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**Working for the Welfare: Exploring the Experiences of
Indigenous Child Protection Workers**

Thesis submitted by

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July 2018

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
In the College of Arts, Society and Education

James Cook University

Cairns

Statement on Sources

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any other form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

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I, the undersigned, author of this work, declare that every reasonable effort has been made to gain permission and acknowledge the owners of copyright material. I would be pleased to hear from any copyright owner who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to offer my heartfelt appreciation to the people who so generously and courageously shared their stories with me as part of this research. Thank you for taking the risk.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late mother, who, regardless, persisted.

Declaration on Ethics

The research presented in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMCR) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007*. The proposed research methodology for this study received clearance from James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: H6266).

Statement on the Contributions of Others

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Abstract

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately represented in the statutory child protection system in Queensland and across Australia. A strategy gaining traction to address this disproportionate representation is to recruit more Indigenous practitioners into child protection work. However, the experiences of Indigenous people who undertake child protection work have not been explored thoroughly, particularly in an Australian research context. There is a dearth of enquiry considering Indigenous child protection workers' potential experiences of trauma, given past policies of forced child removal in Australia. There has also been a lack of consideration of Indigenous practitioners' professional and wellbeing support needs in the workplace. Additionally, there is a dearth of research examining the link between the additional recruitment of Indigenous practitioners and a decrease in the rate of Indigenous children requiring the services of statutory child protection authorities. Given the unique position of Indigenous people working in child protection and the plans to recruit more Indigenous practitioners into the system, an understanding of their experiences and support needs is imperative.

This study relies on the stories of the participants to answer the primary research question: what are the experiences of Indigenous child protection workers? The research design was underpinned by critical theory and decolonisation frameworks. The decolonising theoretical underpinning of the study viewed the participants as the experts in their own experience, which provided a framework for the co-creation of knowledge. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, the participants and researcher, in collaboration, explored the overall research question guided by three main aims. These aims were to explore the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who work in the child protection field, to explore the effects of historical trauma

experienced by Indigenous Australians and its symptomology within a child protection workplace, and to explore participant views of culturally responsive models of support for Indigenous workers within the child protection system. The purposive sample of participants consisted of 13 people who self-identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and had worked with families in which child protection concerns were present. Interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis was undertaken to identify emerging themes.

The experiences of the research participants tell the story of a deficiency within the child protection system—particularly in a statutory context—to meet the wellbeing needs of Indigenous workers and provide a workplace environment that is culturally safe. Also described were recurrent experiences of racism, a lack of culturally appropriate statutory child protection practice, a culture of bullying and a lack of support that acknowledges the distinctive experience of Indigenous people who undertake child protection work. Strong themes of marginalisation, isolation and oppression emerged consistently from the narratives of participants.

The outcome of this study generates a body of knowledge outlining how the primary and intergenerational trauma histories of Indigenous child protection workers may affect their wellbeing at work and continued ability to maintain their presence in the child protection field. The stories of these participants have created context and clarity for non-Indigenous supervisors regarding why the support and supervision needs of Indigenous child protection workers are different to those of non-Indigenous workers, as well as providing information to inform staff support policies and procedures. This study has produced a beginning evidence base for further research in this area.

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List of Abbreviations

AASW	Australian Association of Social Workers
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CSS	Child Safety Services
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
RE	Recognised Entity

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

This thesis presents a qualitative exploration of the experiences of Indigenous child protection professionals in Far North Queensland. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the background, context and significance of the research topic. I then introduce the primary research question and study aims. A brief description of the methodology used throughout the research, including an outline of my position as the researcher, is then presented. Terms used frequently throughout the thesis are defined. An outline of the organisation of the thesis will conclude this chapter.

1.2 Study Background

Child protection workers are critical to ensuring the safety and protection of the most vulnerable children in our community. Child protection in Australia is the responsibility of individual state and territory governments, who administer services to children and families at risk of harm (Briggs, 2012). Child protection authorities investigate allegations of physical, sexual, emotional and psychological harm, as well as neglect (Briggs, 2012). In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately represented in the child protection system (Bennett, 2015). At the time of writing, 36% of the children living in out-of-home care were identified as having an Indigenous cultural background (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2018). In the period 2016 to 2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were seven times more likely to receive child protection services and 10 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than were non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2018). Countries where colonisation strategies included forced child removal on the basis of Indigeneity—such as Canada, the United States and New Zealand—also have disproportionate representation of First Nations children and young people in state care

(Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2008). For example, in Canada, First Nations people represent 4% of the total population, yet disproportionately represent 48% of the children and young people in state care (Turner, 2013).

In Queensland, where this study occurred, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 6.7 times more likely to be subject to a substantiated report of harm and 8.5 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than are their non-Indigenous counterparts (Child Protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, 2016). The ongoing disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system has been of great concern to Indigenous groups and communities and governments. Significant financial investment has been provided by successive state and federal governments to address the disproportionate representation, including early intervention and family support services (Lonne, 2013). However, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system continues to increase, while the rates of non-Indigenous children in out-of-home care decrease (Carmody, 2013).

Historically, Australian Indigenous people have not had a positive relationship with child protection services (Atkinson, 2002). Indigenous people and communities have been subjected to government policies that dislocated Australia's First People from their land, culture, traditional parenting and other social and economic practices (Bessarab & Crawford, 2013; Westerman, 1997). Some of these policies culminated in the forced removal of Indigenous children from their parents and community for no other reason than their Indigeneity. Children subjected to these policies are commonly referred to as the 'Stolen Generation' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 1997). Many of the Stolen Generation were subject to ongoing sexual, physical and psychological abuse and severe neglect in state-run institutions and

foster homes, in addition to the trauma experienced as a result of removal (Atkinson, 2002). Many children were raised in dormitory settings with no parental figure to show love or affection, instil a sense of worth and esteem, or present a model of a functional family life (Atkinson, 2002). Every aspect of an Indigenous person's life was controlled by the state, with examples including where a person could live, who they could marry, what work they would perform, where they could travel and what name they would be known by (Atkinson, 2002; Tilbury, 2009).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities have experienced significant trauma, largely unresolved, because of the use of forced child removal as a tool of colonisation (Atkinson, 2002; Bessarab & Crawford, 2013; O'Donoghue, 1993). It is within this context that Indigenous Australia has developed an embedded fear and mistrust of child protection services (Bessarab & Crawford, 2013; Westerman, 1997). Trauma that resulted from the experiences of the Stolen Generations has direct linkage to the problems experienced in contemporary Indigenous communities (Cunneen & Libesman, 1998; Herring, Spangaro, Lauw, & McNamara, 2013; King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009; Memmott, Stacy, Chambers & Keys, 2001). Domestic violence, alcohol and substance misuse, neglect and unsafe parenting practices are ongoing symptoms of intergenerational trauma, and are often the key reasons that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are removed from the care of their parents.

One strategy that has gained traction in Australia to address the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children and families in contact with child protection authorities is the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to work in the sector. It is hoped that additional Indigenous people in the sector will reduce the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children subject to state child protection interventions (Carmody, 2013). Critical social work academic

Briskman (2014) argued that employing more Indigenous people in social service structures may generate stronger awareness of Indigenous disadvantage. However, Briskman (2014) went on to state that increasing numbers of Indigenous workers into a service system in an attempt to create structural change is untested and subsequently cannot be relied on.

Working for a government sanctioned system that has been the source of your own and your community's oppression, is not a common experience of child protection practitioners in mainstream Australia. Given the unique position of Indigenous people working in the child protection system in an Australian context, further investigation into their experiences is warranted.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking child protection work within Australia had not been fully explored in the literature at the time of writing. While legislation and government policy relating to the removal of Indigenous children has shifted focus to considering a multitude of factors other than a child's Indigeneity, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain disproportionately represented in the child protection system. Thus, the aim of this study is:

1. to explore the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who work in the child protection field
2. to explore the effects of the historical trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians and its symptomology within a child protection workplace
3. to explore participant views of culturally responsive models of support for Indigenous workers within the child protection system.

Additionally, it is my intention to prepare and disseminate a report with recommendations to relevant government departments and other agencies that deliver child protection services to promote improved workforce outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, and subsequently improve client service delivery to Indigenous children and families.

1.4 Contribution to the Field

The findings from this research tell the story of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience undertaking child protection work. The findings create a body of knowledge outlining how the trauma histories of Indigenous child protection workers affect their wellbeing at work and their continued ability to maintain their presence in the sector. The participants thoroughly addressed the types of support and supervision they feel would be most beneficial to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners. Consequently, the outcomes of this study give context and clarity to non-Indigenous supervisors regarding why the support and supervision needs of Indigenous child protection workers are different to those of non-Indigenous workers, as well as providing information to inform staff support policies and procedures. It is anticipated that the findings will add to the evidence base in this field and be adopted by government departments and other agencies to improve workforce conditions and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners.

There is a dearth of research exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection practitioners in Australia. Further, at the time of writing, I could not locate any research that evidences an increase in Indigenous staffing equating to a reduction in the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in state care. Given the increasing impetus to recruit more Indigenous staff to child protection work, exploring the experiences of existing workers would be of great

benefit. Further, the dearth of research on ways to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners who work in child protection agencies adds to the significance of this study's findings. The literature review chapter of this thesis provides more detailed analysis of the literature gap and explores in-depth why further research is warranted.

1.5 Language Defined

This section defines some of the frequently used terminology throughout this thesis to help create a shared understanding for the reader.

Indigenous: The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014) defines an Indigenous Australian to be:

- a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- a person who identifies as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin
- a person who is accepted as Indigenous by the community with which the person associates.

For the purposes of this study, the same definition has been used. I recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people belong to two separate and unique cultural backgrounds, with distinct languages, customs and belief systems. The terms 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' have been used interchangeably for ease of the reader, not as an indication that the two are homogenous.

Child protection: The term 'child protection' in this study refers to investigation, assessment and/or support work within a case management framework, undertaken where child protection concerns are present within a family. This work can be undertaken by either government or non-government service providers.

Indigenous workers/practitioners: For the purposes of this paper, the term 'Indigenous child protection practitioner/worker' refers to people who identify as

Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and have experience working in the child protection field with children and families where child protection concerns are present.

Statutory child protection: Statutory child protection refers specifically to administering child protection services under the legislation that governs child protection matters within individual states and territories in Australia.

Non-statutory child protection: Non-statutory child protection work refers to work undertaken with children and families at various positions on the child protection continuum. Practitioners can work with families who are deemed at risk of entering the child protection system or parents who wish to regain the care of their children who have been placed in the care of the state. Non-statutory child protection work is not prescribed under child protection legislation. In the context of this study, non-statutory child protection work also refers to practitioners who perform duties as ‘Recognised Entity’ workers.

Recognised Entity: In Queensland, the *Child Protection Act (1999)* mandates that the Recognised Entity be consulted by statutory child protection authorities when they are involved with a child or family who identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Black: In this paper, the term ‘black’ refers to the participants’ description of themselves and other members of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community.

White: In this paper, the term ‘white’ is used to indicate all people who are neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander in cultural background, regardless of skin colour or ethnicity.

Child safety officer (CSO): Child safety officers are statutory child protection practitioners who work for the government statutory child protection authority in Queensland.

1.6 Approach to the Research

I will now briefly introduce the research design, theoretical underpinning and methodology relied on during the study. The research approach, methodology and design will be discussed comprehensively in the methodology chapter. This is an exploratory qualitative study underpinned by critical theory. As a qualitative researcher, I am interested in the stories of the participants and how they make sense of their experiences. As explained by Minichiello (1995), qualitative researchers ‘seek to uncover the thoughts, perceptions and feelings experienced by informants ... they are most interested in studying how people attach meaning to and organise their lives, and how this in turn influences their actions’ (p. 10). This thesis explores a new area of research, thereby contributing to an identified knowledge gap, particularly in an Australian context. The research question explored in collaboration with the research participants was: what are the experiences of Indigenous child protection workers? In relation to exploratory research, Neuman (2014) stated that this method is used when the ‘subject is very new, we know little or nothing about it, and no one has yet explored it ... exploratory research rarely yields definitive answers ... it addresses the “what” question’ (p. 38).

This study is framed by a critical theory lens. Critical theorists are committed to exploring and critiquing forms of inequality and discrimination that operate in daily life, including colonial constructs (Chilisa, 2012; Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). In a research context, critical theory, as described by Humphries (2008), is a ‘distinctive approach to studying social life, drawing on specific beliefs about the world and how it operates’

(p. 104). Critical theorists are interested in the ‘construction of knowledge and the organisations of power’ and how those mediums are used to subjugate and/or oppress people with membership outside the dominant group (Reeves, Albert, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008, p. 633). While the overall study was designed using a critical theory lens, the findings chapters rely on decolonisation theory to frame the shared experiences of the research participants. Decolonisation theory stems from the tradition of critical theory; however, it is interested specifically in the power relations between those who have been colonised and those who have not (Creswell, 2014).

Decolonising theory in a research context embraces the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants as the experts regarding issues that pertain to them and their communities (Coram, 2011; Kowal, Anderson, & Bailie, 2005). A decolonising theoretical framework views the researcher and researchees as co-creators of knowledge, where the primary consideration of the research agenda is to benefit and transform the group being researched, and that knowledge should be used as a vehicle for change (Creswell, 2013; Jenkins, 2015; Mertens, 2003; Prior, 2007; Wilson & Yellow Bird, 2005). Research agendas framed by critical theory traditionally prioritise the voices of the marginalised and oppressed, as well as finding opportunities to challenge structural inequalities and create change (Mertens, 2010).

As a non-Indigenous researcher in the Indigenous space, I acknowledge that my experiences of the world are different from those of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research participants. I acknowledge that Western research methodologies have had a detrimental effect on Indigenous Australians and their communities. Western research methodologies have been used as a tool of colonisation that has seen Indigenous people cast into the role of ‘other’ and most detrimentally as a ‘problem’ that needs solving (Rigney, 1999). Additionally, Western research methods have

cemented the mainstream group as the only holder of valid knowledge, not recognising the value of other knowledges—particularly Indigenous knowledges (Jenkins, 2015; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Muller, 2014; Rigney, 1999). The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners who undertake child protection work. Working with a cultural group different to my own necessitates a commitment to include the experiences and realities of the research participants, uncoloured by my own Western interpretations. Although I implemented strategies to reduce the impact of my Euro-centric lens, I acknowledge that I could never truly erase it as I am of European descent and the author of this thesis.

As aforementioned, a comprehensive outline of the methodology used in this study is explored later in the methodology chapter.

1.7 Position of the Researcher

Qualitative researchers argue that a researcher can never completely separate themselves from the subjects of their study and/or have little to no effect on the outcome (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Neuman, 2014). Therefore, the researcher has an obligation to acknowledge their own position within the research (Alston & Bowles, 2012). Neuman (2014) argued that social research is a ‘moral-political activity that requires the researcher to commit to a value position’ (p. 116). As such, I feel it important that I outline the context and views that underpin my approach to the research topic. Creswell (2013) argued that a qualitative researcher must discuss their background and ‘how it informs their interpretation’ of the data (p. 47). The ways in which I undertook interviews and analysed and interpreted data during this study were all influenced by my own experiences and worldview (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012; Russell-Mundine, 2012).

It must be acknowledged first and foremost that I am a non-Indigenous female researcher, from a professional social work background, with strong history and ties to Far North Queensland. I acknowledge that Aboriginal Australians are the Traditional Owners of mainland Australia. I acknowledge that Torres Strait Islander people are the Traditional Owners of the Torres Strait Islands. Since completing my bachelor's degree in social work in 2003, I have worked in the area of child protection in Queensland. I have worked in statutory and non-statutory service delivery areas as a practitioner and supervisor. Additionally, I have been in the role of teacher/educator to students newly embarking on their own social work and child protection careers.

Choosing to practice as a social worker in the field of child protection has gifted me many rewards and challenges. The underpinning values of social work include respect for human dignity and worth, pursuit of social justice, service to humanity, integrity and practice competence (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010). As I became more experienced and gained stronger practice wisdom, I developed the view that the utopian principles of social justice and fairness often unfortunately are not applied equally to all. I observed that the application of social justice principles to one individual often came at the expense of another. In a child protection context, I asked whose rights should be most important—is it the child's right to be parented by a standard dictated by the state, or is it the parent's right to raise their child as they consider appropriate? Moreover, I came to focus on the structural disadvantage that affects marginalised individuals more heavily than other individuals, thereby reducing their ability to ensure the care and protective needs of their children.

Fundamentally, I believe that children should be raised by their family when it is safe to do so. I also, somewhat controversially, believe that children should remain in the care of their family unit if the state cannot offer safer, more suitable care

arrangements. Over the span of my career in child protection, I have been witness to countless occasions in which children and young people have been removed from their family units and have suffered further—at times experiencing greater harm than what they would have encountered at home. It is my core belief that the statutory child protection system is not always the safest place for children and should only be used as the very last resort to ensure the protection of children.

I eventually became a supervisor to a team of statutory child protection practitioners—a number of whom were Indigenous. Shortly afterwards, I noticed a pattern emerge among the Indigenous staff that I did not observe among the non-Indigenous staff. A pattern of poor work habits emerged following traumatic incidents, such as the removal of a child or an injustice viewed as being perpetrated by ‘the system’. During times outside of these events, the staff were committed, hardworking, reliable, loyal and generous with their time and knowledge. However, in the aftermath of these events, I noticed that the staff became despondent and withdrawn, would ignore direction and were generally difficult to manage. I also observed an increased desire to perform tasks in pairs, even though one worker would have been adequate. I became curious about this phenomenon that I was observing.

Like all conscientious supervisors, I sought research, strategies or perhaps a supervision model that would better meet the needs of my Indigenous colleagues and supervisees. To my surprise, my search yielded no results. I was genuinely surprised that there was such a dearth of research into the experiences of Indigenous child protection practitioners—particularly given the disproportionate representation of First Nations children requiring statutory child protection services in countries where forced child removal was implemented as a colonisation strategy. The dichotomy of being employed by the system that was responsible for your trauma and your community’s

trauma is unique to Indigenous people who are employed by the state. As social work practitioners who base our work on the principles of social justice, we have yet to focus on this dichotomy to explore what this tangibly means for Indigenous welfare workers, and subsequently for Indigenous clients of the child protection service system. I asked a trusted Indigenous colleague and friend about the phenomenon that I had witnessed. She stated words to the effect of: ‘it’s trauma; we all talk about it all the time, but it’s not something we share—because no one ever asked us’. Thus, this research topic was born.

