investigation and presented their views to the court. This is what this community based participant said:

\[\text{When the child protection application was made, [as the recognised entity] we went before the court and we informed the court that we were not happy. We did not support the application and that the children needed to be returned to the mother and that they had failed to respond to legislation appropriately.}\]

\[\text{The magistrate ordered a two week adjournment for further negotiations and consultation to take place. Now, in that two week period, mum's reaction to all of this and to the application to the child protection order incited, what you would call, a mother's wrath or ire or anger. So she basically battered the authorities with abuse}\]

\[\text{Based on that premise alone, the department took that, put it in an application to the court and part of it actually stated that the department were actually fearful for their safety in communicating and engaging with the parent because the parent had issued certain threats and her attitude towards the department and that they didn't believe that the children were safe as a result of the mother's attitude and behaviour towards the authorities.}\]

\[\text{Now, based on that, the magistrate granted a two year child protection order. Despite us disagreeing and we did disagree in court (Indigenous community participant H)}\]

\[\text{An Indigenous participant presented an example of case planning meetings where parents had complied with the case plans only to be told that their children would not be returned. This worker did not always view case planning meetings as helpful to the client, or to the child protection process. He/she said:}\]

\[\text{One family I was involved with, the woman actually, she lost her children ... She worked alongside with all these agencies to try and get her children back. She done it all, and then [the statutory agency worker] states we might be looking at another 2}\]
year extension. And she said, “Hang on a minute. I’m doing everything I can do”, and the agencies that she worked alongside they said, “Yes she has been doing this and she has been doing that” and Child Safety stated, “Well we give you 12 months, 12 months to work everything out, if you haven’t got everything worked out in 12 months, your children will be taken away from you for another two years.”

Well that’s a threat to me, and when I was sitting in that meeting I thought – You don’t go saying to people things like that. They’re doing as much as they can to get their children back ... So no, you could say she is guilty before proven innocent. Not the right way is it? (Indigenous community participant L)

This view demonstrates how non-Indigenous workers and Indigenous workers are often using different sources of information to make decisions. This example provided by an Indigenous community participant presented the parent’s view which was she had complied with the case plan and anticipated that the children would be returned to her care. However the statutory participant, whilst accepting that the parent had complied with the case plan, wanted the parent to demonstrate the stability of this compliance over a longer period. The scenario demonstrates that participants in the meeting did not have equal weight (capital) in decisions. The information used to determine outcomes had a major influence on participants’ approaches to intervention. Statutory participants relied on historic child protection data bases which they had accessed, whilst Indigenous participants relied on their knowledge of the family and sources from the community. Decision-making processes did not always incorporate these often disparate views.

Outcomes for the families

Finally, participants were asked to provide their views about the outcomes of their practice intervening with families in the cases they selected. Many of the participants chose a case they had been involved with over a number of years, and others were part
of the investigation and assessment team where their involvement was for shorter periods and focused on the assessment of child protection concerns.

Non-Indigenous participants who in their role provided family support to parents and children viewed their intervention as positive despite there being little change within the families with whom they worked. They proposed, that over time, with ongoing contact, they had a better understanding of families, had formed relationships, and felt communication had improved. However, the outcomes of their practice had not matched intended case plan goals which were, in most of the cases, for families to make changes in order to continue to care for the children in their care. Many of the families, after several years of being supported, had demonstrated minimal change and for some of these families, their children had been removed. Some of the children placed in out of home care had then experienced a number of foster placement breakdowns, poor school attendance and performance. One participant proposed that the children who had been removed experienced more emotional trauma whilst in the care of the statutory agency than they might have if they had continued to reside with the parents. These children’s current behaviours were unsettled, and their future was uncertain. This was summed up in this comment:

*I’d have to say our intervention has caused these children more emotional trauma and their behaviours … they are in a worse place than when they came to us (Non-Indigenous statutory participant P).*

This reinforces the views of the parent who had argued that if the children had remained at home and had not been removed, they would not be behaving like they are now. For example, running away from the place they were staying and not attending school. In this case, the parent viewed the intervention process as unhelpful (to say the least).
Another participant recounted from a case s/he selected. She commenced an investigation about serious physical harm to a child following an incident in the home where alcohol use had led to domestic violence. Despite the children being removed, they returned home shortly afterwards although, in the participant’s view, nothing in the family had changed. S/he still viewed her intervention as helpful for this family:

_I think yes, it helped the kids in the short term but in the long run I don’t think there has been any great changes to this family whatsoever. I think things are just back to where they were yes_ (Non-Indigenous statutory participant B).

Two of the participants discussed cases in which they had made a decision that children needed to be removed from home. Following this decision, they felt unsupported when they were unable to provide a placement for the children from within the children’s extended family. Referring to one of these cases, one statutory participant expressed their frustration after visiting the family; making the decision to remove children; and then finding out that no foster care placements were available for a child under two years of age. This participant said:

_What’s the point really? ... What the f##? is the point. If you are going to do an assessment, you’ve done your assessment you’ve made a decision these children are in need of protection and then what? You can’t even be honest then, with the family ... you can’t just say by the way I think your children are in need of protection but guess what we can’t even do anything about it. We haven’t even got a carer for your kids to go to_ (Non-Indigenous statutory participant R).

Although participants selected a case to present during the interview, all but one participant presented cases which had resulted in them feeling frustrated, powerless and confused. None of the cases they selected demonstrated interventions that had enabled the family to disconnect from the child protection system. Several participants had engaged with the family over a number of years. However, further domestic violence in
many of these cases had led to the children being removed from the family home. Non-Indigenous participants criticised the lack of resources available to assist them to support families, and they expressed disappointment in the minimal changes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to address their alcohol abuse, to refrain from domestic violence and to provide more supervision to their children.

Participants compared the funding available for children who were living in out of home placements, and believed less resources were being implemented to support families to parent their own children. One participant believed that although money was available when situations reached a crisis point and children were removed, there were fewer resources available to prevent this from occurring. S/he said:

*With the right supports in place and meaningful support ... it’s a longer process than 2 years ... I just wish that there was more, I wish that there was funding ... so that there was more we could do and need to do, and not wait till everything goes to hell and then only have money when the kids are out* (Non-Indigenous statutory participant Z).

Participants proposed that insufficient resources were a problem, and that more resources could keep children out of care. More funding, they said, was required to support non-government services in the community and to provide a greater network of support. They emphasised that a lack of resources impacted on the support able to be provided in interventions aimed to strengthen families, and retain children living within the family unit.

**Summary**

In practice, participants said that despite lengthy engagement with families over many years, their interventions had resulted in minimal changes within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families with whom they worked. Many of the non-Indigenous
participants were left frustrated and confused when outcomes for children did not match their anticipated case plan goals.

Although statutory and community participants engaged jointly in home visits and interventions with families, the complexity and unpredictability of issues that presented in Aboriginal communities were less understood by non-Indigenous participants and inequalities of power in decision-making and different role expectations meant that the potential contribution of Indigenous workers in these processes was under-utilised. The role that Indigenous workers play in supporting families, such as attempting to explain intervention processes to families and responding to their angry outbursts after departmental workers had visited, were not visible to non-Indigenous statutory participants because this often occurred at times when non-Indigenous workers were not present. Non-Indigenous participants were more likely to interpret the silence of Indigenous workers during child protection investigations as unsupportive and not meeting the expectations they had of them in the investigative process. Non-Indigenous participants who viewed their role as investigating and monitoring the safety of children in families, therefore, took the lead role in investigations, and their behaviour and actions remained accountable to the agency that employed them rather than to the Indigenous families they engaged with, or the Indigenous workers they worked alongside.

In the next chapter, the data is discussed to identify implications of the study’s findings for culturally competent policy development and practice in child protection with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Data are explored using the theoretical insights provided by Bourdieu’s concepts of capital, habitus and field which goes some way to explain the ongoing struggles and competition between parties within the child protection enterprise.
Chapter Seven: Playing by the Rules

Introduction

The aim of this research was to explore levels of cultural competency among child protection practitioners and the impact of this on effective child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in rural Queensland. This was attempted through investigating the experiences and views of participants currently employed in rural practice about the knowledge and skills they use in their cross cultural practice. This study considered the guiding concept of cultural competency as an approach that aims to enhance the ability of largely mainstream workers to provide culturally relevant and effective responses to people from cultural backgrounds different to their own. The increasing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system, as outlined in chapter two, makes it imperative for planned and effective responses for these families in order to achieve socially just outcomes.

Review of the current child protection workforce in Australia by Martin and Healy (2010) showed that the majority of workers in the child protection system are non-Indigenous, which makes it likely that in practice, non-Indigenous workers will work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This research explored the practice of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants at statutory and community agencies. The experiences and perceptions of research participants, employed at two rural sites, were outlined in the previous chapters. Four major themes emerged. These were: (1) the readiness of workers for cross-cultural practice, (2) the knowledge and resources they used to engage in the field, (3) the influence of the local/geographic, practitioner, client and organisational context and (4) the impact of these on practice and outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and their families.
In rural communities, engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families present complex issues for child protection workers. The aim of this chapter is to explain the ways participants from this study managed and adjusted their practice to different contexts. It is understood that different contexts contain their own discrete systems of values and acceptable practices. The work of Bourdieu (1989; 1990; 1993) provides both theoretical and structural tools to assist in this exploration. The child protection system and the context of these rural communities were presented as social fields, and the concepts of capital and habitus were used to analyse how workers position themselves and others within these fields. The following is discussed:

Who was granted entry to the child protection field and why?

What particular capital did child protection workers bring with them into their field and site of practice and how was this valued?

What influences from outside the fields of practice influence what happen within it?

How was power distributed and maintained in the field?

**Introducing the game**

In chapter four, Bourdieu’s theoretical model of social practice was introduced (Bourdieu, 1986, 1989, 1990a, 1993). Bourdieu viewed social life as occurring within contexts of objective structures which he called fields. Society in its entirety forms a field, but within it, there are a range of intersecting fields, none of them fully separated from society as a whole, but each with its own logic of practice (see Peillon, 1998). Bourdieu (1993) proposed that within fields, the behaviours of individuals interacting with each other reflects many taken for granted attitudes and beliefs about what they perceive as reality. In this study the child protection system can be viewed as a social field. Using Bourdieu’s (1989; 1990a; 1993) concepts of habitus, capital and field provides a way to
explain how workers are positioned in the child protection field, and how they position themselves and interact within it.

Bourdieu (1993) described fields as ‘structured spaces of positions’ that exist between agents and institutions in social space (p.72, 73). The structure of the field is important because it outlines the inherent system of power relations that is always at stake, requiring those within a field to defend their position against those who challenge it. This discussion explores these struggles, and the power relations within a cross-cultural child protection field. It highlights the role of context, and language (oral and written), which mask the influence and the presence of unwritten rules and (practical) knowledge of the principles upon which the field functions (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 75).

Chapter four introduced the analogy of the game that was often used by Bourdieu (1972; 1976; 1993) to describe social interactions within fields. The analogy of the game is used in this discussion to portray the interactions of workers within the child protection field, the unwritten rules, and the influence of power dynamics within these rural, cross cultural contexts. The analogy is not used to minimise the importance of the work that is carried out in the child protection field, nor the importance of the rural communities, which are understood here as contexts in which the game of child protection is played. Rather, the analogy provides a way to explain the state of child protection play in these contexts and the inherent power systems within them.

The game in this study demonstrates that in social spaces (or fields), players position themselves and actively, although not necessarily consciously, compete with each other, using the resources (or capital) they bring with them into the field, and those they acquire once they engage in play. For players to enter fields, they need to be motivated, and have a willingness to actively play (Bourdieu, 1993; 1998). Their habitus implies knowledge and recognition (though not necessarily consciously) of the inherent
laws of the field, as well as the stakes (Bourdieu, 1993; 1998). This is what Bourdieu referred to as a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1990a; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.224). By the very act of engaging in social fields, players acknowledge that there is value (or gains) that can be produced from their involvement, and recognise that as well as the written rules, there are unwritten rules that encompass play (Bourdieu, 1993). There is also an underlying belief or investment in the game itself, which Bourdieu referred to as *illusio*. Players who engage in the game, believe the game is ‘worth the effort’, and ‘what happens matters’ to those who engage in it (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 76). This belief serves as the fundamental premise upon which an entire field is based, and about which all those within the field have a shared implicit understanding (Bourdieu, 1998). In the child protection field, the *illusio* is the belief that children need protection and that players in the field protect them. This is the foundation of the child protection field. Although Bourdieu (1993) acknowledges the constant conflict and struggles in every field over positions, these struggles do not ‘call into question’ the very foundations’, the ‘bedrock of ultimate beliefs on which the whole game is based’ (p. 74). Rather, Bourdieu (1993) proposes that the size of the investment in time and effort, presupposed by entry into the game, ensures the field is maintained by those in power, who protect its existence from ongoing challenges by internal or external forces. Those who take part or engage in a field, reproduce the game by maintaining and perpetuating the value of its very existence which is always at stake (Bourdieu, 1993).

To be competitive in any field, including the child protection field, and to pursue stakes that are able to be acquired by playing, players need to maintain or improve the value of their position in the game. Their position is a source of power and influence over other existing players or newcomers who take up play in the field. Players constantly compete to improve their positions. To be competitive in the game, it is necessary to be able to exert some control or influence in the state of play. Those actively engaged in the
game are able to do this by using the resources they have available to them, or that they are able to acquire. Because the value of different resources changes within fields, it is also necessary for players to keep abreast of the salient aspects of how the game is being played. Chapter two presented a history of the child protection field. It drew attention to changes that have occurred, and the salient aspects of child protection practices and policies with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families during the past century.

In the child protection field, as in any field, workers who seek employment and enter this context bring with them portfolios of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). It is this capital which players invest and use in their interactions and practices. Capital can be divided into four different forms: economic (money and assets), cultural (forms of knowledge), social (affiliations and networks) (Bourdieu, 1986), and symbolic (social recognition) (Grenfell, 2008). Although these forms of capital are not equally distributed in any field, their value and usefulness is specific to the each field.

**Making the decision to play – the context**

This section discusses the capital that workers who choose to enter the child protection field bring with them; who is granted entry to the field and why. It considers the knowledge and experiences workers bring with them to commence their employment as child protection workers in rural locations and how this positions them in relation to others within the structure of the child protection field. It also explores how and why forms of capital are valued or of value in this field. To do this, it is necessary to outline the context. According to Bourdieu (1989), each field has its own purpose, a distinct boundary, and a recognisable set of players (Grenfell, 2008; Mutch, 2006).

The development and existence of the current child protection system, founded on the belief (illusio) that there are children living in families who need to be protected is
mandated by legislation. In this study it is acknowledged that seeking employment in child protection systems is voluntary. Seeking to enter this field signifies the intent to actively engage in what is presented in this discussion as ‘the game’. Obtaining employment provides workers entry into the child protection field and positions them in the child protection game. Employment in statutory agencies grants authority and responsibility to workers to actively respond to information received about children who may need care and protection, and to determine the nature of the response. Employment in community agencies gives community workers entry into the field. It allows them to share in decision-making about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. It does not give them the authority to make decisions, nor to determine responses about interventions. Workers in the field could be viewed as the recognisable set of players in the field.

The boundary for this field is defined by the age and circumstances of the child. For a child protection system to have authority to intervene in family life, there needs to be a child/ren under the age of 18 years who has experienced harm or is at risk of significant harm, and who has no parent willing or able to protect them (Child Protection Act 1999, Section 5B). This forms the boundary of the field.

Table one provides the demographics of children and families living in the rural contexts at site one and two. The demographics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families who reside at the two sites present the realities about which Langton (2010) refers, that is, they are overwhelmingly young, and have poorer outcomes in health, education and employment compared to the non-Indigenous population within the same region. It is within this context that workers can apply for employment as child protection workers, and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. At these two rural sites, child protection practice brings together people from different cultural and socio-political and economic backgrounds and perspectives. It also
brings to the surface aspects of difference that are not openly talked about, acknowledged or valued in Australian society. In making a decision to enter the child protection field, and to play the game, workers are confronted with these differences.

**Deciding to play**

Bourdieu viewed players as strategic improvisers who enter fields because they see the possibilities of returns that their active involvement in the game may provide (See Jenkins, 2002). Upon entering into the child protection field, workers do not necessarily have either a rational, or conscious strategy about how to play the game. Nonetheless, on deciding to play, they enter the child protection field, take up a position, and actively engage and compete in the stakes using the forms of capital they possess or are able to acquire in order to be competitive in the game. This capital can be intangible, for example, a goal to make a difference in the lives of children, or more tangible, for example, to secure an income.

Chapter five discussed the pathway participants used to acquire a job and gain entry into the child protection field. It outlined the resources (or forms of capital) that participants said that they bring with them and which assist them to perform their roles (or engage in the field). The recruitment process introduces applicants to existing players in the game, and in order to be successfully selected for employment, those applying for positions are required to demonstrate to them that they are motivated to play, and they possess the necessary resources (capital). The main forms of capital that participants said were of value in the child protection game were: tertiary education (educational capital a form of cultural capital described in chapter four), connections to services and people within local contexts (social capital), and previous employment experience in bureaucratic systems (symbolic capital i.e. a form of social recognition). It is the
accumulated possession of forms of capital that positions players within the structure of a social field. Workers were chosen from applicants who express an interest to participate in the field, and who meet the eligibility criteria. However, the distribution of different forms of capital in the child protection field, as in other fields, is not equally distributed between the participants. The value that forms of capital were given in the child protection field provides some indication as to their value in this field.

The possession of educational capital was a criteria for entry into the field. Possession of educational capital, was able to be converted into economic capital in the form of a wage. It is the conversion of different types of educational capital into economic capital which differentiates its value. For example, statutory child protection workers who possess or are able to acquire a degree in an approved disciplined from an accredited university are able to convert this form of educational capital into higher levels of economic capital (income) than those who possess a diploma level qualification. Community workers at community agencies in this study, who did not require degree level qualifications, were paid at a lower financial remuneration (economic capital) than the income levels of statutory workers who possessed degrees. The possession of, or ability to acquire educational capital, positioned workers in a hierarchical structure in this field.

Although the financial value placed on educational capital was consistent across the two sites, that is, income levels (wages) offered by the statutory agency at site one and site two were the same, being able to acquire educational capital was different at site one compared to site two. Site one is a larger regional town. The educational facility situated at this site provides access for potential applicants to acquire qualifications, and therefore, a pool of workers with degree level qualifications are available for recruitment into the statutory agency and community agency at this site. Hodgkin (2002) found that when courses and tertiary opportunities are available for local people in rural areas, this is positive for recruitment. Their study also found that when there are no tertiary
opportunities available, employers struggle to attract and retain staff. This study was consistent with Hodgkin’s findings. Site one had less difficulty attracting workers who held degrees from approved disciplines and lived locally into professional positions than site two. Site two had experienced difficulty in recruiting workers locally where there were limited educational facilities to fill all vacancies at the statutory agency. As such, the statutory agency at site two had always needed to recruit workers from outside the local area. Site two however, had been more successful in recruiting workers within the past few years, by being able to offer the Rural and Remote Financial Incentive to applicants who were willing to relocate from other regional areas. This financial incentive (a form of economic capital) was successful in recruiting and retaining workers at site two. Providing higher levels of economic capital attracted non-Indigenous workers into professional positions at site two, and demonstrates economic capital is of value in retaining and recruiting non-Indigenous workers. It was not successful in recruiting Indigenous workers into the statutory agency.