As previously stated, Far North Queensland is my home. It distresses me that the Far North continues to have ever-increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children taken into the care of the state. Many children are removed from their community of origin and placed in larger regional centres because of a lack of appropriate out-of-home care placements. The majority of these children are never returned—often resulting in severing their connection to family and culture. It pains me when I see white foster carers with Indigenous babies and young children, and hear the children call out ‘mum’. I wonder if this is really the best we can offer these children. Given the large Indigenous community located in Far North Queensland, I am confident that, given the opportunity in an appropriate support environment, the community could design better systems to support these children. I do fundamentally believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities are best placed to drive policy designed to address the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system. One of my intentions for undertaking this study was to provide a practical and usable guide for non-Indigenous supervisors, informed by the expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection workers.

1.8 Organisation of Thesis

I have organised this thesis into seven chapters. These chapters are titled: 'Introduction'; 'Literature Review'; 'Methodology'; 'Being Indigenous and Undertaking Child Protection Work'; 'Trauma, Support and Supervision'; 'Statutory Organisational and Practice Issues' and 'Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion'.

In the 'Literature Review' chapter, I highlight gaps related to the research topic by examining five related areas of literature. As a result of the dearth of current research relating to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection practitioners, these areas were chosen to highlight the research gap and to evidence the significance of pursuing the study topic. The five core areas of literature for examination: contact and colonisation including forced child removal; contemporary Indigenous child removal; Indigenous practitioners, child protection work and trauma; support and supervision in a child protection setting; and the recruitment of Indigenous people as a strategy to address disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in care.

In the 'Methodology' chapter, I outline the research rationale and aims; significance of the research; research design, including the theoretical underpinning; and methods used during the research. This chapter also contains a more comprehensive outline of my position as the primary researcher, the ethical considerations, and the limitations pertaining to the study.

In 'Being Indigenous and Undertaking Child Protection Work', I present findings related to participant experiences of working within the child protection sector. This chapter outlines findings related to participant motivation to undertake child

protection work, views of self and family, working in one's own community, organisational expectations, racism, tokenism, the experience of trauma as an Indigenous child protection practitioner, and negative organisational practice.

In 'Trauma, Support and Supervision', I explore practitioner experiences of working in a trauma-laden environment, the support mechanisms available, the supervision processes and the organisational response to traumatic stress.

In 'Statutory Organisational and Practice Issues', I explore findings pertaining to the organisations who undertake child protection work with children and families, as experienced by the study participants. In this chapter, I outline the findings in relation to culturally incompetent statutory practices, training and induction processes, the adequacy of funded support services and the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners.

I conclude the thesis with the chapter titled 'Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion'. In this chapter, I discuss the three previous findings chapters. I also revisit the study findings in the context of the research aims. Additionally, I provide recommendations for policy direction and future research.

1.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced the study titled *Working for the Welfare: Exploring the Experiences of Indigenous Child Protection Workers*. I presented an overview of the topic and its relevance, as well as a brief summary of the study's literature review. I also introduced the research question, outlined the study's research design and methodology, and defined the terms used throughout the thesis. Moreover, I outlined my position as the researcher and defined the origin of the research topic. In the next chapter, titled 'Literature Review', I explore the literature related to the study topic, identify the research and examine the significance of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I present and discuss literature linked to the research question: what are the experiences of Indigenous child protection workers? At the beginning of the literature review process, I encountered difficulty locating material that directly related to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who undertake child protection work in Australia. To demonstrate the literature gap and the significance of undertaking this study, I created a mind map as a visual representation of the areas of research most closely linked to the research question. I examined the research question through a critical theory lens, which led me to review literature that could help me understand the power dynamic between Indigenous Australians, non-Indigenous Australians and the welfare state, with particular focus on child protection. Through this process, I established five core areas of literature for examination: contact and colonisation including forced child removal; contemporary Indigenous child removal, Indigenous practitioners, child protection work and trauma; support and supervision in a child protection setting; and the recruitment of Indigenous people as a strategy to address disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in care.

2.2 Contact and Colonisation

Exploring the historical practice of forced child removal within Australia will add depth and context to the situations to which Indigenous child protection practitioners and their communities have been exposed historically. When the British arrived in Australia in 1788, they determined that there was no evidence of civilisation or culture because the land did not appear to be owned or cultivated in any way (Bennett, 2013; Prentis, 2009). As a result, the British declared the land now known as

Australia to be ‘Terra Nullius’—that is, the land was owned by no one (Atkinson, 2002; Krieken, 1999). The British assessed the land to be empty of anything except flora and fauna, and subsequently free for ownership to be assumed (Bolt, 2009).

According to Tyson (2011), the declaration of Terra Nullius was underpinned by the colonisers’ belief that they were superior to other cultures because they were ‘civilised’ and the other people (namely, the Aboriginal people) were not. Discourses at the time—including social evolutionary theory, Darwinism and anthropological scholarship—deemed Aboriginal people to be primitive, inferior and requiring a superior race to assume responsibility for them (Bennett, 2013; Muecke, 1992; Reynolds, 1987). Anthropologists used questionable research practices to determine that Aboriginal people were unable to evolve and assimilate into European society, and would subsequently eventually die out (Tatz, 1999).

The expectation of a natural expiration of Aboriginal people heralded a period of protectionism beginning in the late 1800s. The protectionist period was designed by government officials to move Aboriginal people from their traditional lands and onto missions or settlements, so they could be segregated from the European community while they died out (Bennett, 2013). Any autonomy over oneself was extinguished by the authorities who controlled every aspect of an Aboriginal person’s life, including freedom of movement; employment and wages; education; marriage; and access to resources, such as food, water and other supplies (Sherwood, 2013; Tatz, 1999; Westerman, 1997). Traditional cultural practices were forbidden, including the use of tribal names and language and participation in ceremony (Reynolds, 1987). Tilbury (2009) wrote that ‘State paternalism saturated every piece of legislation ... the effect was to slowly extract any power that people had over their lives’ (p. 58).

Despite the efforts of the colonisers, the Aboriginal population did not die out, and instead increased as a result of relationships between Aboriginal women and settler men (Bennett, 2013). Children born of Aboriginal and British unions were said to ‘inherit the vices of both races ... idleness, nomadism, emotionality, lack of discipline and productivity, sexual promiscuity, poor bodily hygiene and a group rather than an individual orientation’ (Krieken, 1999, p. 301). As government authorities became increasingly concerned about the ‘half-caste problem’, they began strategising a solution. Paten and Robinson (2008) wrote that ‘many settlers and government authorities believed that the most effective way to deal with the Indigenous population was to separate Aboriginal children from Aboriginal adults’ (p. 502). ‘Half-caste’ children were viewed to have the capacity to be civilised, unlike their Aboriginal parents, because of their possession of British blood, if only in part.

To ensure that ‘mixed-blood’ or ‘half-caste’ children were ‘protected’ from their Aboriginality, the British colonies of Australia implemented legislation that would see the state assume the legal guardianship of all Aboriginal children, without parental consent or the right of appeal (Bennett, 2013). According to Krieken (1999), the purpose of this approach was to ‘solve the “half-caste” problem by breeding out the colour of both the body and mind through this programme of social engineering’ (p. 303). Aboriginal children were removed from their families and communities and were adopted by non-Indigenous families, sent to orphanages or group homes, or sent to work as farmhands and/or housemaids (Atkinson, 2002).

The removal of children as a tool of social control over marginalised ‘problem populations’ had been used throughout Europe prior to the colonisation of Australia. Krieken (1999) wrote that:

the concept of ‘rescuing the rising generation’ had been central to European church and state agencies’ policies in relation to the children of the poor and working class since the 16th century, and was a central element of the modern state’s conception of the intersection of family life and liberal citizenship.

(p. 302)

In Australia, the removal of children as a strategy to oppress and control the Aboriginal population was successful, and resulted in the collapse of traditional social and political structures, the destruction of economic stability because of stolen land, and the severing of connection to language, ceremony and spirituality (Manne, 2004; Sherwood, 2013).

Regarding the effects of colonisation, Bessarab and Crawford (2013) argued that a ‘dominant power can cause harrowing corrosion of the culture that it has subjugated’ (p. 95). Atkinson (2002); Westerman (1997); Libesman (2004); Stanley, Tomison, and Pocock (2003); and Bennett (2013) all argued that the historical use of government policy as a tool of colonisation has led to fear and distrust of authority among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The literature supports that the actions of the European settlers constitute cultural genocide (Krieken, 1999; Manne, 2004).

2.2.1 The forced removal of Indigenous children

The state-authorised removal of Aboriginal children from Aboriginal parents was practised in Australia from early colonisation until the 1970s (Bennett, 2013). At the time, the dominant political and social discourse endorsed the practice of Aboriginal child removal as philanthropic in nature, as promoting the health and welfare of children and as altruistic on behalf of policymakers (Atkinson, 2002; Bessant, 2013).

Aboriginality was viewed to be an affliction that could be tempered by assimilation into European–Australian culture (Krieken, 1999). Briskman (2014) argued that the dominant discourse often promoted Aboriginality as a ‘problem to be transcended’ (p.

168). Children who were removed to environments where they could be ‘civilised’ into European society were exposed to physical, sexual, emotional and psychological harm, in addition to the trauma of being forcibly removed from their families (Atkinson, 2002; Sherwood, 2013). Indigenous people who were affected by forced child removal on the basis of their Indigeneity have become known as the Stolen Generations (HREOC, 1997).

2.2.2 Role of Social Work in the Forced Removal of Indigenous Children

I found strong criticism of the role of the social work profession in the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families in literature related to the Stolen Generation. Social work played a role in the enactment of policies that resulted in the removal of Indigenous children—the practice that was referred to by Indigenous Australian social work academic Bennett (2013) as an ‘instrument of social control’ (p. 19). Bennett (2013) further argued that social workers at the time were ‘participants in the process of dispossession and oppression’ (p. 20) of Aboriginal people and communities. The role of social workers in the forced removal of children created a deep sense of suspicion and distrust of the profession among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in Australia (Harms et al., 2011). Indigenous Australian social work academics Menzies and Gilbert (2013) wrote that the sense of fear and suspicion towards social workers stems from social work being undertaken ‘to’ Aboriginal people, ‘not with them’, and from the perception that the profession can ‘value a social system that privileged non-Aboriginal perspectives and values, or ways of life over that of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders’ (p. 52).

2.2.3 Legacy of forced child removal

The ongoing trauma experienced by Australian Indigenous communities as a result of forced child removal practices is referred to in the literature as

intergenerational and/or historical trauma (Atkinson, 2002). Evans-Campbell (2008) defined historical trauma as:

collective complex trauma inflicted on a group of people who share a specific group identity or affiliation—ethnicity, nationality and religious affiliation ... it is the legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events. (p. 320)

Haskell and Randall (2009) wrote that intergenerational trauma refers to the idea that the ‘effects of and responses to traumatic events can be “transmitted” across generations’ (p. 52). Stamm, Stamm, Hudnall, and Higson-Smith (2004) wrote that the manifestation of historical trauma in a contemporary context can include the following symptomology:

(a) communal feelings of familial and social disruption, (b) existential depression based on communal disruption, (c) confusion toward owning the ancestral pain accompanied by the temptation to adopt colonial values, (d) chronic existential grief and angst manifested in destructive behaviours, (e) daily re-experiencing of the colonial trauma through racism and stereotyping, and (f) lack of resolution of the existential, communal pain. (p. 94)

Prager (2003) argued that intergenerational trauma manifests as if the ‘present is lived as if it were the past’ and that ongoing trauma ‘deprives the collectivity of a critical resource of social and cultural renewal’ (p. 176). Auerhahn and Laub (1998) explained that:

massive trauma has an amorphous presence not defined by place or time and lacking a beginning, middle, or end, and that shapes the internal representation

of reality of several generations, becoming an unconscious organising principle passed on by parents and internalised by their children. (p. 22)

Castellano and Archibald (2007) wrote that ‘recurrent recollections of trauma experienced by individual members of a society will, sooner or later, enter into a social narrative of the group and become transmitted to subsequent generations’ (p. 73), which is the way that the trauma of colonisation continues to affect individuals and communities in a contemporary context. Regarding the legacy of colonisation, Hill, Lau, and Wing Sue (2010) argued that the identities of people subjected to colonisation continue to be negatively psychologically affected ‘despite the end of formal occupation and overt forms of oppression’ (p. 39).

Haskell and Randall (2009) argued that the experience of trauma is often viewed and understood at an individual level, rather than collectively, which is the way that intergenerational trauma is experienced. Drawing on the work of Nicolas, Wheatley, and Guillaume (2015); Haskell and Randall (2009); and Auerhahn and Laub (1998), it can be argued that individualistic approaches to trauma delegitimise the experiences of communities who have experienced trauma as a result of colonisation practices, particularly where forced child removal was a feature. Haskell and Randall (2009) further argued that the Aboriginal experience of trauma is ‘compounded by a widespread social denial about these traumatic events and an evasion of a sense of social responsibility for effecting the kind of political, social and economic change required to remedy this situation’ (p. 50).

2.3 Contemporary Indigenous Child Removal

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately represented in the statutory child protection system in Queensland and across Australia. Statistics published in 2016 outlined that Indigenous children in Queensland (where the current

study occurred) were 6.7 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be the subject of a substantiated report of harm or risk, and 8.5 times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care (Child Protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, 2016). In the period 2016 to 2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children represented 36% of children in out-of-home care in Australia (AIHW, 2018).

There is agreement in the literature that, in both Australian and overseas contexts, a connection is evident between colonisation practices, the historical forced removal of children and other racially discriminatory social policy, and the social issues affecting Indigenous communities in a contemporary context (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013; Bessarab & Crawford, 2013; Sherwood, 2013; Westerman, 1997). There is consensus in the literature that the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children and families requiring the intervention of statutory child protective authorities is a demonstration of this nexus (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013; Menzies & Gilbert, 2013; Westerman, 1997).

Atkinson (2002) argued that the ‘discriminatory, ethnocentric and harmful government policies resulted in widespread damage of culture and in many instances have contributed to the breakdown of families and communities’ (p. 69). Similarly, Herring et al. (2013), King et al. (2009) and Memmott et al. (2001) have argued that communities with a history of forced child removals experience deep trauma that manifests in behaviour that will likely cause children to receive the attention of current child protection services. Cunneen and Libesman (1998) wrote that contemporary child removals by state child protective authorities have foundations linked to historical removals—namely, that the intergenerational effects of past separations, coupled with systemic racism and poor socioeconomic conditions, ‘combine to produce the conditions which underlie contemporary removals’ (p. 103). Stamm et al. (2004) have

also described the ways that historical trauma can affect contemporary parenting practices, and wrote that ‘events transmitted generation to generation can be perpetrated from within, across, or between individuals or cultures ... while a parents’ traumatic stress may carry forward to the next generation through the parent’s impaired ability to parent’ (p. 93).

2.3.1 Racism and Discrimination

Another legacy carried by Indigenous people within Australia as a result of colonisation is the experience of racism and discrimination. As defined by Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2006), racism is:

the belief in the inferiority of a person due to prejudice against his or her ethnic group, phenotypic characteristics, or purported biological nature ... racist ideology seeks to justify the unfair, harmful, or discriminatory treatment of a person deemed inferior. (p. 2)

The colonial treatment of Aboriginal people has influenced the way non-Indigenous people view Indigenous people and issues within Australia in a historical and contemporary context (Bennett, 2013). Since colonisation, Aboriginal people were labelled as lazy, diseased, animalistic, child-like, lacking the ability to manage their own affairs and incapable of raising children (Krieken, 1999). The belief that Aboriginal people were inferior to European settlers informs the contemporary discriminatory discourse relating to Aboriginal issues within Australia (Bennett, 2013). Haskell and Randall (2009) summarised the contemporary experience of continued marginalisation of Aboriginal people and communities by arguing that:

one of the more insidious ways that marginalisation and relative social powerlessness get reinforced and further entrenched is through the mainstream tendency to deny any social responsibility for producing the very conditions

producing this marginalisation and powerlessness, while simultaneously holding those so affected responsible for their own situation ... erasure of colonialism with the blaming of those negatively affected by the colonial injustices. (p. 67)

Herring et al. (2013) argued that 'racism remains part of the day-to-day experience, debilitating our people, denying us the right to live and move about with ease in our own country, compounding the low self-esteem and shame that many people carry' (p. 108). According to Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005), negative emotional responses to experiencing racism 'fit the standard definition of trauma' (p. 574). Lowe, Okubo, and Reilly (2012) conducted a qualitative study into racism as a source of trauma, and concluded that participants who experience racism also experience trauma symptomology. Lowe et al. (2012) outlined that participant experiences were 'similar to trauma responses as described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' (p. 195).

According to Tyson (2011), institutionalised racism is responsible for the prevalence of racism in colonised societies because it is supported by societal structures and institutions. Quinn (2003) defined institutional racism as 'the way in which major institutions and structures in society operate to the advantage of one or some racial groups, and to the disadvantage of others' (p. 78). Additionally, Edwards (2006) wrote that 'institutionalised racism also manifests in terms of access to power' (p. 33).

Indigenous people in Australia have not been afforded access to power either historically or in a contemporary context (evidenced by the persistent experience of racism). As such I question the ability of mainstream Western-centric government systems, like the child protection system, to share power with Indigenous people as a way to reduce the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in care.

2.3.2 Contemporary Child Protection Practice with Indigenous Children and Families

A number of authors are critical of the ways in which child protection authorities work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families within Australia (Bennett, 2013; Briskman, 2014; Lewis & Burton, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008). The most consistent criticism is the lack of culturally competent practice possessed by statutory child protective workers, and the rate at which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be removed from their families and communities (Bessarab & Crawford, 2013; Funston & Herring, 2016; Stanley et al., 2003). A lack of understanding of the ways in which historical trauma presents within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in a contemporary context is frequently cited (Atkinson, 2002; Bessarab & Crawford, 2013; Harms et al., 2011; Menzies & Gilbert, 2013). Westerman (1997) argued in relation to working with Aboriginal people that ‘it is essential to have an understanding of policy and the inter-generation effects these are having on Aboriginal people today’ (p. 2). Similarly, regarding the presentation of trauma in a contemporary context, Haskell and Randall (2009) argued that:

a traditional trauma framework is not broad enough ... to grasp the complexities and dimensions of these experiences ... an expanded trauma framework that explicitly attend to and integrates an analysis of social context, including the social relations of inequality—race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender and sexuality, and abilities and disabilities—is necessary. (p. 49)

The role of the social work profession in the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system is also widely criticised in the literature. Australian social work academics Bessarab and Crawford (2013) argued that ‘top-down and templated systems of child protection can fail many Aboriginal children’

and that the ‘homogenising of the category “Aboriginal” and constructing Aboriginal as “problematic”, presumes that families who are Aboriginal are in some way deficient’ (p. 93).