The majority of participants, who held degree level qualifications (educational capital) were non-Indigenous (14 of 17) and all of them were employed at the statutory agencies. Indigenous participants who possessed a degree qualification were rare, and the two participants who did possess this level of qualification have been recruited into management positions. Indigenous participants who possess or are able to acquire this form of educational capital are provided with the potential to position themselves higher in the hierarchy in this field, and acquire higher rates of remuneration (economic capital).

Workplace training provided opportunities for Indigenous workers to acquire Diploma level qualifications (also a form of educational capital), which provided them with a pathway into and a position in the child protection field. However, once positioned, there were few opportunities available at both sites, without further training, for Indigenous participants to progress in their careers to professional positions.
Employers assume that child protection workers who hold degrees in approved disciplines at accredited universities have the capacity to perform their roles. This assumption validates the value of *educational capital* in the form of qualifications converting it to *symbolic capital*. The definition of *symbolic capital* was presented in chapter four. In this study, symbolic capital ascribed child protection workers with the recognised authority delegated to them in their roles (as authorised officers) to impose their power on others (that is, to investigate, assess, and make decisions including the removal of children from families). This value placed on *educational capital* is recognised prior to workers taking up positions. There is an acceptance that workers who commence their roles have the capacity to perform and comply with the expectations placed on them in their roles. It may provide some explanation as to why employers provide minimal training for participants to prepare them to commence their roles. It does not however, acknowledge the unpreparedness participants experienced, especially non-Indigenous participants, to commence practice in rural contexts where there are larger numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients (see Table 2).

Another form of *symbolic capital* valued in this field was knowledge of government systems acquired from previous employment in government bureaucratic systems. This is a form of capital that is acquired rather than inherited. Participants acknowledged that being able to acquire this form of knowledge was time consuming, but being able to acquire it provided the participant with strategies to acquire knowledge of the policies and procedures, the expectations of their role, and relationships between statutory and non-statutory workers. Participants recognised knowledge of government systems, and how to manoeuvre in them, was valuable as an employee within these systems, and for community workers who worked alongside them. Participants acknowledged that being able to acquire this form of knowledge placed them in a more powerful position in the field. Participants acknowledged this form of *capital* was valued in the field. Those
employed outside of statutory systems found it difficult to acquire this knowledge. They talked about feeling excluded from ‘this togetherness, this ill-fated workplace culture that they (referring to statutory workers) have within themselves’.

A fourth form of capital within the child protection field was social capital in the form of connections to services and people within local contexts. These connections differed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. Some of the non-Indigenous participants recruited locally possessed social capital, and did have connections and knowledge about services and residents in the local area. However, the connections that Indigenous participants possessed, or were able to acquire was because of their Indigeneity, and through their networks with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In the field where this information and these connections were not easily accessible or easily acquired, social capital possessed by participants in their connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and services increased in value. Social capital was valued in the child protection field, particularly because of the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in these systems, and because of the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families who came to the attention of child protection agencies. Indigenous participants at the two sites were local residents, and possessed high levels of social capital through their strong connections to the Aboriginal communities and networks. Non-Indigenous participants, especially those who had relocated to the area, and many who were local residents recognised and acknowledged from their limited previous experience and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and people that they did not have these connections and relationships. They had less social capital and they needed to build (or acquire) this. Acquiring this was a time consuming process, and participants realised they needed to acquire cultural knowledge, establish relationships and build trust.
For non-Indigenous workers, this form of social capital was sought after, whilst for Indigenous workers who were accepted by the community, it was taken for granted.

Indigenous workers talked about the advantages of knowing and being known and accepted within the community. Social capital provided a number of by-products for Indigenous workers, which were of value in the child protection field. Social capital provided a convenient and useful source of informal information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. The advantage of social capital enabled those participants who possessed it to acquire information easily and quickly about clients and community. This was recognised by colleagues, and also workers in the non-government sector. A further advantage of social capital, for Indigenous workers especially, is that it reinforces their identity and belongingness with First Nations peoples of Australia. For employers, it publicly demonstrates the commitment of statutory and community agencies who employ Indigenous staff to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this enterprise. Similarly, non-Indigenous staff acquisition of social capital serves as a public acknowledgement to these communities about the agency’s commitment to the provision of culturally appropriate services.

Non-Indigenous participants bring with them into the field high levels of educational capital (qualifications) with lower levels of social capital (connections and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples), whilst Indigenous participants bring high levels of social capital (connections) and lower levels of educational capital. Being able to convert certain forms of capital into economic capital demonstrates the value of particular forms of capital and makes distinctions between them. Recruitment at both sites prioritised the educational capital of qualifications for entry into the child protection field. Mainstream cultural knowledge, knowledge acquisition and proof (holding a degree) are of more value than non-mainstream forms of cultural knowledge, acquisition and proof in statutory child protection agencies. This validation
and recognition of education capital converts it into symbolic capital. That is, a form of capital that is given sufficient recognition to place those who own it in a position of power in the field and in the game (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23). Although this power gave those who possessed it authority over child and family clients, acquiring knowledge and relationships (social capital) in the local/geographic and client context, for some participants, occurred after they began their employment as child protection workers.

**Taking up a position in the field**

The previous section outlined the capital that participants brought with them into their roles. This section discusses how forms of capital position workers within the hierarchical structure of the field, in this case the child protection field. Bourdieu (1993) views the structure of the field as the state of power relations between those within the field. There are those in the field who seek to preserve the current status, to retain the value of capital they possess against those who seek to challenge or transform it, using the capital they are able to acquire, and all the (relative) power they have at their disposal. This structure of the field is always at stake.

Mainstream educational capital in the form of qualifications positioned workers in this field hierarchically. Seeking employment in this field without a qualification precluded entry. Workers who had degree qualifications were paid more, and were provided with roles that delegated them more responsibility and autonomy in case management and decision-making.

An undergraduate degree in preferred disciplines was recognised and valued by those responsible for recruiting workers into the statutory agency. They recognised their owners as having a legitimate knowledge base from which to work. Mainstream educational capital, that is, holding a university degree positioned statutory participants as more powerful than participants who did not hold these degrees irrespective of whether
they had knowledge and experience about child protection practice or the geographic/social contexts (*fields*).

The participant, who held an undergraduate degree (but not from an approved discipline) and had child protection experience, was unable to be appointed into a professional role because this qualification was not recognised in this field. This participant was employed in a role that did not require a degree level qualification, had less autonomy and decision-making responsibility than their approved undergraduate degree holding colleagues, and was paid at a lower rate of pay.

Being able to acquire a position of authority without a qualification is rare in the child protection field. However, there were two participants in this study, who acquired positions of authority without holding degree level qualifications. They did this entering into the administrative stream of practice (management) rather than following the professional practice stream. This demonstrates one way in which capital can be accumulated through using knowledge of how systems are structured. Both of these participants were Indigenous and possessed experience in the child protection field and the local community. Their lengthy history of employment in the agency demonstrated their skills in this game, and their ability to influence rules of play, particularly in exploiting rules about the different entrance qualifications for administrative and professional roles, to their, and presumably their employer’s advantage. Therefore, workers who possess a combination of forms of valued capital in this field (*social capital, educational capital and symbolic capital*) can improve their positions within the hierarchical structure of the child protection field.

The example above also highlights that both a valuing of particular forms of capital (systems knowledge and degree appropriate qualification) lead to the structural composition of a child protection agency and that the structure itself enables multiple
forms of valuing (of both administrative and professional roles). It also shows that it is often a player’s own recognition of the rules of the game, the variety of potential capital that exists in the field, and their ability to not be constrained by the perceptions contained in their habitus, for example, a perception of the value of professional roles relative to the values in which they hold non-professional, managerial and administrative roles.

Chapter two outlined how in the 1970s media drew the public’s attention to child abuse. This resulted in professionals assuming greater responsibility to investigate and determine responses to children who had been harmed, or were alleged to have been harmed, in order to protect them (Tomison, 2001). Public Inquiries into child protection systems in different states of Australia have been critical of these systems particularly in relation to outcomes for children who come to their attention (QCPCI, 2013; CMC, 2004; Gordon et al, 2002; New South Wales Aboriginal Child Assault Task Force, 2006; Wild & Anderson, 2007). These inquiries represent pressures from external forces that challenge existing structures. These inquiries publicly criticised the ability of child protection workers to protect children. As a result of these inquiries, the structure of the field has been forced to change.

Recommendations from these Inquiries have called for greater participation of Indigenous workers in the child protection field. Inquiries therefore give recognition to the importance and value of cultural knowledge outside of the mainstream. These Inquiries also brought to the surface the value of social capital since it was perceived that an increase in Indigenous child protection workers would increase access to the social capital of these workers, that is, their connections and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents and clients. The inquiries advocated the value and need for Indigenous workers to be positioned in child protection fields.
Indigenous participants at the two sites in this study possessed social capital as members of the Aboriginal communities and as child protection workers within the contexts where they were employed. Their social capital went in two directions. They could be used in child protection agencies to impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clientele according to the wishes of the agency, while at the same time, Indigenous clients expected that Indigenous workers would use their social capital within the organisation (as colleagues and employees) to influence child protection decisions made about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families, according to their wishes. Indigenous workers are placed in an unenviable position of being perceived by both community members and their own colleagues with suspicion and mistrust, since both groups expect to be able to draw on their social capital for their own purposes (gains). Social capital is also valuable for those workers who are outsiders to these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and communities. Participants who had relocated to these rural areas found building trust and developing connections (social capital) was time consuming, and they often were encouraged to turn to Indigenous colleagues for support. They were able to access social capital from them during joint investigations, and to access information and connections within Aboriginal communities.

Non-Indigenous participants who entered the two sites recognised during their initial experiences, that the forms of capital they brought with them were perceived and valued differently by residents in these communities, compared to their employers. Participants who attempted to engage with children and families in Aboriginal communities without acknowledging differences in styles of communicating and ways of behaving met with much resistance in this new context. There was a resistance within the Aboriginal community to the entrance of outsiders and workers who were unwilling to build and acquire knowledge and understanding of them and their social contexts.
Participants who experienced client resistance relied on their Indigenous colleagues to make sense of their experiences. Being Indigenous and having cultural knowledge and connections also provided pathways into actively engaging within Aboriginal communities which were not as accessible for non-Indigenous participants. Indigenous participants themselves valued and recognised the importance of their cultural knowledge and connections. Employers saw the value of the social capital of Indigenous workers in Aboriginal communities where workers engaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children. The presence of Indigenous workers during interventions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families enabled organisational processes to be completed. Social capital provided greater accessibility into the field of the Aboriginal community, but did not necessarily influence outcomes in child protection practices engaged with families residing in them.

Possession or the ability to acquire capital valued within social fields positions workers within the structure of a field. Workers who are able, consciously or unconsciously to acquire capital and use it to engage in the game can improve their positions, and some are able to assume positions of authority and power. Strategic players can use their capital to maintain and improve their position in the field, enhancing what Bourdieu referred to as their ‘feel for the game’.

Commencing work

After being positioned on entry into the field, workers are required to perform their roles and meet the expectations of their employers. They must do this to maintain their position within the field and to continue to attain the gains the field offers. For example, there is an expectation that workers employed as professional workers, in exchange for economic capital (a wage), will do their job, manage the cases they are allocated, and meet the demands and expectations placed on them by their employers. This reflects and
reinforces the state of play in fields, and the hierarchical order within the field. Bourdieu (1993) refers to this as an acceptance and a commitment by those who enter fields, of the existence of ‘a determinate state of the power relations’ which they consciously or unconsciously accept, and that within the field there are those who ‘more or less completely monopolize the specific capital’ which forms the basis of the specific power or authority characteristic of that particular field (p.73).

Most of the non-Indigenous statutory participants had not consciously considered the realities of rural cross cultural child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families prior to commencing their employment. One reason for this is that their knowledge was acquired from their formal education (educational capital) and not from their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities (social capital). Cultural competency models presented in chapter three advocate that effective cross cultural practice in the human services necessitates a critical awareness and understanding of the history, dynamics, and interrelations occurring in specific communities as well as for the worker to self-reflect and critically evaluate the views and beliefs they bring into the cross-cultural relationship (Green, 1999; Lum, 1999; McPhatter, 1997; Sue, Arrendondo & McDavis, 1992). Despite the commitment to train, educate and recruit staff to provide culturally appropriate practice by all tiers of Australian government since the 1990s, this clearly had not been experienced by participants of this study. Instead, participants said that they were “thrown in the deep end”, and relied on the views and beliefs they brought with them to make sense of their experiences.

Many of the non-Indigenous participants were aware, through their tertiary training, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were over-represented in the child protection system. They knew it was a likely possibility that in child protection practice they would engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and
communities. Yet, participants of this study stated that the knowledge they had acquired about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their training and education, did not assist them to make sense of the extreme conditions of poverty, overcrowded housing, housing in states of disrepair (etcetera) that they observed in these communities. Even though most said that they would have welcomed training to prepare them, a lack of knowledge and understanding about what they observed initially in their roles did not, however, lead them to question the power that they were given as authorised officers in the child protection field. Non-Indigenous participants did not always make their lack of understanding visible to their colleagues or to their employers. Instead they displayed high levels of busyness to mask their feeling of incompetence. The implication of this was that workers were seen to be doing their job and completing intervention processes, while lacking understanding and through having insufficient knowledge to make sense of their experiences and without any formal strategy in place to address the performance of their roles in these contexts.

Indigenous participants, who, in commencing roles had entered child protection systems for the first time, were also shocked and unprepared for their initial experiences. They also experienced pressures in their roles to perform and meet the expectations of their employers and the funding guidelines for their agencies. Their shock was not so much by their observations of the conditions in Aboriginal communities, but by the culture of child protection systems which responded and acted quickly to remove children from their families because they believed children in communities to be unsafe. They expressed a sense of powerlessness. Indigenous participants did not always agree with assessments, and believed there were alternative cultural approaches that could be used to maintain the safety of children within the community.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants did not anticipate or expect what they experienced in their initial practice and this presented them with dilemmas of how to
merge the knowledge and perspectives from within their *habitus* with the current context of their practice. Once in their roles in this field, they engaged in the state of play by drawing on strategies that they had used elsewhere. These included taking responsibility for their own learning; prioritising and complying with policies and procedures to guide their practice, and hiding their lack of knowledge and the difficulties they experienced from others.

Interacting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Aboriginal communities was not an unfamiliar experience for Indigenous participants. Their *habitus* provided them with familiarity and a position within this context. They were able to draw on their own life experiences when they met with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. These life experiences provided them with an unconscious, and taken for granted knowing about appropriate ways to behave and interact. They were more conscious of their observations of non-Indigenous workers entering these communities. They saw in the behaviour of non-Indigenous workers anxiety, a lack of confidence and discomfort in their responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons and families. Indigenous participants knew that non-Indigenous workers lacked knowledge about what behaviours were appropriate, and seemed oblivious to the non-verbal cues that families would display when becoming angry, or disgruntled during their visits. Indigenous participants did attempt to explain the unwritten rules within these communities to non-Indigenous workers. Possibly due to the taken for granted nature of this knowledge (*habitus*), and because their non-Indigenous counterparts use of defensive strategies rather than seeking knowledge or other forms of help, their advice was not always heeded. The findings of this study are parallel in this regard with Hodgkin’s (2002) research in child protection practice in Victoria which drew attention to strategies of workers creating the impression of coping and not appearing to be stressed for fear they would be questioned about their suitability for the role.
The assumption that workers with tertiary training enter child protection practice with sufficient knowledge to perform their roles in Aboriginal communities is severely compromised with these research findings. Some of the non-Indigenous participants acknowledged the need to build their cultural knowledge and talked about the strategies they had used to build knowledge when they commenced their roles. These workers worked alongside Indigenous workers, and acknowledged they had much to learn, and that Indigenous workers were fountains of knowledge. These workers did build knowledge and said this improved their understanding of their work in this field.

In the child protection field, financial remuneration acknowledged economic capital (qualifications) and delegated power and responsibility to those who possessed it. Social capital in the form of connections to services and people within local contexts was acknowledged as valuable, and saved valuable time, but those who possessed social capital without economic capital held less power to influence practice within the field. Capital that workers possessed or were able to acquire positioned them differently in social space within the structure of the field.

Local/Geographic and Client Context

Although fields are governed by their own laws, and have their own set of beliefs which rationalise the rules of behaviour within them, Peillon (1998) proposed the analysis of any field necessitates an understanding of how it is positioned within broader society since social fields are never fully separated from society as a whole.

State governments have historically played a prominent role in child protection. Chapter two outlined historic, socio-political and economic influences on child protection field in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. It is the State which legitimises the power of its child protection representatives. Legislation provides the mandate for government to protect children when families either do not, or cannot do this.
Community based agencies, receive economic capital through government funding. In exchange, they must demonstrate their compliance with the criteria and expectations placed on them by their funders. Community agencies (in this study Recognised Entities) rely on their social capital and their links and connections to Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to engage their child protection responsibilities. It is social capital, however, which will bend to the will of economic capital because child protection agencies continue to be reliant on government funding for their survival. This provides those with greater amounts of economic capital, greater power and authority. Without access to economic capital to pay wages, agencies are not able to continue to operate. This was demonstrated when a community agency in this study failed to secure funding, and after seventeen years of operation was closed. There could be no cruder measure than this, of the difference in authority between statutory and community workers and statutory and community agencies.

Commencing work in rural Aboriginal communities brings attention, however, to how the social contexts of these landscapes contain a logic of their own, that is, necessarily outside of the experience or habitus of those entering them. It draws attention to the unwritten rules played in the game.