2.3.3 Cultural Competency

The concept of ‘cultural competency’ and variations thereof is strongly criticised in the literature. The strongest criticism relates to processes that frame cultural competence as a task for completion, rather than an ongoing process (Cross, 1989; Farrelly & Lumby, 2009; Sakamoto, 2007; Wells, Merritt, & Briggs, 2009). In relation to child welfare practice, cultural competence as an ongoing process was defined by Wells et al. (2009) to be a two-pronged undertaking—namely:

an unyielding commitment to learn about and understand the world from the client’s point of view with specific appreciate of the racial, ethnic, and cultural influences that shape and inform their experience ... the development of a partnership with the client to ensure the appropriate incorporation of this understanding in all stages of intervention. (p. 1161)

Wells et al. (2009) further argued that ideally cultural competence ‘seeks to bridge this divide and address the discrimination felt by many racial, ethnic, and cultural groups’ (p. 1166). In an Australian context, Menzies and Gilbert (2013) viewed cultural competence to be a ‘commitment to recognising and embracing cultural diversity and effective practice around navigating cultural norms and nuances’ (p. 53), rather than a singular action. In contrast, some authors defined cultural competency as a system that frames culture in neutral terms, affording no space for the critique of power or the oppression and marginalisation often faced by non-white groups (Pon, 2009; Sakamoto, 2007).

2.4 Indigenous Practitioners, Child Protection Work and Trauma

The legacy of government-led forced child removal has created extremely contentious and difficult working environments for Indigenous child protection workers. Zon et al. (2004) argued that:

for Aboriginal workers especially it gives them no room to move ... either way in the eyes of their communities, they may be seen as collaborators with the state in its ongoing destruction of culture and family life; and if they speak out and criticise the current cultural circumstances that block effective intervention, they may be seen as traitors to their own culture and strangers to themselves, their families and communities. (p. 293)

Love (2002) described a similar view shared by Māori practitioners in statutory child protection agencies in New Zealand. Love (2002) stated that:

Māori workers perceived as conforming to the norms within statutory welfare systems, may be viewed by their whānau, hapū, iwi and communities as brown faces doing the dirty work that was previously done by white social workers ... the challenges they face are amplified and one is over-worked and yet undervalued or worse, invisible. (p. 32)

Authors like Bennett (2015) have argued for the criticality of recognising that the issues faced by Indigenous communities are mirrored within the Indigenous human services workforce. Bennett (2015) has stated of Indigenous human services workers that 'they have personal, family, and community issues ... they have lower life expectancy, health issues, mental health issues, and families with drug and alcohol issues or who are incarcerated' (p. 10). The work of Westerman (1997), Zon et al. (2004) and Bennett (2015) indicated that a great number of Indigenous workers could, at some time, experience symptomology related to intergenerational trauma.

There is agreement in the literature that past colonial practices have influenced the contemporary experience of racism endured by Indigenous people and that the experience of racism can lead to the presentation of trauma-like symptomology. However, there was a dearth of literature that explored experiences of practitioners who have been subjected to racism and trauma rooted in past colonial practices, and then enter a profession that works with people with similar trauma backgrounds, like the field of child protection. A lack of understanding about the issues faced by Indigenous child protection workers and how they could be acknowledged and supported within a workplace is absent in the literature and reinforces that further exploration is needed.

2.4.1 Child Protection Work and Traumatic Stress

Frontline child protection workers are critical to protecting the most vulnerable children and families in Australia. Within the literature, it is widely acknowledged that child protection work is one of the most difficult and complex areas of social service practice, with exposure to primary, secondary and vicarious trauma an inherent part of the work (Dane, 2000; Geller, Madsen, & Ohrenstein, 2004; Levy & Poertner, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008; Munro, 2010; Wise, 2017). In a generalised sense, trauma is described as a normal physiological response to a single event or series of events that are extreme or threatening in nature (Haskell & Randall, 2009). Primary trauma experienced by child protection workers in the literature includes physical assaults; intimidating, threatening and aggressive behaviour by clients; having access to exits blocked; receiving threats to harm workers' children and pets; stalking; and abusive verbal confrontations (Hunt, Goddard, Cooper, Littlechild, & Wild, 2016; Littlechild, 2005; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). These experiences were listed by child protection workers in addition to witnessing distressing instances of abuse to children during

hospital admissions; during interviews; or through viewing photographic, audio or visual evidence.

Vicarious and secondary traumatisation are discussed interchangeably in the literature and appear to be a relatively recent concept within the human services work landscape. Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995) originally defined vicarious traumatisation as ‘the cumulative transformation in the inner experience of the therapist that comes about as a result of empathic engagement with the client’s traumatic material’ (p. 31).

Williams, Helm, and Clemens (2012) added to the definition provided by Pearlman and Saakvitne to argue that vicarious trauma presentation in workers is ‘a shift in the internal experience and psychological wellbeing’ (p. 134). There is consensus in the literature that people who work in a trauma-laden environment with individuals who have experienced trauma are at much higher risk of developing symptoms of vicarious trauma than are people who do not (Bober & Regehr, 2005; Bride, 2007; Cornille & Meyers, 1999; Devilly, Wright, & Varker, 2009; Harrison & Westwood, 2009; Hunter & Schofield, 2006; Jankoski, 2010; Meadors & Lamson, 2008; Regehr, Hemsworth, Leslie, Howe, & Chau, 2004).

The symptomology of vicarious trauma in workers can be difficult to identify because of the broad range of symptomology and manifestations among those who experience it. Abassary and Goodrich (2014) described the behaviour set exhibited by workers experiencing burnout as ‘exhaustion and can be accompanied by distress, reduced effectiveness, decreased motivation, as well as dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours at work’ (p. 66). Other psychological symptoms have been described as including feelings of horror and intrusive imagery. Further, some workers can experience physical symptoms, such as nausea, headaches and exhaustion (Ilffe & Steed, 2000, as cited in Sommer, 2008, p. 63). Workers are often reticent to disclose

that they are experiencing symptoms of vicarious trauma for fear of being viewed as deficient in some way (Zerubavel & Wright, 2012). Pearlman (1995) argued with this sentiment and wrote that vicarious traumatisation is not a 'reflection of inadequacy on the part of the [practitioner] ... it is best conceptualised as an occupational hazard' (p. 52). However, despite Pearlman's (1995) view that the experience of traumatic stress in those who work in trauma-laden environments is inevitable and should be considered as an occupational hazard, the literature suggests that child protection agencies struggle to manage the presentation of vicarious trauma and other trauma-based mental health concerns among practitioners (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Littlechild, 2005), and that individual workers are often expected to manage their own wellbeing (Lewig & McLean, 2016).

Compounding the stress experienced by frontline child protection workers are other factors outside of their control, such as onerous media scrutiny, negative public opinion (Lewig & McLean, 2016) and the organisational constraints of neoliberalism (Lonne et al., 2008). The literature supports the concepts of greater recognition of the stresses managed by child protection workers and a renewed emphasis by agencies on supporting practitioners through quality reflective professional supervision (Cooper, 2002; Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Littlechild, 2005; Lonne et al., 2008).

I found agreement in the literature that child protection work in a general context is difficult and exposes practitioners to high levels of trauma (Dane, 2000; Geller et al., 2004; Levy & Poertner, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008; Munro, 2010; Wise, 2017). However, I could not locate any research examining whether Indigenous workers have support needs in addition to mainstream child protection workers. Previous enquiries have not examined the ways in which an intergenerational history of trauma and ongoing exposure to racism, combined with working in a trauma-laden environment, affect

practitioners. This is a gap in the literature and evidences the need for further exploration.

2.5 Support and Supervision

Supervision is the most common tool used to address wellbeing issues experienced by child protection practitioners. The AASW (2014) relies on the definition outlined by Davys and Beddoe (2010) that professional supervision is:

a forum for reflection and learning ... an interactive dialogue between at least two people, one of whom is a supervisor. This dialogue shapes a process of review, reflection, critique and replenishment for professional practitioners.

Supervision is a professional activity in which practitioners are engaged throughout the duration of their careers regardless of experience or qualification.

The participants are accountable to professional standards and defined competencies and to organisational policy and procedures. (p. 21)

Additionally, Berger and Quiros (2016) argued that supervision should include a number of functions, including 'educational, supportive and administrative' (p. 297).

Supervision and support models for workers within child protection practice have been a topic of great debate in the literature over the past 20 years (Munro, 2010). There is strong agreement in the literature that the provision of good quality supervision contributes to practitioner retention and satisfaction, as well as decreasing the effects of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and other mental health and wellbeing concerns (Foy et al., 1996; J. Gibbs, 2001; Bell, Kulkarni, & Dalton, 2003; Hunt et al., 2016; Manthorpe, Moriarty, Hussein, Stevens, & Sharpe, 2015). The AASW's (2014) *Supervision Standards* identify staff support as a core function of supervision:

Recognition is given to the personal impact that social work practice can have on practitioners. Supervision is a space where social workers can become more

aware of how their work is affecting them and, in turn, how their personal reactions and emotional state are impacting on practice. Strategies to deal with such reactions and for self-care are identified. Supervision is a place for encouragement and validation, working through personal-professional boundaries and recognition of circumstances when external personal assistance may be needed. (pp. 3–4)

While the AASW recognises the potential for work-related duties to negatively affect workers in a general sense, they do not specifically address the issue of trauma experienced by workers while undertaking work in trauma-laden environments. Pack (2013) argued that, in trauma-laden environments, supervisors should consider the use of clinical supervision that includes trauma theory, peer supervision and critical reflective models of work as tools to help workers reduce their likelihood of experiencing symptomology related to primary, secondary and vicarious traumatisation. Additionally, Berger and Quiros (2014) argued that ‘trauma practice supervision should be mandatory rather than on an as-needed basis’ (p. 298).

Despite almost universal agreement in the literature that the provision of good quality supervision to child protection workers is a critical element of a well-functioning and effective child protection workforce, poor supervision practices continue to be a complaint of practitioners. Munro (2010) argued supervision to be the ‘core mechanism for helping social workers reflect on the understanding they are forming of the family ... their emotional response and whether this is adversely affecting their reasoning, and the making decisions’ (p. 53). Poor supervision provision in statutory contexts is consistent with studies by Manthorpe et al. (2015), Wilkins, Forrester, and Grant (2017) and Goddard and Hunt (2011). These studies all found that supervision in statutory child protection workplaces tends towards being administrative,

compliance based and organisationally driven, without a strong focus on practitioner wellbeing or practice reflection. Bradbury-Jones (2013) was critical of current models of supervision being used in the child protection landscape—namely, that ‘many supervision models focus almost entirely on identification, referral and procedural issues to the exclusion of addressing practitioner’s emotional needs’ (p. 253). J. Gibbs (2001) found that the ‘overriding priority for supervisors seems to be ensuring that the work is completed and conforms to acceptable standards’ (p. 330). Additionally, J. Gibbs (2001) argued of supervision in child protection that the ‘prevailing model of supervision pays too little attention to the emotionally charged nature of this work and its personal and professional impact on front line workers’ (p. 324).

Manthorpe et al. (2015) reported on their study of supervision and newly qualified child protection practitioners, and found that line managers believed the core function of supervision to be the oversight of case management. Other functions such as ‘reflection, personal development, training and encouragement’ were viewed by line managers to be ‘optional extras’ (Manthorpe et al., 2015, p. 60). Similar to Manthorpe et al., a study by Wilkins et al. (2017) exploring supervision from the supervisor and supervisee perspective found that line managers felt that they were providing supervision to practitioners that was ‘child focused, reflective, analytical, emotionally supportive and helpful in terms of practice’ (p. 947); however, this was disputed by the practitioners who received this supervision. Further, Wilkins et al. (2017) found that there was ‘limited references to the emotional impact of the work, with the exception of frustration at perceived parental resistance and limited discussions of risk’ (p. 947) during supervision sessions. Supervisor views from the studies of Manthorpe et al and Wilkins et al., which described the role of supervision to be about the oversight of case management, contradict the consensus I found in the literature which supports a strong

focus on practice development and the emotional well-being of workers in supervision (Berger & Quiros, 2016; Hunt et al., 2016; Bradbury-Jones, 2013; Pack, 2013); indicating a gap between research and practice.

Practitioners not being provided with an appropriate forum to discuss matters pertaining to their wellbeing creates an environment conducive to the development of ongoing traumatic stress. Studies from Foy et al. (1996), Litz and Roemer (1996) and Schauben and Frazier (1995) found that supervision decreased the effect of the threat of wellbeing-related issues, such as compassion fatigue, among child protection workers. Supervision was also seen as a key factor in the retention of child protection practitioners in the literature (Cearley, 2004; J. Gibbs, 2001; Hunt et al., 2016; Jacquet, Clark, Morazes & Withers, 2008; Russ, Lonne, & Darlington, 2009; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). Additionally, Manthorpe et al. (2015) found that practitioners who received less frequent supervision were 'less likely to feel they had a manageable workload, to experience working conditions as being poorer and to be less engaged with the job' (p. 62).

In addition to inadequate supervision practices placing workers at risk, I found strong support for the link between the provision of unsatisfactory supervision and poorer outcomes for children in the literature. Studies by Ferguson (2011); Hunt et al. (2016); and Briggs, Broadhurst and Hawkins (2004) support that inadequate delivery of quality supervision that tends to the emotional care needs of child protection practitioners can negatively affect the safety and wellbeing of children. Ferguson (2011) argued that 'workers' state of mind and the quality of attention they can give to children is directly related to the quality of care and attention they themselves receive from supervision, managers and peers' (p. 205). A study by Hunt et al. (2016) of 423 child protection practitioners found that 42% believed that the quality of their care and

protection assessments were compromised because of a lack of adequate support and supervision. Briggs et al. (2004) has argued that deficient provision of supervision to child protection practitioners leads to potential neglect of children's safety. Briggs et al. (2004) wrote that:

this situation could result in the rights and needs of abused children being ignored due to a loss of productivity, increased fear, loss of commitment and turnover of professionals in the field. It also heralds the need for attention to be paid to the mental health of professionals engaged in child protection. (p. 5).

Berger and Quiros (2014) drew on the work of Bober and Regehr (2005), Bordin (1983), Hunter and Schofield (2006), Pearlman (1995), Shulman (2010), Toren (2008) and Tsui (2005) to argue that, when a safe, empowering and trusting supervisory relationship is established, a supervisee's 'vulnerability to vicarious traumatisation decreases and consequently, the quality of services to clients is anticipated to improve' (p. 298). Berger and Quiros (2014) further argued that 'a strong supervisory working alliance plays a critical role in creating a space that feels physically and emotionally safe and enhances trust and communication' (p. 298). Hawkins and Shohet (2000) described how incorporating an emotional element within a supervisory relationship benefits workers and argued that the 'supervisor's role is not just to reassure the worker, but to allow the emotional disturbance to be felt within the safer setting of the supervisory relationship, where it can be survived, reflected and learned from' (p. 3). Abassary and Goodrich (2014) supported Hawkins and Shohet's work and argued that 'the supervisory relationship may serve to cultivate a stronger ability for a [worker's] inclination toward growth by supervisors mirroring a trusting, nurturing, and empathic relationship' (p. 69).

2.5.1 Trauma-informed Supervision

The literature suggests that supervision frameworks that include a trauma-informed element are beneficial not only for the worker, but also for the supervisor and client. Etherington (2009, as cited in Berger & Quiros, 2014) stated that trauma-informed supervision combines ‘knowledge about trauma and supervision, and focuses on the characteristics of the interrelationship between the trauma, the practitioner, the helping relationship, and the context in which the work is offered’ (p. 298). Berger and Quiros (2016) further argued that supervision for those who undertake work with traumatised populations should also seek ‘to enhance the knowledge and skills of practitioners in understanding the complexity, dynamics and potential behavioural manifestations of trauma’ (p. 145). Integrating trauma-informed practices into current supervision frameworks is congruent with current social work values, as argued by Berger and Quiros (2016), who wrote that the ‘concept of trauma-informed refers to a system of care that demonstrates an understanding and recognition of trauma as both interpersonal and socio-political and is therefore aligned with the principles of social justice’ (p. 145).

A lack of understanding about a worker’s experience of trauma by supervisors can reinforce trauma symptomology, such as feelings of isolation, poor self-image and intrusive thoughts. Haskell and Randall (2009) argued that:

those who have endured traumatic events often cannot explain or even recognise their own psychological responses as trauma related ... this points to the critical importance of psycho-education at both the individual and community levels concerning the nature of trauma and its effects. (p. 54)

While Jankoski (2010) and Zon et al. (2004) agreed that supervision models need to include a psycho-educational element for workers regarding the development and symptomology of vicarious trauma and strategies to manage emerging symptomology and/or the presence of workers' personal history of trauma being triggered, they did not explore how supervision frameworks and practices may need to be revised to accommodate such a concept.

There was some agreement in the literature regarding the lack of training afforded to supervisors who manage workers in trauma-laden environments (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Zon et al., 2004; Berger & Quiros, 2014). Jankoski (2010) argued that:

child welfare competency-based training programs must address vicarious traumatisation and ways to ameliorate its effects ... every aspect of their training must have a trauma focus ... training for supervisors must address supervision style and communication skills ... they must be made aware that helping their colleagues heal is more important than the paperwork that must be completed. (pp. 116–117)

Hobfoll (2007) outlined a five-point model used when working with people who have been exposed to traumatic events. The model aims to:

1. promote a sense of safety
2. promote calming
3. promote a sense of self and collective efficacy
4. promote connectedness
5. promote hope (Hobfoll, 2007, pp. 285–286).

Hobfoll's (2007) model was developed to be used by practitioners who work with clients who have been exposed to traumatic events. In the absence of other models relating to supervision with workers who have experienced traumatic events and

resulting symptomology, Hobfoll's (2007) model may offer a starting framework. However, the model does not appear to distinguish the symptomology of a person experiencing the effects of a personal history of trauma with a person experiencing vicarious trauma or a combination of the two.