When workers come to practice, there are already rules in place about how this game is played. To enter this play, workers need to orient themselves to the field and acquire a feel for the game. In these rural sites there was a geographic and socio-political separation that existed between the child protection systems and communities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. At one of the sites, the community agency was located within the Aboriginal community. The workers of this agency had daily contact with residents in the community, and were familiar with what was happening there. This provided the opportunity for these workers to respond to the needs of residents in the community. However, they were also required to meet the conditions of
their child protection funding. Much of their work with residents, including visits and family support went unnoticed, since it was not necessarily conditional to their funding agreement. During a research visit to this agency participants spoke about funding cuts to their service which meant the loss of staff. The community participants were particularly concerned that family support workers were being cut and the agency would no longer be able to provide the level of family support that they had been providing to residents in the community. During a subsequent discussion with the manager at the statutory agency, the manager was adamant that the community agency was not funded to engage in family support with residents. Family support, the manager advised, was provided by an agency outside of the Aboriginal community. This data inadvertently reveals that workers who had been providing family support were responding to the needs of community rather than complying with the guidelines for funding. Clearly the community, and the community organisation itself, had far less capital (social, political, economic) than the funding organisation and were not in a position to change the rules of the game in favour of residents over a large bureaucracy. This data also reveals, however, how workers manipulate rules of the game (play foul according to those who hold the power to make the rules) and the risks and anxieties this engenders for them. These are the unwritten rules of play. Players, without making public how they engage in play, bent the rules and acted outside the scope of the parameters of their role. In rural areas practice is often some distance from the gaze of those in power within regional offices.

The statutory child protection agencies were situated in towns some distance from both Aboriginal communities. This separateness made the social interactions within these two communities less visible to workers. It also meant that each context, that is, the workgroup of the agency, and the day to day activities that occurred within these communities, functioned quite separately and out of sight of each other. Many of the non-Indigenous participants, who had lived and worked in regional towns had never, prior to
taking up their current roles, visited the Aboriginal communities they now engaged as part of their child protection practice. Their knowledge about these communities had been acquired from other outsiders to these communities, for example outsiders at university, in the media, or from neighbours and friends who lived in the local towns. The majority of their connections and relationships were in the towns in which they lived, not in the Aboriginal communities. Many of the non-Indigenous participants of this study who had relocated to rural practice, and those who were recruited locally, continue to maintain a separateness between their work and home locations. This was not the case for Indigenous participants.

The majority of Indigenous participants had lived in, or visited these Aboriginal communities and were often related or connected to residents there. They moved in and out of these social fields. The work and home life of Indigenous participants was not separated as for non-Indigenous participants. These participants had to negotiate both of these social fields. When Indigenous participants found it impossible to separate incidents that emerged at work with people to whom they were closely connected, they often made choices to refrain from being involved. For example, some participants refused to accompany other child protection staff on visits to families when the decisions had been made to remove the children.

**Positions in the field – Practitioner context**

‘Individuals who share a similar position in social space also share, because of this, many of the same conditions of work and life’ (Grenfell, 2006, p. 93). Bourdieu (1984) referred to this as class *habitus*. A close proximity in social space tends to generate a degree of interpersonal closeness, where individuals who live and socialise in the same places, develop similar lifestyles, outlooks, dispositions, and an inferred sense of their place in the world. Many of the Indigenous participants talked about the
importance of, and support they got in their relationships with Indigenous colleagues, and their ability to share a common sense of humour, use familiar Murri words, and have a yarn with each other. This sense of cohesiveness and familiarity reflects an interpersonal closeness, shared understandings, and views of the world.

The propensity to play the game in these contexts is consciously or unconsciously influenced by the *habitus* of individuals, through which ‘embodied sediments of their individual and collective history’ provide them with a lens to make sense of the world (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.61). The *habitus* of the individual, according to Bourdieu, filters how individuals interpret their experiences, what they observe, and where they position themselves alongside others within social contexts. In social life, individuals engage in many different social fields all of which have different rules for entry, and rules of play.

Non-Indigenous participants of this study experienced a sense of their ‘difference’ upon entering the child protection field and the Aboriginal communities. For example, a non-Indigenous participant became consciously aware of their appearance, and their upbringing and social experiences. This participant spoke about becoming acutely aware of their hair and skin colour; about coming from a city where they had attended university, and entering a rural Aboriginal community in the role of a child protection worker. The participant became aware of their social position in urban life, and the sharp contrast this provided to the lower socio-economic lives of people in the Aboriginal communities into which they entered. This participant found it difficult to position themself within the context they were now entering.

*Habitus* also influences how one acts (Bourdieu, 1993). *Habitus* predisposes individuals to orient their action by socially acquired tendencies about what they perceive to be socially acceptable, predictable and expected. A participant who had limited experience in Aboriginal communities recalled that their previous experiences did not
provide them with a basis to make sense of what they saw. This participant was uncertain about how to start work with families. They said they felt out of place in this unfamiliar context. The unconscious rules of their society which they had taken for granted, did not assist them in this field where the state of play was different. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants talked about justifying their approaches to practice by embracing the authority they had been provided in their roles.

Embracing their role descriptions and being amongst others with similar views and strategies, taught participants how to play the child protection game. It did not foster or encourage them to challenge how the game was played. They watched how their more experienced colleagues played the game. This was encouraged through organisational (field) practices of encouraging newer workers to shadow more experienced workers. Participants in the study talked to work colleagues about how they had oriented themselves into the child protection field, and they learnt the types of behaviours and actions which were acceptable or not acceptable in the field. The impact that *habitus* had on the different cultural groups was evident. For example, participants who had been raised in Aboriginal communities shared their views about the importance and strengths of client connections to family, culture and community. They saw Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as survivors and role models for younger generations. They advocated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to remain living with their families and in their communities. It was difficult for Indigenous participants to challenge the authority that non-Indigenous workers held in their roles as statutory workers. Most however, did not want to be seen as decision-makers who removed children, although they were at these discussions, and wanted their views heard.

Many of the non-Indigenous participants who came to practice had been raised and lived with people who were racially, ethnically and culturally similar to themselves. Some of these participants found it difficult to accept the differences and diversity they
observed around them, and because of this, they leapt to making judgements about what they saw, against their own *habitus* and making their child protection decisions from this backdrop. They justified these by pointing at ‘Aboriginal culture’ which they saw as imbued with domestic violence, alcohol use, and poor living conditions. It was these observations, so different to anything they had encountered before, that influenced their views about the safety of children. One participant, who had visited an Aboriginal family, looked in the cupboard and found no food. This participant realised that in most of the families they visited there was a reliance on sharing, and that families often supplied each other with food. This participant suspected that the children were being fed, but didn’t know. In their family of origin, it was expected that the parent would have food to feed their children. Therefore not having food in the cupboard was confronting and the participant was confused about how to make sense of what they observed.

The ability of workers to be open to new ideas and to review their own preconceived beliefs and attitudes (*habitus*), and the beliefs and attitudes of those working in the field when they entered impacted on how they oriented themselves to child practice in rural Aboriginal communities. McPhatter (1997) referred to this as Enlightened Consciousness, a component she proposed was necessary to attain cultural competence. The next section considers the relationships and interactions between workers in the child protection field.

**Playing the game - the logic of practice**

Bourdieu’s (1993), concepts of *field* and *habitus* which together contribute to understanding the logic of practice, are useful ideas from which to analyse the relationships between workers and consider the child protection field as an arena of social and cultural (re)production. In using the analogy of a game to describe the social field and the participants (in this study the workers) Bourdieu (1993) said:
‘The new players have to pay an entry fee which consists in recognition of the value of the game (selection and co-option always pay great attention to the indices of commitment to the game, investment in it) and in (practical knowledge) of the principles of the functioning of the game’ (p.74).

There is little doubt that participants of this study entered the child protection field with an investment and commitment towards protecting children. Participants expressed this as a motivating factor for them entering the field. They believed that in their roles as child protection workers they could make a difference to children, families and communities. They were particularly committed to protecting children.

To understand how workers protected children, how the game in the child protection field is played, it was necessary to understand how participants perceived their own position in this field and how they perceived the position of others. It is necessary to understand the ways workers found value in the game itself, how they committed to it, invested time and energy, and how they acquired practical knowledge of how to play the game (Bourdieu, 1993). Neither the players nor the field is rigid and bound by rules, since this is a fluid game which occurs in social spaces that constantly change (Grenfell, 2008). For Bourdieu, there are almost always continual struggles as people compete with each other to gain some form of control; to direct players and position themselves amongst others who also seek to acquire and improve their positions. This requires entrants to the field, to position the resources (capital) that they bring with them as having value, because this strengthens their position in the field. This is not to imply that people actively seek jobs in a consciously calculated attempt for personal gain.

Participants of this study did not enter the field knowing how to play and how others played. Neither did they have a full awareness of the interactions within the field. By applying for their job, however, prospective employees signify that they have an
interest and a goal to protect children and that are willing to invest time and energy in the field. As employees their investment provides them with financial returns in the form of wages, as well as a career which provides a status and authority within the broader societal context.

**Playing by the rules – Organisational context**

After participants acquired their jobs, they began to develop a practical mastery of the game. An aspect of practice in the child protection field is the ability to engage in play mindful of the rules. For many workers in the statutory child protection system, these rules are contained in the agency’s policies and procedures. Statutory workers attend induction training once employed which introduces them to the organisational structure of the agency, and reinforces the policies and procedures, and organisational demands of statutory child protection. It is the policies and procedures within the statutory agency which determine and reinforce how power and authority is allocated among groups and staff. Workers who remain in the field need to commit to these processes. Induction training introduces them to the rules of play within the field.

Within the statutory agency, the distribution of authority is inherently hierarchical, with clear lines of responsibility and accountability written into policies and procedures. An outcome of induction training raises the consciousness of statutory workers to the aims and structure of the organisation, and provides clarity about the expectations of them in their role.