2.5.2 Supervision or Therapy

Supervisors struggling to define where their role as supervisor ends and the role of therapist begins are often discussed in the literature by authors such as Pendry (2012), Graves (2008) and Wheeler (2007). Pendry (2012) wrote that supervisees also struggle with disclosure in the supervisory relationship, and argued that:

systemic supervision within a postmodern frame seems to view supervision as a collaborative conversation ... this undertaking appears to ignore the idea that unequal power relations are embedded within the supervisory relationship ... the power of the supervisor cannot be theorised out of existence. (p. 411)

Further complexity was raised by Wheeler (2007), who stated that 'the extent to which the supervisor has a mandate to discuss the psychological well-being, personal difficulties, or organisational conflicts of their supervisee depends on both contractual agreements and the working alliance' (p. 245). Williams et al. (2012) argued that 'a personal history of childhood trauma can have a direct effect on the development of vicarious trauma' (p. 147) which adds weight to the argument that a workers trauma history is relevant for discussion in supervision. There is some agreement in the literature that a supervisor's role must encompass managing service delivery and maintenance of wellbeing to both the client and worker (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Rushton & Nathan, 1996; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). Mander (2002) further argued that the needs of the worker and client must be appropriately balanced. However, it is acknowledged that juggling the two is fraught with difficulties, which includes

struggling with ambiguous boundaries (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Rushton & Nathan, 1996; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). Wheeler (2007) added to this debate and wrote that:

the extent to which supervisors should offer therapeutic support to supervisees is debatable ... supervision is not about therapy ... ways in which the well-being of a counsellor impacts on the client ... must be addressed ... a balance needs to be struck that enables exploration and support, but avoids supervision as therapy. (pp. 246–247)

Managing the emotional support needs of workers can be difficult as already outlined by Goddard and Hunt, 2011, Rushton and Nathan, 1996 and Stanley and Goddard, 2002. Newcomb, Burton, Edwards and Hazelwood (2015) discuss the concept of the wounded healer—an archetype used by Jung, to describe the position of people in the healing professions who themselves have a personal history of trauma (p. 55). Newcomb et al. (2015) argued that the critical application of Jung’s wounded healer concept to students who are studying human services degrees, could assist educators to ‘develop approaches to these concerns whilst simultaneously enhancing the development of professional resilience’ (p. 56). While Newcombe et al’s work focuses on a workers past trauma as a deficit for correction, Zerubavel and Wright (2012) focus on the archetype of the wounded healer as potentially a useful construct in human services workers. Zerubavel and Wright (2012) argued that many practitioners ‘arrive at their profession of choice through a journey that involves a history of pain and suffering’ (p. 483). This statement reflects earlier conclusions by Guggenbuhl-Craig (1999), (as cited in Wheeler, 2007), who argued that human services workers are ‘both motivated to become healers and strengthened in their capacity to empathise with others by painful life experiences ... such experiences contribute to their skill, sensitivity, and insight’ (p. 245).

While there is some agreement that a worker's past history of trauma could enhance rather than detract from service delivery, authors like Zerubavel and Wright and Guggenbuhl-Craig have argued that reluctance to disclose past histories of trauma often results in only negative attributes of the wounded healer presenting in the workplace. Zerubavel and Wright (2012) argued that workers' reluctance to disclose such history may 'pertain to potential stigma ... and judgement by colleagues regarding their competence to practice ... these concerns can result in secrecy, self-stigma and shame' (pp. 482–483). The literature suggests that practitioners who experience symptoms of traumatic stress either from past trauma, trauma from working in a trauma-laden environment or a combination of the two, may be reticent to disclose their struggles and/or seek help because of the fear of an unfavourable response from their agency (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Zerubavel & Wright, 2012). Graves (2008) argued that 'the wounded healer remains easily hidden in a profession that implicitly, and at times, actively encourages a denial of illness' (p. 217). In relation to supporting workers with a history of trauma, Zerubavel and Wright (2012) argued that:

the fundamental importance of having disclosure as a viable option for wounded healers in need of support ... it is problematic if our profession has developed an atmosphere in which it is stigmatising to acknowledge vulnerability or woundedness ... such a milieu puts wounded healers at greater risk of unaddressed impairment by precluding opportunities to assess the impact of woundedness and to suggest intervention when needed. (p. 487)

Wheeler (2007) argued that 'while the supervisor cannot be the therapist, the personal life of the [worker] cannot be ignored ... supervisors have an important role to play in recognising and attending to the wounds of the healer' (p. 255). Although in agreement, Berger and Quiros (2016) acknowledge that:

while supervising any practitioner with a personal trauma history is challenging, working in trauma-impacted environments where encountering traumatised clients is consistent and extensive is a significant risk factor for triggering vicarious re-traumatisation and thus requires particular attention ... shying away from this discussion in supervision may compromise the necessary depth of understanding the multifaceted nature of trauma and ultimately impact both the therapeutic alliance and the accompanying individual and group interventions.

(p. 151)

The lack of consensus in the literature regarding the role and boundaries of the supervisor in relation to the management of traumatic stress in child protection workers, indicates that further exploration is required.

2.5.3 The Supervisor

Although the role of the supervisor was debated in the literature, there was consensus about the attributes possessed by effective supervisors of workers who deliver services to highly traumatised client populations (Berger & Quiros, 2016; J. Gibbs, 2001; McPherson et al., 2016). Berger and Quiros's (2016) study into the characteristics of effective trauma-informed supervisors found that those who demonstrated 'modesty, cultural humility, acknowledgement of their own limitations'; fostered 'learning communities' among staff; and were available and provided 'frequent and consistent supervisory meetings' (p. 147) were the most successful. McPherson et al. (2016) wrote that successful supervisors 'work with issues of power, gender, culture and difference, and effective supervisors' value their staff, imprinting a sense of trustworthiness and predictability' (p. 76). Authors such as Harris and Fallot (2001), McPherson et al. (2016) and Etherington (2009) argued that a supervisee's feeling of safety and a supervisor's ability to create it are critical elements required for an effective

trauma-informed supervisory relationship. Additionally, Berger and Quiros (2016) argued that:

creating safety consists of two complementary aspects ... the enhancing of structural, operational and administrative conditions that can help augment the feeling of safety; the other is simultaneously identifying triggers for feeling lack of safety and working to minimise them. (p. 151)

Similarly, McPherson, Frederico, and McNamara (2016) argued that ‘supervisors who present as empathetic and well-regulated enable their supervisees to move from an internal state of distress to calm through this contagion, creating space for supervisees to reflect, practice and learn’ (p. 76).

2.5.4 The Supervisor and Race

Anecdotally, it is widely acknowledged that the majority of supervisors within the child protection work landscape are non-Indigenous, particularly in the Australian context. Pendry (2012) argued that, in a supervisory relationship where cultural backgrounds are not similar, ‘consideration of how the ideas of race might be thought about and talked about in the supervisory relationship, and how the oppression of people based upon this idea might influence this relationship’ (pp. 403–404). Pendry (2012) conducted a study relating to ‘non-white’ workers who were supervised by people of Caucasian European heritage. Pendry (2012) found that the issue of cross-cultural acknowledgement within a supervisory context was not considered ‘due to a lack of cultural competency on the part of supervisors, evidenced by most participants feeling that their supervisors conducted supervision from a Eurocentric perspective that denied their (racial) identities’ (p. 410). Given that denial of racial identity and culture was a feature of colonisation in Australia, it could be argued that the denial of cultural identity within a supervisory relationship—which essentially reinforces the power

dynamic afforded to the mainstream—could be detrimental to the wellbeing of Indigenous child protection practitioners. Pendry (2012) argued that the supervisor:

holds a position of power over the supervisee resulting from the dominant discourses at work concerning supervision ... the supervisor can exercise this power to either perpetuate or challenge inequalities, such as the inequality between white people and black people. (pp. 403–404)

Pendry's (2012) and Berger and Quiros's (2014) work lends validity to the inclusion and discussion of racial and cultural identity within a supervision context.

2.5.5 Organisational Constraints

Debate regarding ideal supervision and practitioner support models without some dialogue relating to organisational constraints would be naïve and could establish unrealistic expectations of supervisors. Organisational culture does affect the wellbeing of staff (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Littlechild, 2005; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). Wheeler (2007) argued that:

organisational cultures can be nurturing and benevolent or destructive and alienating ... counsellors can be supported in their therapeutic roles or hounded by incompetent managers, prohibitive rules, organisational chaos or be victims of organisationally-induced stress ... either way, there will be times when the organisational dynamics and their consequences will be brought to supervision, as they impact on the clients and/or the supervisee ... without doubt, organisations can be wounding. (p. 252)

Berger and Quiros (2016) argued that supervision frameworks that actively value and facilitate the therapeutic aspect of supervision are the most successful. However, this could be somewhat idealistic, given the pressures on organisations in the current neoliberalist funding landscape (Lonne et al., 2008). Anecdotal evidence presented in

the literature indicates that agencies are increasingly seeking activities that increase their revenue, and that ‘supervision has been compromised and became to be seen as a luxury rather than a necessity’ (Berger & Quiros, 2014, p. 297).

Administrative supervision is necessary because it serves as a mechanism for adherence to funding arrangements, performance monitoring, and consistent and quality client service delivery (Lonne et al., 2008; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). However, the literature supports that administrative supervision can jeopardise or erode the establishment and maintenance of safety and empowerment within the supervisory relationship. Beddoe (2012) argued that the ‘tensions between managerial accountability and professional autonomy remain an ever-present issue in social work supervision’ (p. 208). Safety and empowerment creation within the supervisory relationship is a critical element for workers to feel able to deconstruct their own histories of trauma and/or to address emerging vicarious trauma symptomology. Berger and Quiros (2016) argued that ‘empowerment has critical meaning relative to trauma-informed work because issues related to the loss of power are central in the experience of trauma exposure’ (p. 151). Authors such as Berger and Quiros (2016), Jankoski (2010) and Lonne et al. (2008) concur that organisations must invest in regular and consistent trauma-informed supervision for their employees. I argue that organisations and funding bodies would benefit from psycho-education regarding vicarious trauma, its symptomology within workers and worker support strategies. The literature supports the argument that these are core functions and that organisations need to be funded appropriately to provide these services to their staff (Berger & Quiros, 2016; Foy et al, 1996; J. Gibbs, 2001; Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Hunt et al., 2016; Lonne et al., 2008; Manthorpe et al., 2015).

2.6 Recruitment of Indigenous People as a Strategy to Address Disproportionate Representation

As I have discussed previously, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately represented in the child protection system. A strategy increasingly discussed in the literature to address the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in social service systems, including child protection, is to recruit more Indigenous practitioners. However, there is little evidence that could be located at the time of writing that indicated that an increase in Indigenous staffing decreases the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families requiring statutory child protection services.

The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, commonly referred to as the ‘Carmody Inquiry’, was commissioned by the Queensland Government in 2013 to review the effectiveness and adequacy of Queensland’s state-run child protection services. A review of the commission’s terms of reference revealed two primary items of interest:

1. the current Queensland Government response to children and families in the child protection system, including the appropriateness of the level of, and support for, frontline staffing
2. strategies to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at all stages of the child protection system, particularly in out-of-home care.

Chapter 8.2.7 of the commission’s report discusses ‘Developing a Culturally Capable Workforce’. Interestingly, the commission’s report states that:

another way to build the department's cultural competency is by employing additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, who can share their cultural knowledge with non-Indigenous staff and provide more culturally responsive interventions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families. (Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013, p. 211)

Further outlined in Chapter 8 of the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry is the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services policy definitions relating to supervision and its purpose. The report states that:

professional supervision is essential for the provision of a transparent, accountable, positive and supportive work environment ... supervision also provides an environment for staff to debrief, share ideas, seek guidance, discuss practice, develop achievement and capability plans, and discuss cases and tasks. (Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013, p. 207)

However, the commission's report does not canvass the issue of how best to support Indigenous staff currently within the workplace or those who may be recruited to fill new targets. Consideration of the support needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners is absent from the report, despite the purported expectation that they will 'share their cultural knowledge' (Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013, p. 211). Recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to address the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children and families within child protection systems is not a unique approach. Similar recruitment strategies exist in social service areas, such as health, education, policing and justice.

Watson, Young, and Barnes (2013) cited the *Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Strategy 2009–2012*, which highlights the:

importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in healthcare at all levels and within all disciplines in order to inform the development of, and promote engagement with, health services ... recruitment of an Indigenous workforce is recognised as an important component of increasing the acceptability and suitability of services offered for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. (p. 115)

In his submission to the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, Lonne (as cited in Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013) shared the approach adopted by the workforce strategy that more Indigenous staff will better manage Indigenous issues. Lonne (as cited in Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013) argued that ‘the child protection system needs more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers to address the increasing over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are now in child protection systems’ (p. 212). The employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the community services sector is widely used as a mechanism to break down the multiple barriers between Indigenous clients and the state, thereby offering individuals stronger opportunity to engage with state-run services. Herring et al. (2013) wrote that ‘...dedicated Aboriginal positions is an approach frequently adopted by mainstream agencies as an attempt to increase service access’ (p. 110). However, neither Watson et al.’s (2013) nor Lonne’s (2013) work identify specifically how an increase in Indigenous staff will address the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in state-run social systems in practical terms, or what support mechanisms may be in place for these staff.

Sherwood (2009) explored colonisation and its constructs embedded within health policies, and the effects this has on health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within Australia. Sherwood (2009) stated that:

as a health professional and educator I have witnessed how ill-informed constructs continue to be utilised in problematizing Aboriginal peoples ... this dominant way of knowing, being and doing has infiltrated all spectrums of mainstream society and it is this positioning that continues to promote problematic constructs of Indigenous Australians. (p. 25)

Parallels can be drawn between Australia's health system as outlined by Sherwood (2009) and Queensland's child protection system. Anderson (2000, as cited in Sherwood, 2009) stated that 'Indigenous health workers are critical to alleviating the current health gap and increasing cultural sensitivity within health services' (p. 26). This argument is also made by Lonne (2013) in his submission to the Carmody Inquiry—that is, that more Indigenous staff should be recruited into child protection work to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within the child protection system. Tilbury (2009) disagreed with Anderson and Lonne, and argued that the strategy of increasing numbers of Indigenous workers in isolation represents:

a narrow conceptualisation of the problem of racial disproportionality, setting out narrow parameters for intervention and proposing that a practitioner can make adaptations with that framework, rather than challenging the entire way that the child welfare system addresses child abuse and neglect in Indigenous communities. (p. 62)

Like Tilbury (2009), Herring et al. (2013) were critical of recruiting additional Indigenous staff within mainstream services, and argued that this strategy in isolation sets up workers and organisations to fail. Herring et al. (2013) argued that:

workers in such positions are often unable to achieve what is expected of them by both their employer and their own communities ... many of these workers are immobilised by fear of being found wanting, without a sufficient sense of entitlement to ask for support. (p. 110)

The works of Sherwood (2009), Herring et al. (2013) and Lonne (2013) all signal that the recruitment of Indigenous staff as a strategy to address the disproportionate representation and poor outcomes of Indigenous people within social service systems is an active policy in Australia. However, these recruitment strategies fail to address the ways in which the increase in Indigenous staff will be supported within said social systems, particularly given that the same systems were responsible for much of the trauma caused to Indigenous people. Sherwood (2009) argued that:

it is often forgotten, that Indigenous health professionals' lives have been impacted by colonial assumptions ... they also wear the intergenerational effects of unrelenting grief and loss ... they are professionals who must work in an environment where their people are treated poorly, their worldviews are not respected and must observe the inequitable care their people receive in the hands of non-Indigenous health professionals. (p. 26)

Herring et al. (2013) supported Sherwood's view and added that 'employers rarely recognise the distress that workers in these situations are experiencing, or provide the mentoring required ... tasking Aboriginal workers with sole responsibility for making services culturally competent is a non-solution and other strategies are needed' (p. 111). Additionally, Menzies and Gilbert (2013) described as 'naïve' (p. 52) the notion that

workers' Indigenous cultural background alone equips them to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.

2.7 Conclusions from the Literature Reviews

While conducting reviews of relevant literature related to the research question, I reached a number of conclusions that I will now discuss and summarise. Of the five core areas of literature examined— contact and colonisation including forced child removal; contemporary Indigenous child removal, Indigenous practitioners, child protection work and trauma; support and supervision in a child protection setting; and the recruitment of Indigenous people as a strategy to address disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in care—I found strong consistency among authors and study outcomes.

My review of the literature confirmed that the racism and discrimination experienced by Indigenous Australians is rooted in colonisation and directly related to the strategies used by the colonisers. Science was used to legitimise the views that Aboriginal people were savages with smaller brains; were inferior racially; and possessed no capacity for learning, managing their own affairs or parenting children appropriately (Bennett, 2013; Muecke, 1992; Reynolds, 1987; Tatz, 1999). It appears that all government policy was rooted in this belief, which justified the colonisers assuming and asserting power as the dominant group over the 'inferior' Aboriginal population (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013; Bessant, 2013; Briskman, 2014; Krieken, 1999; Tyson, 2011).

I found consensus in the literature that the trauma experienced as a result of colonisation spans across generations, often presenting as social dysfunction in a contemporary context (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013; Menzies & Gilbert, 2013; Sherwood, 2013; Westerman, 1997). Trauma-fuelled social and emotional issues form

the foundation for the large numbers of Indigenous children being taken into the care of child protective authorities (Cunneen & Libesman, 2000; Herring et al., 2013; King et al., 2009; Memmott et al., 2001). I found agreement in the literature that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately represented in the child protection system in Australia, with projected increases in the near to medium future cited (Bennett, 2013; Briskman, 2014; Lewis & Burton, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008). It is also clear that culturally responsive practice improvements are critical to reducing the disproportionate number of Indigenous children requiring intervention by child protective authorities (Bennett, 2013; Briskman, 2014; Lewis & Burton, 2014).

In relation to child protection work in a general sense, I found agreement in the literature that the work is difficult, complex and at times traumatic (Dane, 2000; Geller et al., 2004; Levy & Poertner, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008; Munro, 2010; Wise, 2017). Further, consensus confirmed that individuals who undertake work in a trauma-laden environment are more likely to suffer trauma-related mental health concerns than are individuals who do not (Bober & Regehr, 2005; Bride, 2007; Cornille & Meyers, 1999; Devilly et al., 2009; Harrison & Westwood, 2009; Hunter & Schofield, 2006; Jankoski, 2010; Meadors & Lamson, 2008; Regehr et al., 2004).