During induction training, new child protection staff complete two days of basic cultural competency training which the participants of this study described as informative and foundational. Participants who attended this induction training said that when they returned from these workshops and assumed their responsibilities they had more
understanding of their role and the broader roles of the agency. They could now play with some (considerable) authority. These roles are reinforced within the Practice Manual which some workers use to guide their practice when they return to their roles after induction training. The manual outlines the administrative demands and processes expected of workers and through which they demonstrate their commitment to investing in the rules of the game. Recalling their induction, participants of this study said it gave them an understanding of the role of the organisation and its role alongside other agencies, but it did not prepare them for the complexity of the context and the issues that presented in working in Aboriginal communities. Workers in statutory agencies therefore are likely to prioritise policies and procedures, which are endorsed, directed and which they understand, over culturally appropriate practises which they are much less likely to understand and which rely much more on workers stepping into their own individual professional authority and accountability.

This is demonstrated in the way different participants of this study described their role. Statutory participants described their roles as: investigators, assessors, monitors, and decision makers. Indigenous participants described their role as that of a good communicator, finding out what is happening in families and communities, and ensuring that clients understand statutory processes. Although both statutory and community child protection agencies were invested in child safety and protection, statutory participants saw protecting children as their responsibility whereas community participants saw this as the responsibility of the community.

Very few of Indigenous participants attended induction training and most had not attended the cultural competency training, believing that their cultural backgrounds provided them with the cultural knowledge and understanding they would need in their practice. Instead, Indigenous participants had attended training in administrative processes, legislation, and organisational and inter-organisational protocols. Although
they knew that to actively participate in the game they had to work within these systems, they were rarely in a position to formulate or even input into policies to guide service delivery. Indigenous participants who did not have degree level qualifications were delegated tasks by supervisors. The tasks were specific, practical, and structured. Indigenous participants in both the statutory and community agencies provided non-Indigenous workers with an informal induction about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Indigenous participants were perceived by them as culture bearers and non-Indigenous participants sought advice and support from them about cultural information. An assumption existed that Indigenous workers were or should be ‘cultural experts’, and non-Indigenous participants talked about a reliance on Indigenous workers to know and be able to make sense of the differences they observed between Indigenous people in the community and their own experiences and expectations about parenting, children and family. Non-Indigenous participants put these differences down to ‘culture’ and Indigenous workers were supposed to help them make sense of what they observed due to their own location as Indigenous persons. Non-Indigenous participants therefore demonstrated an expectation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were a homogenous group who could be understood by any other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. This approach by non-Indigenous staff also demonstrates their lack of understanding that Indigenous workers often enter the field with diverse and limited child protection experience, and little training to support and prepare them for the demands placed upon them.

Providing knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is recognised as important by the statutory child protection agency which advertises careers for Indigenous workers on their website, urging them to bring ‘cultural knowledge to the agency’, and to help it improve the way it delivers policies, services, and programs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Department Communities Child Safety and
Disabilities, 2012). In addition, the funding requirements of community agencies entail an expectation that community agencies will employ Indigenous workers to represent the Indigenous community and consult with, plan and help them to deliver culturally appropriate child protection services.

Participants in this study can be viewed as individuals who bring with them social capital, some of which is recognised as valuable by those within the child protection field, and some of which is honed in order to be made more acceptable and therefore valuable to the child protection field. This capital gives workers the opportunity to invest in the child protection game.

**Strengths and Limitations**

The study explored the opinions and experiences of child protection workers currently employed in rural practice in Aboriginal communities in Queensland. There are several limitations to the study. This study presents a snapshot in time of a field that is highly complex, and which is impacted by both internal and external pressures. The sample size was small and cannot be generalised to other rural locations or urban settings. It was focussed on child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and did not consider practice across other cultures who also reside at these sites.

Nonetheless the practice of child protection workers at these sites provides insight into theories and models of cultural competency. The qualitative interviews with participants presented the views and experiences of workers in their own words about their own practice. It explored their views, and how their experiences could be of use by other workers who worked across cultures with people from different cultural backgrounds. It did not include perspectives of client families. This was outside of this study, the purpose of which was to explore models of cultural competency for child protection practitioners.
The data analysis was systematic and the methods used to analyse the data were transparent. Interpretation of the data was engaged through use of Bourdieu's framework to go beyond 'what workers said' to what this meant for developing cultural competence in practice.

**Conclusion**

This study explored how workers entered into rural child protection practice and the strategies they used to adapt themselves to this field using the capital they possessed. This analysis demonstrated that the *habitus* of child protection practitioners impedes their openness towards change, and their ability to consider alternative approaches when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families especially those who live in Aboriginal communities. The outcomes for families in the cases workers presented did not achieve anticipated outcomes in case goals and plans. Rather, and despite lengthy interventions, children were removed from their families and community.

The issues that face Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in Aboriginal communities are complex and dynamic. Cultural obligations and community connections have a major influence on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and what happens in these communities. These dynamics are rarely visible to outsiders. This study concludes that culturally competent practice (like any other practice) cannot be separated, or developed in isolation from, context, place and power relations.

One of the goals of cultural competency is to provide an opportunity for the voice of people from diverse ethnic or racial groups to be heard (Sanders, 1980). Employing bicultural paraprofessionals, to incorporate cultural perspectives in practice was evident in the child protection practice of the two sites examined in this study. This study showed that bicultural workers rarely have the power to change decisions and practices which are
reified through manuals, policies and protocols. Inflexible policies and procedures created ethical dilemmas for Indigenous workers who are faced with making decisions in their practice that either accommodates the responses expected of them by people living in the communities or the demands of their organisational context. Lack of power in this study meant that Indigenous workers were often not listened to and felt unacknowledged and unheard.

The notion of *habitus* was introduced to show the experiences, beliefs and attitudes of workers influence their practice even unconsciously. Without a commitment to critically reflexive practice these unaccounted for beliefs, attitudes and values will continue to guide child protection practice.

Bourdieu’s notion of *capital* was utilised to demonstrate how different forms of *capital* provide a variety of benefits to individual workers, specific groups of workers and even whole organisations. Different types of *capital* are not valued or spread evenly and this study demonstrated the power given to statutory child protection workers and organisations in relation to community based child protection services.

This research revealed the difficulties that present in child protection practice that aims for cultural competency in fields where power relationships are uneven. The ‘game’ metaphor demonstrated that child protection practice is structured around set procedures and points of decision making which guide the state of play, rather than accounting for the contexts, preferences and needs of the clients it purports to serve. Cultural competency implies people from different cultural backgrounds working together to reach more effective outcomes. This is difficult to achieve if these workers do not share the power in decision-making that guide practice interventions. The next chapter outlines the conclusions and recommendations from the study.
Chapter Eight: Conclusion

Introduction

The over-representation of Indigenous children at every point in the child protection system in all states and territories of Australia is a significant and complex issue for workers in the child protection system. To address this, child protection services need to be culturally responsive and adaptive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families so that they are effective in providing culturally acceptable support services which build on the strengths of culture. The goal of cultural competency encompasses an acceptance of difference and diversity in people from different cultural backgrounds (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010; Brach & Fraser, 2000; Green, 1999; McPhatter, 1997; Sue et al., 1992; Weaver, 1999, 2004). For professionals who work across cultures, this involves a commitment towards being open to learning and a willingness to incorporate cultural knowledge into assessment, planning, practice interventions and their monitoring. Acquiring new knowledge involves the ability to critically reflect on the attitudes and worldviews professionals and paraprofessionals unconsciously bring to practice. Even though providing culturally responsive and respectful services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander has been recognised in a commitment by government and non-government agencies, instigating this has primarily been through training and education. Results from this study indicate that the training and education of workers prior to commencing their roles was insufficient to prepare them for the realities of practice in Aboriginal rural communities in Queensland and limited opportunities for cross cultural training occurred after they had commenced their roles. This research aimed to contribute knowledge about child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families by examining how rural practice is currently enacted on the ground.

The thesis commenced by discussing the disjuncture between legislation and policies that were introduced to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and
children from the effects of colonisation, and practices which focused more on control rather than care. These have been criticised for having created ongoing social, political and economic trauma for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This final chapter is a summary and reflection of the research. It outlines its potential contribution to future child protection policy and practice.

The research

The aim of the research was to explore levels of cultural competency among child protection practitioners working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in rural Queensland. Child protection practice involves activities undertaken by workers to ensure the safety and well-being of children harmed, alleged to have been harmed or at risk of child abuse and neglect. Cultural competency is one approach that aims to impact on effective cross cultural practice.

The study began by exploring pathways into child protection practice, and the resources workers rely on to commence their roles. This includes the knowledge they drew on in their initial practice to make sense of what they observed, and their responses within this rural practice context. It found when workers commenced their roles as child protection workers they were unprepared. For effective practice in child protection in Aboriginal communities, workers need knowledge and understanding of the social, economic and political problems that impact on these communities and skills to negotiate the diversity and complexity with which individuals, families and communities interact within these communities. Indigenous workers contributed their knowledge and understanding of these contexts, but experience difficulties in being heard, and being able to influence decisions and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in child protection practice contexts. The research concludes that a cultural
competency approach to practice was not being used at the two rural sites where this research was conducted.

**Implications for future research**

This study aimed to identify implications for culturally competent policy development and practice in child protection with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Although this was a small study, comparisons could be made with the experiences of workers who engage across cultures in other field such as health, immigration, and education. This could assist in bringing to the surface cross cultural practices that are similar and/or different in other organisational contexts. Further, comparing how workers employed within different organisational settings engage in practice across cultures may be useful to ascertain how people from different cultural backgrounds use their cultural knowledge and experiences in practice with people from the mainstream.

This study did not explore the experiences and perceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who are on the receiving end of child protection services. This is an important aspect to explore in future research to enable knowledge from this perspective to be incorporated into practice.