The literature frequently discussed the issue of child protection agencies struggling to provide quality supervision to practitioners to address the administrative requirements of the organisation, as well as the emotional and professional development needs of practitioners (Berger & Quiros, 2014; Foy et al., 1996; J. Gibbs, 2001; Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Hunt et al., 2016; Litz & Roemer, 1996; Manthorpe et al., 2015; Pack, 2013; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). However, the literature highlights links between unsupported child protection professionals and increased risk to children (Briggs et al., 2004; Ferguson, 2011; Hunt et al., 2016).

I would also like to comment on what was missing from the literature. I could not locate any studies that linked the additional recruitment of Indigenous practitioners to a decrease in the rate of Indigenous children being taken into care or being returned to the care of their parents. Additionally, I could not locate any existing studies that explored the experiences of Indigenous people who undertake child protection work; that considered their experiences of trauma, given the past policies of forced child removal; or that examined what their support needs might be. Thus, the aims of this study are to explore the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who work in the child protection field, to explore the effects of historical trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians and its symptomology within a child protection workplace, and to explore participant views of culturally responsive models of support for Indigenous workers within the child protection system. The dearth of literature relating to these three aims specifically demonstrates that there is a research gap that requires enquiry.

2.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have presented literature highlighting the gap in research relating to the experiences of Indigenous child protection workers in Australia. The literature review covered contact and colonisation, forced child removal, the legacy of forced child removal in a contemporary context, Indigenous child protection workers, and support and supervision in a child protection setting. The review of this literature outlined the context of the research, indicated the research's importance, and drew attention to the research's necessity. In the next chapter, titled 'Methodology', I outline the theoretical framework and methods used throughout the study. I also discuss my position as a non-Indigenous researcher undertaking research in an Indigenous space.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will begin by presenting the theoretical framework that has informed every aspect of my study. Critical and decolonising theory has informed my methodology, design, data collection and analysis. I will discuss the data collection methods used and provide a rationale for the use of these methods and how they are philosophically underpinned.

In the initial part of this chapter, I present critical and decolonising theory as the philosophical underpinning of my research design, implementation and analysis. In the second part of the chapter, I state and explore my position as the researcher. I then present my rationale for choosing to undertake this study qualitatively. Finally, I present the methods I used throughout the study, including in-depth semi-structured interviewing, thematic analysis and the use of a cultural broker and mentor. I also explore the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as the ethical considerations pertaining to the research.

3.2 Philosophical Underpinning: Critical Theory

In a research context, theories provide the researcher a solid foundation from which to view complex social phenomenon and a lens through which to view their data and frame their analysis (Creswell, 2014; Reeves et al., 2008). Bronner (2011) wrote that critical theory ‘questions the hidden assumptions and purposes of competing theories and existing forms of practice’ (p. 18). Critical theory concerns itself with examining conditions of domination, power and oppression (Reeves et al., 2008), and prescribes that people construct and weave their lives within an oppressive context. Critical perspectives are concerned with ‘empowering human beings to transcend the

constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender' (Fay, 1987, as cited in Creswell, 2014, p. 65).

Critical enquiry scholars are committed to exploring and critiquing forms of inequality and discrimination that operate in daily life (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). Critical research approaches should prioritise the creation of knowledge as a tool to effect social change by revealing the nature of oppression (Wilson, 2001). I purposively claim parts of critical theory used in this thesis that emphasise the importance of history and context and reveal the materiality of the participants' lives.

Critical theory originated within the Institute of Social Research attached to the University of Frankfurt in the 1930s. The institute, commonly referred to as the Frankfurt School, was established after a donation from Felix Weil, for the purpose of furthering Marxist scholarship, which he felt was being overlooked in Germany at the time (Joll, n.d., para. 1). The Frankfurt School produced three key critical theorists: Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) and Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) (Held, 1980; Morrow & Brown, 1994). The Jewish background of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse necessitated the relocation of the Frankfurt School to New York for a period of time as a result of Germany's occupation by the Nazi Party (Held, 1980).

Scholars within the Frankfurt School were critical of societal 'preoccupation with absolute foundations, analytic categories, and fixed criteria for verifying truth claims' (Bronner, 2011, p. 19). The three core theorists from the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, sought to challenge traditional theories, such as positivism, that purported that society be 'analysed according to the criteria of the natural sciences' (Bronner, 2011, p. 19). They maintained that an alternative lens was required—particularly in the social sciences—that 'could grasp the nature of society as

a historical totality, rather than as an aggregate of mechanical determinants or abstract functions' (Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 14).

In a contemporary research context, Neuman (2014) argued that critical researchers:

conduct studies to critique and transform social relations by revealing the underlying sources of social control, power relations, and inequality ... by uncovering conditions, critical social science empowers people, especially those in society who are less powerful and marginalised. (p. 111)

According to Humphries (2008), critical research is 'predicated on producing knowledge for action by dominated social groups, for application by those seeking transformation of collective and individual identities and on changing social structures' (p. 118). Humphries (2008, p. 106) wrote that there are five core presuppositions of critical social research, namely:

1. social structures are oppressive, maintained through political and economic power, and supported by a range of legitimising strategies
2. these legitimations should be made visible for examination and to identify the oppressive and exploitative practices they underpin
3. by focusing on special topics, taken-for-granted understandings are examined for their relationship to wider social and historical structures
4. critical social research seeks ways to combat oppressive structures
5. the critical social researcher is reflexive and flexible enough to engage with these power dynamics.

Additionally, Bronner (2011) wrote that critical theory 'insists that thought must respond to the new problems and the new possibilities for liberation that arise from changing historical circumstances' (p. 18).

Critical theory as a research paradigm is also consistent with the goals and principles of social work (D’Cruz & Jones, 2004; Marlow, 2001). It was important for me to select a theoretical framework that was congruent with the values of social work as a profession because these values inform a large part of my own personal beliefs and values. Martin (2003) argued that ‘the goal of structural social work is critical reflection on the interplay between personal, social, economic and political processes’ (p. 30).

Further, D’Cruz and Jones (2004) argued that:

in social work research, the construction of knowledge is not the sole concern.

What also matters are the ethical and political dimensions of how ‘knowledge’ is generated and interpreted ... social work research is not solely or primarily conducted as a pursuit of knowledge but also has a political and ethical purpose in keeping with social work objectives to achieve social justice and improve the conditions of individuals, groups and communities. (p. 30)

I support the argument of D’Cruz and Jones (2004) that the construction of knowledge should be used to facilitate change, rather than creating knowledge that will not be used once the study is finalised.

3.3 Decolonising Research Theory

Within the broad category of critical theory exist theoretical frameworks that speak more specifically to particular marginalised groups, such as women, minority cultural groups and people living with a disability. In this thesis, I rely on critical theory and decolonising research theory. My research practice has been informed by a decolonising approach. I chose a decolonising theoretical framework because it relates directly to the participant group’s experience of marginalisation as a result of their Indigenous cultural background and experience of colonisation. Tuck and Yang (2012) argued that:

without mention of Indigenous peoples, our/their struggles for the recognition of our/their sovereignty, or the contributions of Indigenous intellectuals and activists to theories and frameworks of decolonisation ... kills the very possibility of decolonisation; it re-centres whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler. (p. 3)

I will spend some time discussing what a decolonising framework is in a research context and how it was applied during this study. As mentioned previously in this chapter, Eurocentric research ideologies and practices have been used as a tool of colonisation to degrade and devalue Indigenous people and knowledges. Indigenous people and communities have been subjected to unethical research practices and researchers who sought to exploit Indigenous people for their own advancement, rather than to engage their research with Indigenous communities in a beneficial, productive and meaningful way. It is critical to acknowledge the power that derives implicitly from membership in the dominant group, especially in relation to research. As a non-Indigenous researcher in an Indigenous space, I view this as an essential element. Chomsky (2012) wrote that ‘historical amnesia is a very dangerous phenomenon, not only because it undermines moral and intellectual integrity, but also because it lays the groundwork for crimes that lie ahead’ (p. 149).

Porsanger (2004), an Indigenous Scandinavian researcher, argued that Western academic scholarship ‘has usually been aimed at solving “Indigenous problems”’, which has transferred ‘power and control to the non-indigenous world’ (p. 108). The Eurocentric view of Indigenous people as the ‘problem other’ has been perpetuated by Western research methodologies, and fails to recognise the legitimacy of Indigenous strength and knowledges (Atkinson, 2002; Rigney, 1999). Māori researcher Coram (2011) argued that the ‘inherently different cultural values between western and non-

western worldviews mark the need for practices that disrupt western research methodologies characterised by relations of dominance' (p. 40). Prior (2007) viewed decolonising research methodologies as decentring the 'focus from the aims of the researcher to the agenda of the people' (p. 165).

Coram (2011) argued that mainstream Eurocentric research methods are 'assumed to privilege the authority of the researcher as "expert" and members of the community as informants, bystanders' (p. 41). In contrast, a decolonising research framework, as argued by Prior (2007):

promotes a respectful relationship between participants and researchers based on trust and cooperation ... the value of equality means that the cultural wisdom, values and beliefs of Indigenous and other minority populations are valued as *equal* to the dominant cultural belief system. (p. 166)

Other research paradigms, such as positivism, position the researcher as the expert who solely possesses the 'power and ability to create knowledge' (Potts & Brown, 2005, p. 262). The research subjects do not usually have a collaborative relationship with the 'expert' researcher and have 'no real involvement or control in the processes' (Potts & Brown, 2005, p. 262). Additionally, positivist research does not recognise the inherent power relationship between the researcher and researched, and does not attempt to mitigate or alter this in any way. In contrast, research paradigms underpinned by a decolonising framework, according to Chilisa (2012), 'discuss the role of imperialism, colonisation, globalisation ... takes a post-structural view of the world with the aim of deconstructing truths, beliefs, values' (pp. 48–49).

I used a decolonising research framework in this study because I believe that Indigenous people have the best information about issues experienced by Indigenous people, and are subsequently the best placed to contribute expert knowledge. The

decolonisation framework I used within this study's research design maintained the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants as firmly rooted as the experts within the research. By using a decolonising research paradigm, I embedded an opportunity for marginalised voices to be heard and not devalued or silenced by mainstream Eurocentric research practices (Prior, 2007; Wilson & Yellow Bird, 2005) through using semi-structured in-depth interviews so that the participants could direct me to issues they thought I should explore. The voices of participants are the voices that will be heard in the findings chapters of this thesis. I explore the placement of the participants' voices at the fore of this study later in this thesis. A decolonising research framework is also congruent with my values as a social worker. Briskman, Pease and Allan (2003) argued that critical social workers have a 'world-view shaped by socio-political analysis and a commitment to social justice' (p. 51). D'Cruz and Jones (2004) argued that social work has a key role in identifying structural inequalities, and that social workers are subsequently in a prime position for 'recommending strategies for change' (p. 3).

3.4 Position of the Researcher

From the conception of this project, I questioned the appropriateness of a non-Indigenous female social worker undertaking this study. White social workers remain a symbol of fear for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Green et al., 2013; Harms et al., 2011; Menzies & Gilbert, 2013). Social workers and their practices were used as 'instruments of social control' over Indigenous people (Bennett, 2013, p. 19). Bennett's (2013) statement is particularly true in relation to the role of social work and the forced removal of children as a consequence of their Indigeneity. Fear and mistrust of government officials and social workers continues into a contemporary context because of the historical role of enforcing child removal policies (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013; Harms et al., 2011).

Similarly, white researchers have caused great harm to Indigenous people and their communities (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Bennett, 2013; Muecke, 1992; Reynolds, 1987; Tatz, 1999). Canadian Aboriginal academics Absolon and Willett (2005) wrote about the ongoing effect of exploitative Western-centric research practices in Aboriginal communities:

Aboriginal peoples have been represented in curricular, research and scholarship as a savage, noble, stoic, and most disturbingly, a dying race ... images and representations of Aboriginal peoples that predominate in media, popular culture and research studies portray us not as we are, but as non-Aboriginals think we are ... to various degrees, we all struggle to free ourselves from the colonial beliefs and values that have been ingrained in us ... throughout the world such 'neutral' and 'objective' research has been used to justify the oppression and genocide of the Other for the good of humankind. (pp. 108–109)

As discussed in previous chapters, research was used by European settlers as a tool of oppression and to justify the discriminatory treatment of Aboriginal people (Tatz, 1999; Smith, 1999; Sherwood, 2013; Westerman, 1997). Western-centric research practices privilege mainstream knowledge as legitimate and valuable at the expense of other knowledges, particularly Indigenous knowledges (Jenkins, 2015; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Muller, 2014; Rigney, 1999). Given the history of white research and the exploitation of Indigenous people, knowledge and skills, many Indigenous people remain sceptical of the research process (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Briskman, 2014; Rigney, 1999).

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the 'key instrument'; therefore, analysis of one's own position within the research project is vital (Creswell, 2014, p. 185). The researcher has a responsibility to introduce themselves and present their values, biases

and assumptions (Creswell, 2014; Miller, 1992). In relation to research with Aboriginal communities, Canadian Aboriginal researchers Absolon and Willett (2005) argued that research ‘cannot take place without the trust of the community, and one way to gain trust is to locate yourself’ (p. 107). I will now locate and explore my position as the researcher in this study.

As previously stated, I am both a non-Indigenous social worker who has worked in child protection and a non-Indigenous researcher researching in the Indigenous space. As a non-Indigenous researcher exploring this topic, I first must acknowledge that I am an insider and an outsider. The insider/outsider notion is explored by Gair (2012), who argued that the status of a researcher is the ‘degree to which a researcher is located within or outside a group being researched, because of her or his common lived experience’ (p. 137). Anti-oppressive researchers Potts and Brown (2005) argued that there is an insider/outsider dichotomy in all research situations, and that most researchers will find themselves ‘somewhere in the middle of the continuum’ (p. 265). I locate myself in the middle of the continuum and will now explore my dual status as an insider and outsider.

My experience working in the child protection sector positions me as an insider. I did find having an insider vantage point to be useful when engaging with the research participants. Working in the area of child protection has some unique challenges. The material to which child protection practitioners are exposed as part of their role can be so extreme that those outside the profession struggle to accept these experiences as a reality. My insider status allowed the participants the freedom to not have to defend or explain why certain practices are undertaken the way they are, or the nature of the work environment. Participants could state their experiences without having to justify their actions or convince me, as the researcher, of the validity of their account of events.

This study explores the experiences of Indigenous child protection workers. Indigenous researcher and academic Rigney (1999) argued the need for non-Indigenous researchers to analyse their membership within the dominant group when undertaking research in the Indigenous space. Although my femaleness gives me membership to a marginalised group, my racial background still provides me privileges not enjoyed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. My non-Indigeneity positions me as an outsider. In the context of being an outsider, I did experience some challenges and some profound realisations. I was distressed by some of the information provided to me by participants outlining their experiences as Indigenous people undertaking child protection work. Some of their experiences left me feeling shocked and in disbelief that these events could have happened to the participants. At no point did I doubt the validity of the participants' accounts; however, I was genuinely astounded by the level of marginalisation experienced by the participants in their workplaces. Some of the participants were shocked that I was shocked, particularly in relation to their experience of racism within their places of work. Incidents of racism were so frequent for many of the participants that they struggled to understand how I could not know the extent of those occurrences. Having been a child protection practitioner myself, the workplaces in which the participants experienced frequent incidents of racism were similar to ones in which I had worked. The participants presented to me the reality that, although I had shared the same workplace as Indigenous child protection workers, we had remarkably different experiences. My inability to see the isolation, marginalisation and oppression experienced by my Indigenous colleagues is a demonstration of my privilege as a non-Indigenous person. This situation of being oblivious to the experiences of Indigenous colleagues was explained by Walter, Taylor, and Habibis (2011), who wrote that 'social privileges of whiteness are invisible to those who benefit from them; it is so normal that

it is not even recognised as occurring' (p. 7). My chapter titled 'Being Indigenous and Undertaking Child Protection Work' outlines the participants' experiences of isolation, marginalisation and oppression in more detail.

I relied on the literature to build my understanding of how I, as a non-Indigenous researcher, could contribute positively to the research base, rather than using the knowledge of the participants solely for my own gain. Authors such as D'Cruz and Jones (2004); Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009); Chilisa (2012); and Rowe, Baldry, and Earles (2015) argued that there are appropriate ways for non-Indigenous researchers to engage in research with Indigenous people and communities that are inclusive, are respectful and acknowledge Indigenous knowledges as equal. Reyes-Cruz (as cited in as cited in Muller, 2014) argued:

while the ideology of decolonisation offers a fertile ground for Indigenous research, it presents an opportunity, an intellectual room of inquiry, to collaborate with colleagues who are not Indigenous to where they reside, to challenge oppression and marginalisation. (p. 75)

Indigenous Australian researchers such as Rigney (1999), Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009) and Muller (2014) argued that research with Indigenous people should ultimately benefit Indigenous people, and that the purpose of the research enquiry should be to inform public policy and strengthen social work practices. Chilisa (2012), a Botswanan academic who specialises in postcolonial research methodologies, argued that non-Indigenous researchers can be an instrument of decolonisation by employing postcolonial research methods. Decolonisation is defined by Native American academics Wilson and Yellow Bird (2005) as 'the intelligent, calculated and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies and lands' (p. 2). Australian author Prior (2007)

argued that decolonisation in a research context is a ‘collective process that should engage all parties: the colonised and the coloniser; the dominant and the marginalised’ (p. 167). Canadian Aboriginal academic Battiste (2000) suggested that decolonising practices can occur by ‘harmonising Indigenous knowledge with Eurocentric knowledge’ (p. xvi). Prior (2007) argued that:

decolonising research promotes a respectful relationship between participants and researchers based on trust and cooperation ... the value of equality means that the cultural wisdom, values and beliefs of Indigenous and other minority populations are valued as *equal* to the dominant cultural belief system. (p. 166)

Relying on the work of Battiste (2000), Prior (2007), Chilisa (2012), Rigney (1999), Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009) and Muller (2014), I suggest that non-Indigenous researchers do have a role to play in the Indigenous research space. Chilisa (2012) argued that the non-Indigenous researcher must ‘move the research from deficit and damage-centred research to investigation that builds communities and restores hope and belief in their capabilities to resolve challenges that they encounter’ (p. 174). I support Chilisa’s view. The desire to work with the research participants to effect change in the practice of non-Indigenous practitioners is the foundational goal underpinning this study. Further, I support the view of Canadian Aboriginal researchers Absolon and Willett (2005), who argued that, for many Aboriginal people, the process of research is equally important as the product at the end. With this sentiment, I will now introduce and discuss the methods used throughout the study.