Finally, it is suggested that further research on how child protection workers who enter practice can be better prepared and informed to meet the challenges that confront them in working with clients from different cultural backgrounds. This includes Indigenous workers. Strategies that can prepare workers to deal with the issues which confront them in order for their practice to be guided by an understanding of the context and specific characteristics of the contexts in which they work is essential.
Practice

Workers entered the field motivated and committed towards improving the circumstances of children and families. A planned ongoing strategy to acquire and build knowledge and practice skills is important. The concept of cultural competency advocates this. The data from this research raised an awareness that employers assumed workers self-direct their learning to acquire salient knowledge and skills necessary to work across cultures whilst managing work pressures such as time, distance, and administrative processes. There were no attempts to ensure that this happened. Employers have an obligation to prepare workers to respond to the complex needs that arise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in order to provide culturally appropriate interventions to preserve the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. To develop workplace initiatives to address this is an essential aspect of the organisation and this needs to be apparent in each aspect of the organisation’s activities. Short two day training sessions were insufficient to maintain a lasting impact on cross cultural practice.

Acquiring knowledge to work across cultures is incremental. As the difficulties and complexity that workers face in their interventions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families increase, so too does the level of skill necessary to respond. Rural practice presents unique challenges, and workers in these areas need to be able to acquire knowledge that is context specific so that they are able to implement this knowledge in their practice. Workers did take up opportunities offered to them for further training and professional development after they commenced their roles, however these were irregular, often short one off workshops, and not always relevant or responsive to their practice needs.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have cultural knowledge, and are familiar with these communities can contribute in this process, but their capacity to contribute is not being utilised. Workplace training, provided locally, led to employment opportunities for Indigenous workers within the child protection field. However, once employed, they faced diverse and sometimes conflicting demands from colleagues, clients, and community. When Indigenous workers do not meet these expectations they are perceived as lacking capacity and criticised. Indigenous workers expressed the need to be able to access experienced Indigenous supervisors for support in ways to respond in their roles in workgroups where the majority of workers are non-Indigenous. Providing support and training to Indigenous workers in their role is essential. An implication of this is that without support and training Indigenous workers are not retained, and neither is their cultural knowledge, experience and social capital as cultural consultants. Indigenous participants presented a willingness and openness to engage in workplace training and many of them had previously completed education modules.

The study found that non-Indigenous workers who experienced difficulty in making sense of the situations and complexities that they were confronted with in Aboriginal communities did not always seek support to assist them to talk through these problems. Instead, many relied on the knowledge they brought with them from their previous employment and life experiences, to filter and inform their practice in this context. This accentuated the differences between their own experiences and what they observed in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and they rationalised these differences by clinging to their own standards as a benchmark. Many of the workers encouraged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to work towards changes that reflected the standards they themselves aspired to, for example, budgeting finances or keeping the focus on the nuclear family unit rather than the broader extended family network which
holds greater significance in Aboriginal communities. Using knowledge derived from outside the context to inform practice caused a mismatch in perspectives.

Child protection interventions are almost always involuntary intrusions into the lives of families. They currently operate separately, on and apart from the communities in which they engage, and are guided by policies and procedures that do not incorporate knowledge about specific contexts. The non-Indigenous statutory workers in discussing cases from their practice expressed frustration and confusion that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families reflected minimal change in family functioning and did not achieve the goals developed in their case plans. Despite lengthy intervention to support families and keep children at home, in the cases presented, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were removed from their families. These removal decisions fail to acknowledge the strengths and resilience of families who live in small rural Aboriginal communities and their ability protect their children.

**Policies and Procedures**

Policies and procedures in statutory agencies outline timeframes, administrative procedures, and the types of interventions offered to families. They are a significant and important guide to statutory practice. They provide reassurance to statutory workers that they are complying with the expectations of their employers in their role, however, they do not provide sufficient guidance and support for cross-cultural practice in the field. Although a number of the participants had previously been employed in government systems and found they were able to perform their role using policies and procedures to guide them. Policies and procedures were not used by non-Indigenous participants to engage in discussion around skills in how to engage families, build rapport, and build knowledge across cultures with people from different cultural backgrounds. They do not address the impact of cultural difference and diversity. Many participants felt pressured by
constraints on their time to complete tasks with some non-Indigenous participants unaware of the impact of their practice on their client families.

Policies and procedures are problematic in that they push practice towards certain decision points, with one person assuming responsibility for making the decision. This brings to the surface inequalities in power between child protection workers and agencies. The hierarchical system of decision-making within the statutory agency does not always incorporate cultural knowledge and therefore reduces the potential for this to influence alternative responses and strategies. Much of the practice of Indigenous participants was more informal, and less confined to practice guidelines, and involved spending time engaging with families on an informal basis, offering family support and ‘yarning’. This work was not recognised or acknowledged as valuable by non-Indigenous statutory workers. Participants in this research, who work in community agencies were conscious that they needed to be accountable to the policies, procedures, and protocols that had had been developed between agencies.

The inequalities of power inherent in different roles was reinforced through job descriptions and performance guidelines contained in the policies and procedures of the statutory agency. These impacted Indigenous workers in community agencies who are required to work alongside statutory workers and on agencies who needed to comply with demands of statutory organisations in order to maintain statutory funding. Different job descriptions between workers in statutory and community agencies created tension and potential conflict when the role expectations clashed. Indigenous workers in both statutory and community agencies experienced being left out of the intervention and decision-making process at times, and felt they had little ability to influence decision makers and outcomes. Decisions made to keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children safe in Aboriginal communities were often made following a crisis, and whilst non-Indigenous participants considered their processes collaborative, many Indigenous participants both
within and outside of the statutory system did not. Therefore policies and procedures, whilst necessary, do not always bring about collaborative and participatory decision-making processes in practice. To be effective, child protection interventions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families need to seek more time planned outcomes within wider parameters than those set in practice manuals. The Practice Manual states “there is no maximum timeframe for an intervention with parental agreement case to remain open, however, up to 12 months is generally seen as an appropriate length of time in which to address the concerns” (Department of Communities, Child Safety & Disabilities, 2012c). Participants acknowledged that time frames were not realistic.

Cultural competency as a practice and a goal has not been incorporated into the frontline practice of child protection workers. Rather the responsibility for non-Indigenous workers acquiring and developing cross cultural understanding in the workforce is placed on Indigenous workers who are not provided with support and training to enable them to manage and satisfy these expectations. Management and key decision-makers in organisations have committed themselves to providing services on the frontline which advocate for cultural competency as a long term goal. This cannot be achieved through brief, irregular and infrequent training and workshops. These do not prepare staff for the complexities in their everyday practice on the frontline, nor do they influence positive outcomes for children and families from different cultural backgrounds.

**Social Work and Human Services Education**

The study showed that whilst tertiary qualification was a prerequisite for employment in the statutory agency, different forms of training did not provide sufficient knowledge to adequately prepare workers for their child protection roles. Many workers commenced work before they had a clear understanding of the breadth of their role, and
the context in which they were to practice. Although their tertiary education had exposed
them to the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since colonisation,
including legislation and practices about the Stolen Generations, the element of surprise
they experienced when confronted with the conditions they observed in Aboriginal
communities indicated a gulf that has not been bridged in helping them link these
conditions to colonial history. Lacking knowledge and understanding does not equip them
for the specific challenges of exercising statutory authority in cross cultural situations with
First Nations Australians.

The majority of workers in the Australian child protection field are, and are likely in
the immediate future to continue to be from non-Indigenous, educated backgrounds
(Martin & Healy, 2010). Participants of this study viewed their role as working towards the
goal to protect children, and their work encompassed engaging with vulnerable and
powerless families. This necessitates those working within the field of child protection
have an understanding, and sensitivity to the political, socio-economic positioning of
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the wider historic and contemporary
Australian contexts.

Social work and human service educators have a role to play in preparing workers
for the field. There continues to be a strong reliance on learning in the workplace rather
than formal education. Training provided to rural workers is often outside the context in
which they are employed. Workplace training provides an opportunity to combine these
two aspects. Although participants were encouraged to pursue professional development
after they commenced their roles, it was not always provided, and when it was, it was not
always relevant and appropriate to meet their practice needs.

Another role for social work and human service educators is to provide
opportunities for those in tertiary study to nurture critical reflection for future practice in the
field, and to develop professional development approaches to practice with families from different cultural backgrounds. Induction training provided for workers after they commenced their role laid a foundation but did not address the ongoing needs of workers at these sites, many of whom remained in their roles for years. There is a strong presence of content in the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2010), and in the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (2012) documents about cultural sensitivity, and the ability to work with diversity and demonstrate respect for cultural differences.

Conclusion

The study aimed to examine levels of cultural competency on effective child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Although this is a small study, which makes it difficult to make generalisations, its value lies in broader implications, because it provides some insight to understanding how the processes and contexts in child protection practice influence child protection outcomes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

The study considered issues such as how workers acquire knowledge, understanding and sensitivity towards families who have different cultural backgrounds than their own. It considered how and whether culture was taken into consideration in practice interventions. It examined the different perspectives workers brought with them into practice and how this impacted their child protection practice. It identified implications for culturally competent policy development and practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

The over-representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system both within the state and in all other states of Australia makes knowledge about these issues imperative. Indigenous workers who are bicultural and have knowledge and skills to
implement more sensitive and culturally congruent responses need to be supported and provided with sufficient training to enable them to influence cross cultural practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

This research argues that practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families needs to consider the intersection between the cultures of child protection workers and the local context in which they work. It needs to take account of the power that workers, who, despite having little understanding of the diversity and functioning within Aboriginal communities, use to make significant child protection decisions.

First the study suggests there can be improvement in educational preparation, and preparation of workers to build confidence in the complex and complicated issues that they face in Aboriginal communities. This includes Indigenous workers who are employed in the field. It is suggested that flexible ways of building bridges between communities addressing issues of power are carefully considered.

Improving the cultural competency of the worker needs to be ongoing and strategic, and cannot be achieved in short one off training sessions or workshops. McPhatter (1997) argued that the process of being culturally competent begins with an honest assessment of the level of functioning of the work with culturally different clients (p275). Her Cultural Competency Attainment Model (1997) proposed the need for an ongoing commitment towards building knowledge and skills, whilst at the same time critically evaluating on worldviews and biases that workers bring into cross-cultural intervention. This research shows that without this, differences that are encountered when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are not understood especially when workers do not have sufficient knowledge. Working across cultures requires child protection workers to be prepared to recognise and become
familiar with the difference and diversity in people from different cultural backgrounds, without which minimal levels of effectiveness will be achieved. This includes knowledge of past policies and practices on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that continue to have an impact, in particular of the ways people in Aboriginal communities perceive child protection workers. Rather than focusing on the differences they observe, workers need to be prepared to spend more time in planning and reflecting on how they can engage and be effective in building strengths and resilience that also prevail within Aboriginal communities. It is suggested that steps be taken to provide child protection workers with opportunities to be prepared for difference in cross cultural child protection practice. It is envisaged that the insight of this study will assist policy makers, so that workers can respond in culturally responsive ways to vulnerable children and families living in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
References


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Research on culturally competent child protection work in rural areas

INFORMATION SHEET

Who is conducting the research.

Research team from Griffith University:
Professor Lesley Chenoweth
Associate Professor Clare Tilbury
Dr Donna McAuliffe
Ms Rosslyn Aitchison (PHD Student)

Contact details:
School of Human Services and Social Work
Telephone 07 3382 1201
Email r.aitchison@griffith.edu.au

Why the research is being conducted

Griffith University has been successful in receiving an Australian Research Council grant to explore child protection service delivery to Indigenous children and their families in rural areas. It may be argued that the reality of working in a statutory child protection agency in a rural area is a very different experience. The aim of the research is to develop a model evolving from current child protection practices. The study will examine the inter-relationships between practitioners and communities in constructing practice. The PHD student, Rosslyn Aitchison, is attached to the research and her research focus is about culturally appropriate practice. The Department of Communities (Child Safety) is a partner in this project.

Two rural sites have been selected in Queensland, the South Burnett Child Safety Service Centre and the Rockhampton Child Safety Service Centres.

Why you are being asked to be a participant and what you will be asked to do

We are particularly interested in your experiences regarding any training, preparation and support you may have received prior to commencing work in a statutory agency in a rural area. We want to obtain your opinions and experiences in relation to your practice with Indigenous families in the field of child protection such as your views about assessment and intervention models, supervision, and professional development, your current workloads, and generally what it's like for you to be a child protection worker in a rural area. We are also interested in learning more about your relationships with non-government partners including Indigenous agencies in the community.
We have decided to conduct interviews to begin to canvass your views and opinions. As a current child protection worker employed at one of these sites you are invited to take part in the research project to provide your opinions and views about your practice in the child protection field, particularly with Indigenous families and children.

Rosslyn Aitchison will visit your Child Safety Service Centre to facilitate the interview, to meet with you, and tell you more about our proposed research and at the same time to discuss your experiences and opinions on the above.

Your confidentiality

The interview will be recorded and later transcribed. This information will be treated as strictly confidential. Any responses obtained from you will be held by the researchers in confidential, de-identified files. As such any information you provide will not identify you or anyone else and your name will not be recorded with the information obtained by the researchers.

Your participation is voluntary

Participation in the interview is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form (attached) prior to your participation. This form will be kept separate to any information you provide to us during the research.

We wish to advise however, that because you will not be identified during the interview, you will be able to withdraw your participation after the interview has ended.

The expected benefits of the research

While the research will not benefit you personally, we hope to make a contribution to future practice, and recruitment of professional staff in rural areas in the future.

Feedback to you

A summary of the research will be available when it is finished at the end of next year. You can ask for the summary to be posted directly to you.

Questions and further information

If you would like any more information you can contact the researchers – details below.

Professor Lesley Chenoweth - Telephone: 3382 1485
Clare Tilbury – Telephone: 3382 1406
Donna McAuliffe – Telephone: 3382 1070
Rosslyn Aitchison – Telephone: 3382 1201

The ethical conduct of this research

The research will be conducted in accordance with the *National statement on ethical conduct in research involving humans*. If you have any complaints about any aspect of the project, concerns about how it is being conducted, or any questions about
your rights as someone being interviewed for the research, you may contact the Manager, Research Ethics at Griffith University on 3735 5585 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au

Privacy statement

The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the University's Privacy Plan at www.griffith.edu.au/ua/aa/vc/pp or telephone (07) 3735 5585.

Griffith University thanks you for your consent and participation in this research.
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM
PATHWAYS TO BETTER PRACTICE

CONSENT FORM

Research team:
Professor Lesley Chenoweth
Dr Donna McAuliffe
Associate Professor Clare Tilbury
Ms Rosslyn Aitchison (PHD Student)

Contact details:
School of Human Services and Social Work
Telephone 07 3382 1201
Email r.aitchison@griffith.edu.au

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular have noted:

- I understand that my involvement in this research may include participating in up to three face to face interviews with a member of the research team. I am aware this interview will be recorded and later this recording will be transcribed.

- I understand I am being asked to provide my views and opinions about my professional experience in the child protection field.

- I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction;
• I understand the risks involved;

• I understand there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research;

• I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary.

• I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team;

• I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty

• I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3735 5585 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project; and

• I agree to participate in the project.

Name..............................................................................................................

Signature...........................................................................................................

Address to send summary of research findings:

..............................................................................................................................

Date .......................
APPENDIX C

SCHEDULE STAGE 1
Interview Guide for Individual interviews with Professionals employed at Child Safety Service Centres and workers employed in non-government organisations in the local community

Instructions to Interviewer

A general statement of question will open up the topic for discussion. Depending on how much information is given in reply, some or all of the additional prompts may be used. The purpose is to obtain as many different views as possible about any aspects of working with Aboriginal families and children in a child protection agency in a rural area.

PROFESSIONALS VIEWS ABOUT CHILD PROTECTION WORK

1. Can you tell me about your previous work experience?
2. What are your experiences in working in a child protection agency in a rural area?
3. What preparation or training did you receive in working with Aboriginal families and children?
4. Can you tell me about your experiences in this community in working with Aboriginal families and children? How have these experiences impacted on your practice?
5. Have you heard of the term cultural competency? What does this term mean to you? Do you think you are a culturally competent worker? What have you learnt about culture?
6. Can you tell me about your experiences in working with other child protection services in this community?
7. What skills do you think are essential in work with Aboriginal families and children?
8. Can you tell me about any differences you have experienced working in the child protection field in urban areas compared to rural areas?
9. Is there a difference in how you work with Aboriginal children and families and non-Aboriginal children and families? Can you tell me about this?
10. Were you supported in your current employment, and by who?
11. Who provides support and mentoring to you when you have had difficult and complex issues in child protection cases? How do you deal with these difficulties if you don’t seek support?
12. Can you tell me of any professional development courses you have attended since commencing in this position or any opportunities for professional development you might be considering in the future?
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE STAGE 2
Interview guide for Stage 2

Instructions to Interviewer

The purpose is to obtain as many different views as possible about any aspects of working with Aboriginal families and children in a child protection agency in a rural area. A general statement of question will open up the topic for discussion. Depending on how much information is given in reply, some or all of the additional prompts may be used.

Prompt: Can you tell me about a case that you’ve been working with an Indigenous family.

Selection
Prompt: I would be interested in knowing why you selected this case, what was unique about this case?

Allocation of case
Prompt: Do you recall how you were allocated this case, how you first came to know about this family?

Preparation
Prompt: Did you do any preparation before approaching this family?

Initial contact with the case.
Prompt: Do you remember anything from when you first met the family?
   Do you recall when you first met with this family?

Role Expectations
Prompt: What is your role, and what did you understand were the goals of this intervention?

Stages of the intervention process
Other agencies
Prompt: Were there other agencies involved? (Liaisons, consultations, referrals).

Sources of information
   Can you tell me about the information that you had about this family and that you might have used in your intervention with this family initially?
Did you have a plan about how you were going to engage with this community? Were you going to make contact with anybody in the community?

Initial experiences
Prompts: Can you recall what you remember from your initial contact with this family? What were your first thoughts and experiences?

Relationships/Extended Family/Connections to community
Prompt: Did you meet with anyone from the extended family? Did you have any contact with people from the community?

Physical location/context
Prompt: Where did you usually meet with the family? Was there anything that you needed to do when you met with the family? Were you easily able to engage with the family? What were your experiences?

Family Support
Prompt: Were there any supports in your work with this family? Did you have other people who you talked to about this family?

Goals of intervention
Prompts: How did you determine what your role was going to be with this family? Did the family have a case plan? Do you remember what your goals with the family were? Was your intervention with this family effective? Can you tell me about that?

What might you have done differently?

Would you have interacted differently if this family was white?

Where do you think this case will go in the future?
Key aspects of practice

1. Decision-making
2. Knowledge of community
3. Cultural knowledge
4. Government knowledge
5. Support