3.5 Qualitative Research

This study relies on the stories of the participants to answer the primary research question: what are the experiences of Indigenous child protection workers? Qualitative research allows for a topic that has previously been unexplored to be explored

(Creswell, 2014). I chose a qualitative research methodology because it facilitated a focus on how others experience life and interpret meaning. Given that it was critical to capture the descriptions and meaning of the participants' experiences of working in the child protection field, a qualitative methodology was most appropriate (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). Creswell (2013) argued that researchers employ qualitative methods when:

we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue ... this detail can only be established by talking directly with people ... and allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature ... we conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimise the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study.
(p. 48)

Conversely, quantitative-based research aims to 'discover' universal social 'laws' and to test theories that explain causal relationships (Alston & Bowles, 1998, p. 9). The use of quantitative research methods, such as a participant survey, would not have provided me the opportunity to hear the participants' stories and explore their experiences to fully address the research question. Creswell (2013) argued that qualitative research methods are often chosen because 'measures and the statistical analyses simply do not fit the problem' and when researchers 'want to write in a literary flexible style that conveys stories' (p. 48).

3.6 Methods

Employing a research design underpinned by critical theory with a specific decolonisation lens positioned power constructs at the fore of my mind. Potts and Brown (2005) argued that 'power lurks in all our reflections and decisions' (p. 273) and

that the research process needs to be one of constant reflection. Chilisa (2012) argued that decolonising paradigms ‘enable scholars to interrogate power relations that arise between researchers and the researched’ (p. 49). Using critical theory and decolonising research theory as the frame, I will now discuss the methods used during the study that reflect that paradigm.

3.6.1 Cultural broker and mentor

I designed this study to include ongoing consultation with a cultural broker and mentor. I could not locate a uniform definition of a cultural broker in the literature. The role of a cultural broker and the way they are engaged in the research process varies between disciplines. However, for the purpose of this study, I rely on the definition provided by Meyer (2010), who stated that the role can include:

the identification and localisation of knowledge, the redistribution and dissemination of knowledge, and the rescaling and transformation of this knowledge ... brokering knowledge thus means far more than simply moving knowledge—it also means transforming knowledge. (p. 120)

I would now like to introduce Ms Kaylene Malthouse, the cultural broker who consulted on this study from the beginning. Ms Malthouse is an Upper Malanbarra Yidinji woman whose clan group is from the Goldsborough Valley region continuing up into the Gadgarra rainforest of the Atherton Tablelands. Ms Malthouse is a respected member of her community and, at the time of writing, was the chairperson of the North Queensland Land Council. Ms Malthouse is a strong advocate for the integration of Aboriginal history, knowledge and ways of working into contemporary child protection systems, including the recruitment and retention of Indigenous staff. Ms Malthouse is an experienced welfare worker within the child protection and education space, and played a pivotal role within this research project. I first met Ms Malthouse while I was

working in a statutory child protection role in a rural area. Ms Malthouse worked in the non-statutory child protection sector at that time, yet took a position with the statutory child protection authority for whom I worked. We enjoyed a close working relationship based on mutual trust and respect. After I left that position, Ms Malthouse and I remained in close contact.

I involved Ms Malthouse from the conception of the research topic to gauge whether it was a topic that needed exploration and whether people would be interested in participating. Ms Malthouse was approached to undertake duties as a cultural broker and mentor on this study because of her strong cultural knowledge, position within the community and experience within the child protection sector. Ms Malthouse assisted me to gain access to knowledge that would not otherwise have been easily attainable for me, especially as a non-Indigenous researcher. This aspect of Ms Malthouse's role is consistent with Wenger (1998), who argued that cultural brokering within a research context 'involves processes of translation, coordination, and alignment between perspectives ... it also requires the ability to link practices by facilitating transactions between them' (p. 109).

Throughout the research period, Ms Malthouse and I held regular meetings or 'yarns', usually with food, coffee and lots of stories and laughter. During these meetings, we discussed where the study was placed, how the research was progressing and any arising challenges. Broader political and cultural discussion pertaining to Indigenous people and policy was also a strong feature of these meetings. The presence of broad socio-political realities for Indigenous people in our interactions was critical in strengthening my ability to step back from my mainstream experience of the world and to consider alternative perspectives.

During the period that this research was undertaken—between 2015 and 2017—a number of significant events occurred on a national level that had wide-ranging effects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Some of those events included the campaign for the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution, including the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, which advocated for a treaty and standalone body representing Indigenous people in the parliament; the tenth anniversary of the Apology to the Stolen Generations by Kevin Rudd; the twentieth anniversary of the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families also known as the ‘Bringing Them Home’ report’ (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, 1997), the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 referendum that led to Indigenous people being recognised as full citizens of Australia; and the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory (Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, *Voices: what children have told us*, 2017).

Locating the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia on a macro national scale indicated to me that the quest for sovereignty, ownership, recognition and control is an ongoing struggle for Indigenous people. Canadian researchers Fornssler, McKenzie, Dell, Laliberte, and Hopkins (2014) argued that engaging cultural brokers in the research process ‘helps generate an ethical space for research by transforming knowledge’ (p. 183). Through Ms Malthouse engaging me in these discussions, I was able to sharpen my view of the power and control that the state still holds over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. My wider focus also allowed me to understand how the struggle for recognition and sovereignty is replicated in other interactions between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and

the state. Of most relevance in this study is the struggle for enhanced control over the processes pertaining to Indigenous children who require investigation and/or statutory intervention by child protective authorities.

3.6.2 Indigenous advisory panel

My initial research design included the formulation and use of an Indigenous advisory panel. I anticipated the role of the advisory group to be a consultative body that could also act as a conduit between the sector and myself as the researcher; to engage in regular robust discussions about the research topic, informed by current policy and practice within the sector, thereby adding depth to the project; and to review the findings of the project and advise on strategic dissemination strategies relevant to influencing policy and practice to improve outcomes.

Despite prolonged attempts to establish this panel in more than an ad hoc manner, the use of an advisory panel as outlined in the original research design did not reach fruition. There were numerous reasons why this element of the research design could not proceed, including serious illness, time constraints, family commitments and lack of employer approval to participate.

3.6.3 Ethics approval

As discussed earlier in this chapter, research has been used as a tool to oppress Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in Australia (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013; Coram, 2011; Porsanger, 2004; Prior, 2007; Rigney, 1999). The document *Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research (2003)* ‘provides guidance to researchers and Human Research Ethics Committees on the complex considerations necessary in the conception, design and conduct of appropriate research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities’ (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2003). The impetus for the above document originated from a conference held in Alice

Springs in 1986, hosted by the Special Purposes Committee of the NHMRC and the Menzies School of Health Research (Dudgeon, Kelly, & Walker, 2010). The conference, titled *Research Priorities to Improve Aboriginal Health*, was the first in Australia to challenge the ethics of Western-centric research practices with Indigenous people and communities, and to ‘highlight concerns about matters of ownership and control of the research agenda in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts’ (Dudgeon et al., 2010, p. 82). From the conference, a working party was formed, which produced the *Interim Guidelines on Ethical Matters in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research* (NHMRC, 1991). In 2003, the NHMRC revised and re-issued the guidelines and gave them the title mentioned above—*Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research* (NHMRC, 2003). I note that, at the time of writing, these guidelines were under review by the NHMRC.

I relied on these guidelines (NHMRC, 2003) when drafting my research proposal to ensure that my study would be ethically sound. The guidelines indicate six core values: spirit and integrity, reciprocity, respect, equality, survival and protection, and responsibility (NHMRC, 2003). With the assistance of Indigenous ethics advisor Professor Yvonne Cadet-James, I incorporated these six values into my research proposal and study design. An example is the inclusion of an Indigenous advisory panel. Another example is an expanded dissemination strategy that included non-traditional methods, such as the provision of a formal summarised results document for participants to provide to their employers and/or organisations. This strategy was in recognition that not all practitioners and organisations have access to academic journals, which is the location in which the results of doctoral studies are traditionally published. I am a strong proponent of the view that the creation of knowledge should be used as a

vehicle for change. My view is supported by Australian academic, L. Smith (2010), who argued that:

ethical research practices are not simply about ‘doing the right thing’, but are framed by wider struggles for recognition and social justice ... ethical research, if theorised in this way, must lead to rethinking the values, knowledge claims and discourses that researchers both work within and promulgate. (p. 60)

My application to the James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee was for approval to conduct my study as a research Category 4—that is, ‘with the potential to cause genuine but not severe psychological distress or physical pain with no long term effects’. A rating of 4 was in acknowledgement of the sensitivity of the research topic for participants. The proposed research methodology received clearance from James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: H6266) in August 2015 for a period of 12 months. An extension of six months until 31 March 2017 was subsequently approved by the ethics committee. The research presented in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the NHMRC *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007*.

3.6.4 Sampling and recruitment

A purposive sampling method was used to identify potential participants—that is, participants who self-identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and who had worked or were currently working in the child protection service system within Queensland. Neuman (2014) stated that purposive sampling is often used in qualitative research to ‘select members of a difficult to reach, specialised population’ (p. 274). Indigenous child protection workers are a specialised population as defined by Neuman (2014). Non-government organisations that deliver child protection services were approached and asked to disseminate the participant information. Programs delivered by these services included Recognised Entity, intensive family support, family preservation

and reunification services. I also approached the AASW with the study proposal. The project was endorsed by the AASW and was subsequently advertised on their website and in their monthly newsletters sent to the membership base.

Thirty-one enquiries were received, and 13 people chose to progress to an interview. When individuals provided reasons for not continuing, even when they had signed their consent documents, was time constraints both at work and outside of work. I provided potential respondents with a participant information sheet (Appendix 1), a consent form (Appendix 2) and a list of prompt interview questions (Appendix 3) prior to consent being obtained.

3.6.5 Consent procedure

Once identified as eligible to participate, I asked respondents to sign an informed consent document. I informed the participants of the purpose of the project, the way the interviews would be conducted, and the way I intended to use the results. Potential participants were invited to take some time to consider the information contained within the documents. I informed the participants that they were under no obligation to consent to participate during our first meeting, and that they could withdraw their consent at any time. The participants were also invited to contact me or Ms Malthouse via telephone or email with any questions or concerns they might have.

All the participants held positions with the government and/or with government-funded organisations. Therefore, I did not consider literacy a potential barrier to gaining informed participant consent in writing. I provided verbal explanations to the participants and provided the option of consulting with Ms Malthouse in the role of cultural broker.

3.6.6 Ensuring the wellbeing of participants

As per James Cook University's ethical requirements of undertaking research with people, I designed this study with recognition of my responsibility to do no harm to the participants. The emotional safety of the participants was of paramount priority, particularly given the poor experiences Indigenous people have had with researchers historically (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Bennett, 2013; Muller, 2014; Westerman, 1997). The participant information sheet outlined a suggestion that participants should consider identifying people within their networks who could offer them support should they require it after the interviews. This suggestion was included in recognition of the difficult subject matter to be discussed in participant interviews. In addition, participants were provided with relevant contact details for support and counselling services, and were given the option to contact Ms Malthouse in her capacity as the project's cultural broker. I also followed up with the participants by email, one or two days after the interview, to see how they were feeling and if I could provide them with any assistance.

3.6.7 The participants

I interviewed 13 child protection practitioners who self-identified as Indigenous Australian—that is, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Eight participants identified as Aboriginal, three identified as Torres Strait Islander and two identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Twelve participants were female and one was male.

All 13 participants had occupied positions that delivered child protection services to children and families, either in a statutory or non-statutory capacity, or including a combination of the two. Three participants had statutory experience with an average length of experience of nine years, four participants had statutory and non-statutory experience with an average length of 10 years, and six participants had only non-statutory experience with an average length of 11.5 years. Additionally, six

participants had supervisory experience across the statutory and non-statutory child protection sector.

The participants' qualifications were varied. Nine held bachelor degree qualifications, while four held certificate or diploma qualifications or were currently studying to obtain a bachelor's degree. The majority of the participants' work experience was located in Queensland.

3.6.8 Data collection method: Semi-structured in-depth interviews

I employed semi-structured in-depth interviewing as the primary data collection method during this study. As a qualitative method of data collection, in-depth interviewing is used to access knowledge of 'meanings and interpretations that individuals give to their lives and events' (Minichiello, 1995, p. 1). Semi-structured in-depth interviewing provided opportunities for the participants to explain their experiences in a comprehensive manner. With the participants driving what they wished to share in the interview process, a level of control was shifted from the researcher to those participating in the research (Potts & Brown, 2005; Prior, 2007). In the interviews, I became the 'facilitator', rather than the 'expert' (Minichiello et al., 2008). The adoption of in-depth interviews as a data collection method provided the participants with the opportunity to present their world from their perspective, and to explain their experiences in as much depth as they wished (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Neuman (2014) argued that the people interviewed in this setting 'are active participants whose insights, feelings and cooperation are essential parts of a discussion process that reveals subjective meanings' (p. 461).

Creswell (2013) argued that interviewing as a qualitative research method has some limitations—namely, that the information conveyed is filtered through the views of the participants. I argue that this is not a limitation in the context of this study, but

rather a desired outcome. Neuman (2014) wrote that people ‘continually create and define social life through their daily interactions’ and ‘filter human experiences through an ongoing, fluid, subjective sense of reality that shapes how we see and act on events’ (p. 435). The ‘filtering’ to which Neuman referred is the voice of the participants, who I acknowledge are the expert tellers of their own experience. It was the voice of the participants that enabled me to address the research question: what are the experiences of Indigenous child protection workers? In-depth interviews also provided the participants with the space to explore and discuss the changes they would like to see occur as a result of their participation in the study.

The structure of the interviews involved open-ended questions that were kept to a minimum to encourage free discussion and participants to focus on the issues they felt were important. The broad focus allowed the participants to freely and comprehensively discuss their experiences within a defined scope. The prompt questions I provided to participants were based on the three core aims of the study: (i) to explore the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who work in the child protection field, (ii) to explore the effects of historical trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians and its symptomology within a child protection workplace, and (iii) to explore participant views of culturally responsive models of support for Indigenous workers within the child protection system.

The provision of prompt questions gave the participants an opportunity to thoroughly understand the scope of the project, and to build trust between the participant group and myself as the researcher. Absolon and Willett (2005) wrote that:

Aboriginal peoples have been misrepresented and exploited for countless generations as the subjects of academic, ‘scientific’ studies conducted by non-Aboriginals ... as a result, Aboriginal communities today are no longer content

to be passive objects of ‘scientific’ study, but demand to know who is doing the research and for what purposes. (pp. 106–107)

By providing a list of questions beforehand, the participants were assured that there would be no surprise questions that would place them in difficult or embarrassing situations. Alston and Bowles (2012) referred to the sharing of interview questions as good ethical research practice because it furthers a participant’s ability to give full informed consent. Similarly, Neuman (2014) argued that ‘it is not enough to obtain permission; people need to know what they are being asked to participate in ... only then can they make an informed decision’ (p. 151). I also informed the participants that they could answer all, some or none of the questions listed.

The participants were also offered the opportunity to meet with me prior to their ‘real’ interview. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, I felt that it was important that the participants knew explicitly what they were consenting to, what the project was about and how their information would be used. As Alston and Bowles (2012) wrote, this method fosters a partnership between the researcher and participants.

The participants were invited to be interviewed individually, in pairs, in groups or with a support person present. Critical theory recognises the inherent power imbalances between the researcher and the researched (Reeves et al., 2008). Thus, the invitation to bring a support person to the interviews was a strategy I employed to help balance the power dynamic and to increase the comfort of the participants, given the sensitive nature of the interview topic. However, I acknowledge that the power imbalance between the researcher and research participants can never be truly negated.

The location of interviewing varied depending on the wishes of the individual participants. The participants were given the choice of the location they wished their interview to occur and whether they would like to participate in a one-off interview or

would prefer a few sessions over a period of time. This extended period was offered to allow for additional interviews or ‘catch-up yarns’ to occur with participants, should they wish. The interview locations included private rooms within the participants’ place of employment, as well as via telephone or Skype.

3.6.9 Recording procedure

Participant interviews were audio-recorded with their consent. Recording the interviews allowed me to fully focus on the narrative being shared by the participants. All except one participant gave consent for their interview to be recorded. For the participant who did not consent to being recorded, I wrote comprehensive notes during the interview, with their consent. The recorded interviews were sent to a professional agency for transcription. Transcription services were paid for by me, as the researcher. The participants were provided with either the verbatim transcripts or written notes taken during the interview to make adjustments, additions or deletions. Transcripts were provided to the participants for their approval prior to any formal analysis process commencing.

3.7 Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the purpose of analysis is to interpret the data for meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Neuman, 2014). Once the participants had approved their interview transcripts, the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo. However, after every interview, I sought common themes and phrasing to identify emerging trends early. Being cognisant of emerging patterns within the narratives of participants early in the process allowed me to detect trends more keenly and include those areas in subsequent interviews. This method of qualitative analysis is consistent with Alston and Bowles’s (1998) argument that qualitative data analysis ‘occurs simultaneously with data collection’ (p. 193). No expected themes were

identified prior to commencement of the analysis. Themes of importance to the research participants emerged through examination of the data.

Data analysis occurred through initial and subsequent coding. The first full set of coded data was separated into umbrella themes, which initially yielded six main analysis areas. Data were then read and re-read. This deductive data analysis process allowed a comprehensive set of themes and subthemes to be developed, which is consistent with the way that Creswell (2014) described the thematic analysis process:

Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up by organising the data into increasingly more abstract units of information. This inductive process illustrates working back and forth between the themes and the database until the researchers have established a comprehensive set of themes. (p. 186)

Umbrella themes became more refined until the final analysis was produced, which included three umbrella themes and subsequent subthemes. The three umbrella themes were: (i) being Indigenous in child protection, (ii) supervision and support and (iii) organisation and practice issues. Relying on Silverman (2006), two steps were incorporated into the analysis to increase the validity of the identified themes—namely, the ‘constant comparison method’, which is the continual comparison of data between cases, and the ‘searching for deviant cases’ method, whereby data that do not fit the pattern of the majority are analysed thoroughly (Silverman, 2006, pp. 209–226). The analysis map function of NVivo was used to create a visual representation of coded data to assist with ‘interpreting data for meaning’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 81). I used the visual representation of the analysed data from the participant interviews to structure the three findings chapters of this thesis.

3.7.1 The use of direct participant quotations

At the time of writing, no previous research had explored the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection practitioners in an Australian context. I designed this study to enable participants to tell their story in their own words, as they had seen and experienced it. Consistent with a decolonising research framework, all participants were valued as experts, informed by their experience of the world. Hearing narratives informed by participant experience allows the ingrained inequalities between the researcher and researched to be exposed, particularly when the participants belong to a marginalised group (Briskman, 2014). D’Cruz and Jones (2004) also argued that ‘stories are important for groups who have been oppressed and marginalized, for they are a means of reclaiming knowledge about experiences that dominant groups have taken over or interpreted within prevalent frameworks of knowing’ (p. 120). Huggins (1998) argued that academic scholarship is a valid way to present the narratives of Aboriginal people in a raw and unedited manner. Neuman (2014) agreed and added that a benefit of eliciting data from qualitative interviews is that participants can express their views of the world in their own way. Huggins (1998) wrote that ‘you can shape all the words around it, but don’t touch or tamper with that vibrant, rich and purposeful, natural, spontaneous language’ (pp. 122–123). Consequently, I have framed all three findings chapters to rely heavily on excerpts from the transcribed participant interviews.

The three findings chapters presented later in this thesis are saturated with the voices of the participants, including their worries, fears, achievements and views on how to create change. The direct quotations used within this thesis were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings of the participant interviews. I removed superfluous words such as ‘um,’ ‘yeah’ and ‘like’ from the transcripts to enhance ease of reading. The removal of these words in no way changed the content of the participants’ narratives.

Contained within the transcribed material were many compelling stories shared by the participants as examples of the views that they held. A number of these stories contained identifying information about the participant, the participant's location or the participant's clients. For confidentiality purposes, the details of these stories could not be included. However, they still informed my interpretation of the data. The omission of these details also acknowledges the small size of the child protection sector in Queensland, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners.

3.7.3 Pseudonyms

I asked the participants to nominate the pseudonym they wished to be known by in this thesis and any subsequent publications. Many of the participants chose to use names related to relatives who had a special significance in their lives. In particular, a number of participants chose to use their grandmother's name. One participant shared a story about their grandparents being stripped of their birth names and given infantilised Western names. This not only resulted in humiliation, but also caused difficulty for the subsequent generation to trace their ancestral origins. The significance of being known by one's birth name to Indigenous Australians cannot be underestimated, especially because a strategy used by the colonisers to sever cultural connection was the removal of given names, which were replaced with European names (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013).

3.7.4 Validity and reliability

In relation to validity in qualitative research, Hammersley (1987) argued that research can only be 'considered valid if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise' (p. 67). Other authors—such as Neuman (2014), Silverman and Seale (2005) and Winter (2000)—simplified the definition of validity in qualitative research to be truth in all its representations. I

designed this study to ensure that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection practitioners who participated in the study were the expert tellers of their truth as they had experienced it. Corbin and Strauss (2015) argued that the role of qualitative researchers is ‘to do the best that they can to maintain the integrity of the data and represent as accurately as possible the intent of the participants’ (p. 81). This is the role that I strived to fulfil as researcher.

Creswell (2014) suggested the inclusion of ‘validity strategies’ into qualitative research to ‘enhance the researcher’s ability to assess the accuracy of findings as well as convince readers of that accuracy’ (p. 201). This study incorporated two of the strategies suggested by Creswell (2014) to assist with maintaining the validity and reliability of data analysis—namely, member checking and clarifying the bias. Member checking, as defined by Creswell (2014), involves the researcher taking the description of their findings back to the ‘members’ who participated in the study to enable them the opportunity to reflect on, comment on and check the data analysis and interpretation for accuracy. As previously noted, the participants in this study were sent copies of the findings and discussion chapters for their review and comment prior to publication.

In relation to reliability, I relied on two strategies outlined by G. Gibbs (2007). First, I checked the transcripts twice to ensure no obvious mistakes were made during the transcription process. This was particularly important because the transcription of the participant interviews was completed by a professional transcription agency. Second, to eliminate blurring of the codes during analysis, I constantly compared the data back to the original analysis codes. Additionally, I wrote notes against the codes in an ongoing manner to ensure clarity during the analysis process.

3.8 Limitations

As with any study, this research comes with some limitations. As discussed previously, some of the research participants were known to me through my previous role as a supervisor within the statutory and non-government child protection service system. I am aware that this may have resulted in participants feeling compelled to participate, or equally feeling that they could not. I have no information either way to substantiate these statements; however, it is an issue to be aware of.

Statutory child protection services in Australia are administered through individual states and territories; thus, legislation and practice vary widely (Briggs, 2012). The majority of the participant pool drew on work experience that was based in Queensland. Therefore, elements of this study may not have relevance across all jurisdictions.

I approached the research unit within the Department of Communities, Child Safety Services [CSS]—the statutory child protection body in Queensland—requesting permission to contact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people currently employed by them, so they could have the option to participate in the study. As a result of the internal protocols of CSS, permission could not be granted. Subsequently, only people who had left their position with CSS at the time of writing were eligible to participate.

The majority of participants in the study were women. While this is reflective of the female-dominated human services industry, it must be acknowledged that the inclusion of more male voices could have influenced the findings of this study.

Given my location in Cairns, Far North Queensland, it was not feasible to offer all interested parties a face-to-face interview. Cost restrictions also rendered travel by plane unfeasible. My inability to offer face-to-face interviews may have been a barrier to people who would otherwise have been interested in participating. Further, interviews conducted by telephone and Skype did impede my ability to observe non-verbal cues.

My inability to observe some non-verbal communication could have influenced my interpretation of the interview data.

3.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the research design and theoretical underpinnings of the study. I also introduced the methods used and the rationale for their inclusion. The following three chapters will present and discuss the findings from the study. The chapters are titled ‘Being Indigenous and Undertaking Child Protection Work’; ‘Trauma, Support and Supervision’; and ‘Statutory Organisational and Practice Issues’.

Chapter 4: Being Indigenous and Undertaking Child Protection Work

4.1 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I present the experiences of the study participants who described what undertaking child protection work had been like for them. These experiences relate specifically to their cultural identity as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in child protection. While the experiences of each participant were unique, there were some commonalities that were consistently described and shared through interviews that indicated the possibility that these experiences are generally shared by Indigenous child protection workers.

To enhance the clarity of the narrative, I have grouped the shared participant experiences into two core areas. The first group relates to those participants who described self, family and community views of being involved in child protection work. The second group relates to the participants' experiences of racism and its manifestation and effects on child protection work. Both these areas as described by participants will be explored and discussed throughout this chapter.

4.2 Introduction

As discussed in previous chapters, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians' past interactions with child protective authorities have not been conducive to developing collaborative and trusting contemporary relationships. Briskman (2014) argued that the social construction of race divides communities into those who hold power and those who are subordinate and inferior. In the Australian context, European colonisers established themselves as the dominant culture, claiming superiority over

Australia's First People by using strategies such as racial stereotyping and Darwinism to ensure the continuation of their dominance (Briskman, 2014; Mullaly, 2002).

Previous child protection policies allowed the state to assume guardianship of all Aboriginal children without parental consent, on the premise that Aboriginal parents were not the optimal people to raise Aboriginal children. Assimilation into European culture through education and instruction in civility was to be pursued (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013). The removal of children—including the subsequent severed connection to family and destruction of culture—was also a way for the colonisers to oppress the Aboriginal population and assume control of their land (Bennett, 2013). For many Indigenous Australians, this policy of forced removals of Aboriginal children from their families and communities was the beginning of the trauma-based issues presently facing contemporary Indigenous communities (Atkinson, 2002; Haskell & Randall, 2009; Stamm et al., 2004). As previous chapters have highlighted, the literature supports the link between the experience of historical trauma and the conditions that support the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in a contemporary context (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013; Briskman, 2003; Cunneen & Libesman, 2000; Herring et al., 2013; King et al., 2009; Memmott et al., 2001).

As has been discussed in previous chapters, most Western research paradigms exclude Indigenous voices. This is one way in which control is exerted over the production of knowledge (Muller, 2014) and the nature of authentic and legitimate knowledge (Fook, 2012). Hearing Indigenous voices is a way of decolonising the research process from a white Western paradigm, where the researcher is the expert and the 'researched' are only informants (Coram, 2011; Prior, 2007; Rigney, 1999). Therefore, throughout this chapter, the voices of the participants are at the fore. The participants' own words are presented to describe their experiences. However, I

acknowledge that I play the role of mediator for the stories shared, as I am the author of this thesis. Therefore, I have sought to make myself visible in the process by purposefully using first person. I acknowledge that the participants are the experts on their own experiences as Indigenous child protection workers. Equally, as a non-Indigenous person, I have not shared the same experiences as the participants and acknowledge that there will be limits to my ability to completely eliminate my Western research lens. However, I am committed to honouring the voices of the participants by treating them ‘with due respect’ (Briskman, 2007, pp. 234–235).

4.3 Motivations, Expectations and Challenges

In the first instance, I asked the participants to share what drew them to undertake child protection work. Most participants described helping others to be a core value of their culture and subsequently their identity. For many of the participants, their motivation to undertake child protection work was linked to their identity as Indigenous Australians: ‘It’s in our DNA’ (Isabella).

Many participants felt that it was their role to work with their people and communities to improve the outcomes for children and families. The Indigenous participants stated that they viewed themselves as a conduit between the ‘white man’s’ child protection system, their people and their communities. The participants’ views were consistent with Zon et al. (2004), who found that Aboriginal child protection workers in the Northern Territory deeply felt a responsibility to change and improve child protection practices for their people and community. Some participants shared their deep desire to work within their communities, to work with their people, and to give back for the upbringing that they felt privileged to have had:

For me, when people ask me, ‘How can you do that job? That would be so horrible’, I say that I grew up with a mum and dad and I grew up with a strong

grandmother and strong cultural beliefs. For me to go out and see family and mob that haven't been given that same opportunity in life is my way of giving back to my people ... I feel it's my turn to give back to my people and give the best of myself to them. I know that I had it good—I had a good, strong upbringing. A lot of people weren't able to have that because of the life experiences and the history of what they went through. (Missy)

The participants consistently linked privilege to being strongly connected to family and culture. Some participants spoke of their motivation to end the disconnection from family and community felt by Indigenous children in state care. Other participants shared that they had experienced disconnection from their own family and community growing up, and felt a strong desire to assist children and young people in the same situation to reconnect to their culture and community:

I suppose because I started so young in researching the family history and wanting to know about my family, it was important for me to give back to society the good upbringing I had ... this is where I want to make the difference. I want to be able to make sure the kids go home to the family members.
(Rosalyn)

A professional role in relation to providing cultural advice and support across the office. I took on that role because that's who I am ... I argue with managers that I'm an Aboriginal officer first ... working for community and being a member of that community. (Sarah)

There were different views among participants relating to how they viewed themselves individually as child protection workers, influenced by the type of child protection work they undertook. The participants who had worked in the non-statutory area of child protection described themselves as having great empathy for the

Indigenous clients with whom they worked. Further, they described themselves as ‘helping’ and ‘supporting’ their communities, which was a source of pride for them and often for their families:

Sometimes when working with other Indigenous families, I can really relate to them in a way ... I can just picture myself and be like, ‘Yeah, you know, this could have been me sometimes and I know exactly what you’re going through’.

(Grace)

However, those who had worked in the statutory child protection area described conflict within themselves. Their values were challenged constantly and they expressed despair at being unable to make a tangible difference for their people who were ‘in the system’:

It does feel like a fail, and I think I do take that a little bit personally sometimes. Like, you always think there’s more that I could have done, or that’s another—you know, it’s like, it’s another black family in the system. (Grace)

The motivation to enter the area of child protection was similar for most of the participants, regardless of the type of work they undertook with children and families. However, the way in which the participants viewed themselves within the child protection system differed depending on the statutory or non-statutory nature of their duties. When reflecting on how their families felt about them undertaking child protection work, the participants described a range of responses, ranging from pride to concern:

My mum was happy ... so proud. My dad actually sat me down and said, ‘Are you going to be right with this? I think that you need to really sit down and understand what it is that you’re getting into’. (David)

My mum ... she was going, ‘You don’t want to go there’, and I’m like ‘I know, but I think this will be a good experience’, so—and it was in the sense that I

learnt so much about how the system works, my own values and what I will and will not compromise on. (Emma)

They think I'm courageous ... they all supported me strongly, understood why I did the job that I do. They didn't like sometimes the long hours that I'd spend at work and/or the way that it would affect me. (Rosalyn)

Indigenous researchers Green et al. (2013) examined the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking a bachelor of social work degree found that choosing to enter the profession of social work can draw harsh criticism from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners' communities. Many people hold the view that choosing to undertake child protection work is indicative of 'becoming assimilated into such a system and walking away from their family and community' (Green et al., 2013, p. 210). Some of the participants in this study similarly described receiving negative responses from their family and community for undertaking child protection work, which sometimes affected their family life and wellbeing. Some families reportedly struggled to understand why their family member would want to work for the government, given the history between Indigenous Australians and child protective authorities:

Well, I think because a lot of her family, them being part of the Stolen Generation—because of what happened with my great grandmother and the fact that they were forced to give up their culture, they sort of view it as a bit of a betrayal in some ways. So a lot of the extended family struggle to understand how I could stay in that role for as long as I did. (Alice)

It is difficult for Indigenous workers because they've got dilemmas. They have the pull between family responsibility, staying with your cultural roots, your

values there, or working within a very structured system where history has not been kind to Indigenous people. (Elvina)

Many participants discussed balancing the expectations of their community with the professional expectations of their role as child protection workers:

Because there's that sense of community responsibility and community expectation for us and that everything that you do should be of benefit for the community as a whole. (Alice)

The participants sometimes found community-based pressures challenging; however, no one described their key position within their communities as unwanted. Although described as frustrating and difficult to juggle, the examples shared by the participants identified how their role in their communities was shaped by their work and shared with a sense of pride. Being the 'go-to person' within a community because of their child protection knowledge was described by some participants as a positive aspect of their work: 'One of the positives is that I can give my family information about how investigation works if something happens' (Alice).

The participants confirmed that there is often an expectation within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community that workers will be available in an informal capacity outside of their paid work hours to manage any child protection-related matters that may arise. This could include questions about processes, such as how to make a child protection notification and where a person can seek parenting support. In addition, the participants needed to manage community expectations, such as requests for confidential information regarding open investigations, and the expectation to support children who arrived unexpectedly at their houses needing somewhere safe to stay:

It never leaves you, it finds you everywhere you go. (Isabella)

People have come to my house to notify concerns and I listened and gave advice. (Veronica)

I got pulled up putting petrol in my car one day by a family who just recognised me and, yeah, just came and had a chat with me while I was putting petrol in my car. So, you can't run away from it ... you kind of forget it because it just happens. It's common. It happens to all of us. (David)

Indigenous writers Calma and Priday (2011) and Menzies and Gilbert (2013) argued that balancing roles can be challenging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners, particularly for those who work in their own community. The participants in this study also identified challenges and difficulties associated with these high expectations:

she got really burnt out. There was a lot of pressure on her from her community. There was a lot of pressure from the office and she got very ill towards the end. (Alice)

I have to live out there. I have to go out and remove children from families that probably have relationships with the extended family that I know. You know what I mean? I've got to engage with these people. I go to community functions. I go to NAIDOC [National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee]. I go to openings. I go to funerals. Are you going to engage with these people? There's no acknowledgement how difficult that is when you've just gone and snatched their children. Or they blame you. (Sarah)

However, the participants shared both benefits and challenges that arise from working in the same community in which they lived. The participants discussed that, regardless of the size of the place one lives, the Indigenous community is very small in comparison to the non-Indigenous community. Additionally, the participants described that knowing

family ties and cultural links is an integral part of Australian Indigenous identity, rendering them even more visible within their communities. Some participants described feeling a consistent pressure to ensure that their work benefited their community, rather than contributing to further disadvantage and trauma:

It can be really, really beneficial and then it can be not so beneficial ... you want to help your community, but at the same time, being local, [name of town] is a small place, but when you're Indigenous, it's even smaller. It is difficult ... You want to help, but it can be hard. I think because the Torres Strait Islander community is very small and everyone knows your family, so I think once they make the connection of who you belong to, it can be really difficult. (Grace)

I was constantly asking questions because I needed to be at peace with myself and those decisions, and go home and try and function with my family and my community. (Sarah)

The participants described this constant visibility to be challenging at times. Moreover, they further stated that the increased visibility because of their work in child protection could also extend to other members of their family, including their children:

Like I said before, a member of the community that you work in, there's no anonymity. People know where you live or, if they don't, they're going to find out through family and family and family. I used to have people going past my house and swearing at me. I used to have to shop not at the shopping centre down the road, but one three hours over. It's not just clients. It's carers.

Everyone wants a piece of you constantly ... it's not 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. (Mary)

Australia's history of systematically eroding the cultural, social and economic fabric of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has created ingrained fear and mistrust of authorities that continues into a contemporary context (Harms et al.,

2011; Menzies & Gilbert, 2013; Walter, Taylor, & Habibis, 2013). An inherent power imbalance exists between those who have been oppressed and those seen to represent the oppressors, such as child protective authorities and other government representatives (Briskman, 2007; Menzies & Gilbert, 2013). In this context, the negative reactions of the participants' families towards the participants' work for child protective authorities were not unexpected. Briskman (2014) reinforced this experience when highlighting that social work with Aboriginal communities has been focused on the resolution of 'Indigenous troubles', as defined by Western paradigms, rather than by working with Indigenous people and communities towards an outcome defined by Indigenous people, such as 'sovereignty, land justice, cultural recognition and acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledge' (p. 16). Despite the difficulties described both in the literature and by the participants of being an Indigenous person and undertaking child protection work, the participants still expressed a strong desire to continue working towards making a difference in the lives of the children and families in their communities.

4.3.1 Confidentiality and Family

Indigenous social workers Menzies and Gilbert (2013) argued that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers are accountable to both their culture and their profession in way that other social workers are not' (p. 53). Many participants shared examples of pressures that can arise from within their family group as a result of their work in the child protection sector. Some participants shared the difficulties they have experienced when members of their family find themselves being investigated by statutory child protection services. The participants shared how challenging it can be to manage regular requests to obtain confidential information, and the precarious position that places them in:

He called me up straight away as soon as they left and told me what had happened and asked me if I could look in the system. When I told him, ‘I can’t do that. This is confidential information. It would be me basically ignoring my contract, ignoring all of the things that I had signed’, and then he put a lot of pressure on me. ‘Well, what’s worth more, your contract or your relationship with your family?’ That’s not fair ... Again, because of gender and age and generational issues, I didn’t feel comfortable saying to him, ‘Well, maybe you shouldn’t have been involved in DV [domestic violence] with your partner’, although that’s what I was thinking. You know, ‘Don’t hit your wife. That’s not okay either. We wouldn’t be in this predicament if that hadn’t happened’. But of course, I couldn’t say that to him. (Alice)

Some participants described a refusal to disclose confidential information leading to being ostracised by their family for a time. Some of the ostracising behaviour experienced by participants included being whispered or gossiped about, being excluded from family events and being verbally and physically threatened: “‘Because you work there, so you should stop them or you should have warned me’”. We get that a lot’ (Sarah). All participants who shared experiences of managing family and community requests for confidential information used the strategy of reiterating that they were not in a position to share that information, and directing people to the appropriate avenues:

You just kind of have to wear your privacy and confidentiality on your sleeve and it’s like, ‘Can’t talk about that, can’t talk about that, sorry’, but give them opportunities and avenues of where they may be able to seek that information. Or if it’s straight out, ‘It doesn’t matter where you go, brother, you’re not going to get that information. That’s that person’s information’. So it’s hard, but you know—it’s dinners, it’s family events, birthdays. (David)

People have come to my house to notify concerns and I listened and gave advice ... sometimes people approach me in shopping centres, but they mostly know me from when I worked at [name of workplace] and they know I can't say anything. (Veronica)

Although the participants described working in their own community as difficult at times, they shared a great sense of pride that they were in a position to help and give back to their communities. The participants also described a sense of comradery with other Indigenous child protection practitioners because they shared a unique and important role within their communities.

4.3.2 Organisational Expectations and Lack of Awareness

Many participants shared experiences that related specifically to their Indigeneity and their work in the child protection field. The participants described feeling a sense of expectation and pressure from their agency because of their Indigeneity. For example, many participants described their agency's expectation that they would know all the details about every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issue:

I guess the other issue that I always found was if you become recognised as being Indigenous, you're supposed to know everything. I'm from [name of town] and, until I moved here, I'd never seen a Torres Strait Islander person in my life. That's a very different culture to Aboriginal. (Mary)

I think as a black worker in a white organisation, it can be really, like, you get pressure. (Grace)

Happens all the time. Walk into a room, you're the only one there. Walk into a room and Welcome to Country has to happen—it doesn't matter where you could be from ... they ask you to do it. (Isabella)

Some participants described an internal struggle or even fear of not meeting the expectations of their workplace because of their exposure to many of the same issues with which clients of the child protection system struggle:

The big thing that I've told a lot of professionals and colleagues too is there seems to be this perception ... that because you're a professional ... you are immune to the transgenerational trauma as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person ... we're members of this Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and suffer the same trauma that a lot of our clients do. There's just an expectation that you're immune ... the trauma doesn't affect you. You're different. (Sarah)

I had fears of me becoming a CSO because of my personal history. (Rosalyn)

Some participants discussed their constant anxiety of not being good enough or being unfairly judged by non-Indigenous colleagues: 'I'm a human being. I had issues in my life. There shouldn't be any shame attached to that' (Sarah). Other participants described altering the way they spoke to appear more professional in the eyes of their non-Indigenous colleagues:

Language for us is—so we talk about broken English and proper English. We don't speak proper English at home. So we constantly straddle two worlds. And so I struggle sometimes even now where—it's really horrible because you have these moments where you're like, I'm dumb, I don't get this stuff. And it's because—we just—and sometimes I actually cannot find the words to describe it. And I try to. (Isabella)

Niemann (2003) argued that minority groups are 'continually aware of putting their best foot forward so as to not negatively affect perceptions of other members of their demographic groups ... they seem to be in a situation of constantly examining and

second guessing their behaviour' (p. 4). Although Neimann is an American researcher researching minority groups in the United States, the experiences of participants in the current study were remarkably similar to those interviewed in Neimann's study. The participants described consciously limiting the information they shared about their family and/or upbringing to appear more 'mainstream':

My Dad used to have very, very deliberate and conscious discussions with us at a very young age about how to behave with white people and how to behave with black people and why you do it—so very open, he prepared us for it.

(Isabella)

Some participants said that they don't share information about their family and community where dysfunction is present with colleagues in their workplaces. The participants explained that they did not share these experiences for fear of judgement, having their professional skills questioned, and perpetuating existing myths about Indigenous people. Some participants described this phenomenon as having to be the 'model black':

I have to admit that I would worry that she would question my ability to do my job. And so I will not put myself at risk like that. So she will know when she needs to know. And then she will know enough of what she needs to know to support me to maybe take a day off. (Isabella)

It can't have touched your life at all because you're a good black. You've got a job. (Mary)

We knew what real poverty was like, that childhood trauma stuff. DV [domestic violence] was not a foreign concept to any of us because every single one of us had an experience of growing up with DV around us. Every single one of us—

family violence, alcohol-related violence, child sexual abuse in our extended families, suicide, self-harm. Every single one of us. (Isabella)

The participants who worked for mainstream agencies—that is, non-Aboriginal-controlled organisations—in the majority shared that they did not feel safe to express their cultural identity in an un-vetted manner, and went to some lengths to appear more ‘mainstream’. Zon et al.’s (2004) study related to the cultural safety of Aboriginal child protection workers in the Northern Territory, and defined cultural safety to involve the level of safety that ‘workers of the minority culture feel to express their cultural identity within the service or work environment’ (p. 289). In addition to Zon et al.’s definition, Gerlach (2012) argued that ‘cultural safety promotes a more critical and inclusive perspective of culture’ (p. 151). When cultural safety is not present, workers can start to experience what Ramsden and Spoonley (1993) referred to as ‘cultural risk’. Ramsden and Spoonley (1993) defined cultural risk to be when ‘people from one culture believe they are demeaned and disempowered by the actions and delivery systems of people from another culture’ (p. 164).

The participants from this study described not sharing certain aspects of their lives in their workplaces for fear of judgement. The Indigenous participants’ experience of editing the way they presented themselves in a majority non-Indigenous workplace was consistent with a study by Wingfield (2010). Wingfield’s (2010) study found that African American professionals experienced frequent racism within their predominately white workplaces. In response to experiences of racism, the respondents felt that they had to maintain a ‘pleasant exterior’ or risk being ‘punished for displaying anger’ (Wingfield, 2010, pp. 258–259). While Wingfield’s (2010) study involved African American participants, there appears to be significant similarity to the experiences described by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in this study.

4.3.3 Role Definition: Inconsistency in Identified Positions

Many participants discussed working in identified positions within a statutory child protection context. The participants described identified positions as non-delegated positions, only to be filled by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Another feature is that the position holders were not required to hold any specific qualifications. Some participants described having one set of duties one day and then having these duties changed the next day without consultation or warning. Some participants described that frequent changes in the office management structure contributed to uncertainty around the role of identified positions and which duties they were expected to undertake:

In one office, you were the babysitter. In another office, you could be almost senior practitioner level. (Mary)

I felt like we had a lot of change in that office. So we were very change fatigued.

I think the office environment had become toxic to a degree. So my role got changed every couple of months depending on the whim of whoever the team leader I was working under or who the manager was. (Sarah)

Some participants shared that constant changing of expected duties caused them confusion, uncertainty and anxiety. Additionally, the participants described the constant change in requirements of the role to be the cause of some Indigenous workers overstepping the boundaries of their role and being chastised or performance managed. Many participants outlined that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in identified positions were not used to their capacity because they were given menial tasks, such as client transport, rather than other 'important' work. Rosalyn, who had experience working in different locations and service centres, explained how identified positions could be used effectively and how the role could differ between offices:

Every second, third day, you'd have kids being removed and angry people in the foyer threatening staff, you know, and us calling police or taking precautions.

We didn't have that in [name of town] because we had a very good rapport with community. Elders would come in and talk to me before things used to blow up, so that I could go out and talk to the families and/or arrange a meeting with the manager, so that that didn't escalate to anything. We had prevention better than, like, the remedy, you know? That was our focus in [name of town], whereas in [name of other town], things used to blow and we'd have to take precautions coming to and from the building. We'd have to be on call with the police if parents got angry, upset or threatened staff. We had to—it seemed like none of that preventative stuff mattered or was done prior to the case being taken in.

(Rosalyn)

Rosalyn's experience appears to be consistent with Briskman's (2014) argument that the 'construction of practice remains largely seen through an Anglo-Australian lens' (p. 68), privileging non-Indigenous practice knowledge over Indigenous knowledge and ways of helping. Participant Isabella shared her desire to return to a model of care that was more in line with her practice as an Indigenous worker:

I've got this yearning to be home again, and home to me is that I will go back to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation ... because I am the same 15-year-old girl that knew that she was going to get a university degree to help improve the lives of her own people. So kind of, like, I've got to go back to it.

That's actually where I need to be. I'm drawn back to that model of care—that's the reason why I'll go back there. (Isabella)

Briskman (2014) argued that institutional racism may 'not just refer to overt acts, but uncritically and sometimes unconsciously [be] embedded into policy, organisational

practices and the way in which the dominant group exercises power over others' (p. 68). Rosalyn's experience of one office valuing and implementing her approach to managing Indigenous families from a preventative (rather than a deficit) model, and then another office ignoring her knowledge and skills presents an example of the ways in which Western practice can be valued and prioritised over Indigenous ways of working.

4.4 Racism

Indigenous peoples' experience of racism in Australia was discussed in the literature review. The review identified that racism may be personal and overt or covert and institutional. The participants in this study expressed that they frequently experienced racism in their workplace. The participants were not initially asked about their experiences of racism within their workplaces; however, the frequency of the issue being raised prompted me to ask the participants more about their experiences of racism and the response from the management in their office.

4.4.1 Racism experienced in the workplace

Almost all participants shared times when they experienced racism perpetrated by their non-Indigenous colleagues in their places of work. While workers from both statutory and non-statutory child protection workplaces described exposure to racism, its presentation appeared to vary. In the participants' view, racism experienced in non-statutory workplaces appeared to derive from non-Indigenous workers' misunderstanding or ignorance relating to cultural matters:

So there is inconsistencies. We've found them. We've brought them to [government department's] attention—we all need to be culturally appropriate and understand the history of this country and why people are the way they are.
(Missy)

The participants who had worked in statutory workplaces similarly described this lack of cultural awareness; however, in addition, they experienced more direct racism towards them as individuals. The perpetuation of racist stereotypes relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was a common experience for participants in statutory workplaces. The four examples shared below relate to incidents that occurred within a statutory child protection workplace. The participants described many incidents of overt racist behaviour in their workplace, often occurring in open work spaces, with individuals making no attempt to conceal their beliefs, even when an Indigenous colleague was present:

This is somebody who had made references about, ‘Well, these darkie kids are lucky to be in care because then they get food’, or, ‘At least the darkies will get to go to school every day over here’, and things like that—she actually used the term ‘darkie’. (Mary)

What was the other really doozy one that we had? I was shocked. ‘All black men have gonorrhoea.’ That was a pearler. (Sarah)

‘That just shows that blacks don’t love their kids as much as other people do’ [in relation to Torres Strait Islander traditional adoption practices] (Sarah)

‘All black kids have scabies’. I said, ‘So, my kids are black. Do they have scabies?’ ‘Your kids are lovely. No, no, not you. You’re different’, she goes.

‘You keep your kids clean’. (Mary)

Dodson (1994) argued that Aboriginality is often viewed as a negative construct by the mainstream. Fook (2012) argued that identity can be largely socially ascribed to marginalised groups by dominant social structures. Discriminatory stereotypes of Aboriginal people (Bennett, 2013; Briskman, 2003) permeate the dominant discourse, which Fook (2012) argued limits the capacity for any individual to alter these

perceptions of identity. As discussed previously, many participants chose to enter the child protection field to work with their communities and effect change. However, according to the work of Briskman, Fook and Bennett, the identity ascribed to Indigenous people by the dominant group may be a barrier to achieving this goal.

While overt racist attitudes and comments were present for some participants, others described being frequently questioned about their Indigeneity based on the way they physically appeared. The participants felt that their physical appearance was a factor for non-Indigenous staff when assessing whether an Indigenous worker was competent or whether their cultural knowledge or advice was accurate. Foley (2000) argued that the persistent questioning of Indigeneity ‘continues to quash cultural identity and confirms the assimilation paradigm’ (p. 47). In relation to identity, Fook (2012) argued that ‘our physical appearance carries social connotations and has a role in defining our social place and identity’ (p. 89). Having one’s identity challenged on the basis of appearance was an experience shared by a number of participants:

‘You really don’t look Aboriginal ... it’s lucky you’re white enough that people don’t know’. (Mary)

I think that’s because I am a fair-skinned Aboriginal person. Unless you identified and said, ‘Oh yes, I’m Aboriginal, my history is Stolen Generation’, and people would go, ‘Oh, you are Aboriginal, I wondered about that’.

(Rosalyn)

My manager—because I’m identified as Indigenous in my paperwork, but I wasn’t in an identified position—what did she say? Turned around and she went, ‘How much Murri are you? How much do you have in you?’. I went, ‘I’m sorry?’. She goes, ‘It says here that you’re Aboriginal. How much are you?’.

(Mary)

Quinn (2003) argued that the focus on people's physical appearance as a determination of their dominance is rooted in the colonial era of the 1800s, where there was a 'scientific' basis to superiority—that is, white skins are superior and black people are inferior. Muller (2014) argued that the dominant culture is able to 'define who they consider a "real" Indigenous Australian, denying the legitimacy of the reality of many people who do not fit within their perceived criteria' (p. 46). The participants' experiences of being categorised as 'valuable' based on the degree of their 'blackness' appears to be consistent with the racist views identified by Quinn and Muller.

4.4.2 Racism in practice with children and families

Some participants expressed great concern that the racist behaviour displayed by some of their non-Indigenous colleagues could affect the quality of service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The participants described incidents of racism in child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, in addition to their own individual experiences of racism. Some participants expressed concern that the safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was often not assessed against the same threshold as non-Indigenous children. The participants outlined their experience that there are different criteria for removal and return of Indigenous children in comparison with non-Indigenous children:

I think they're removed quicker. Bottom line, they are ... but by the same token, ironically enough, the standard to return them is lower. They have less of a right to be safe. (Mary)

Mary went on to describe how she had seen demonstrated in practice the safety thresholds differing in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, based on negative stereotypes:

The cultural considerations for a community, say, in [remote Aboriginal community], where there's less resources than an urban community, are those same cultural considerations relevant? I think they pick and choose, which is another issue around that generic stuff. I know that those were developed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy unit, but I don't think they were intended to ... They were intended for remote communities, like [remote Aboriginal community] and [remote Aboriginal community] and things like that, where kids will roam together in big groups, but there's family everywhere. In central Brisbane—not okay. In [name of town], it is not okay for three-year-olds and five-year-olds to be walking around. But I think they use those to then lower those standards—'Well, the cultural consideration says that's okay. Well, go and talk to the community and get an indication if that's okay, if that's the standard'. You know what I mean? So they're quick to remove, but then, ironically, quick to throw back. It doesn't make sense. I saw a higher rate of removal and much quicker to remove ... also way more hoops to jump through before reunification would happen ... the manager would just go, 'No. Why bother? They'll be back in care in six months anyway'. Or sometimes reunification wouldn't occur at all. The parents would just be allowed to drift away. If they didn't contact, they didn't ring, and they'd just go, 'Oh well, they've gone away. Can't really care too much about their kids'. You know, 'they're better off not being in their community'. (Mary)

Participant Isabella shared that she would often talk with other Indigenous staff about ignorant or culturally unaware practices and behaviours that made her feel uncomfortable in her workplace. I asked her if the group of Indigenous practitioners ever challenged the behaviour that they had witnessed: 'No. For us, as a collective, no

way in the world, it wouldn't have been safe to do that' (Isabella). The participants' views on cultural competency in statutory child protection work are discussed in more detail in the chapter titled 'Statutory Organisational and Practice Issues'.

4.4.3 Tokenism as a form of racism

All except one participant described frequently experiencing tokenism as a form of racism within their work as child protection practitioners. The participants outlined that their experience of tokenism presented in three specific contexts. First, some participants described experiencing tokenism at an individual level. Examples shared by the participants included being asked for cultural advice relating to an Indigenous child or family, and having their opinion challenged or ignored by non-Indigenous colleagues. Second, another context in which tokenism was experienced by the participants linked to the practice of consultation with the Recognised Entity by statutory staff in relation to decisions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Finally, the participants discussed concern about the tokenistic way that Indigenous people are recruited and used in child protection, thereby affecting the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners to effect meaningful change. I will now explore the three contexts of tokenism described by participants.

4.4.4 Individual tokenism

The participants reported tokenism manifesting in non-Indigenous colleagues asking for advice and then not implementing it, asking for advice and then challenging the response, not asking for advice at all, or pre-empting what the advice might be. The participants expressed feeling exhausted by the constant questioning of their cultural expertise or having their expertise not valued or ignored:

It's just, 'we're upping our Indigenous employee numbers and we've got these people with expertise', but there's not an opportunity for that to then be valued

and respected. You get to a point where you're confident enough to be able to challenge and you get shoved away in a corner and you're a troublemaker and whatever else. You're supposed to be here just to facilitate what we need to do, not to actually have a different opinion and be assertive enough to represent that. (Sarah)

If you've got an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in your office that's willing to share cultural information or give you advice on extended family contacts or, 'Hang on, have you considered that that might not be abuse or neglect? That might just be situational because that family's had three people in their family pass away in the last month'. Right. That information is important. Or 'Don't go to [Aboriginal community] because there's three funerals next week, so it's probably not the best time to go to [Aboriginal community]'. That information—that's protecting the safety of your staff. If you go rocking over there in the middle of Sorry time, you'll be sorry. (Mary)

The participants expressed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers were frequently called on to manage angry and aggressive parents when issues arose. The participants reported that such issues could have been avoided if appropriate cultural advice was sought and implemented in the first instance. Some participants stated that non-Indigenous staff would only consider and/or implement their advice if it was congruent with their original view, assessment or intervention plan. The participants would often be asked for advice and then never informed of whether their advice was considered or what the outcome was for the child and/or family:

It's not being heard by the department. Most of the time, I will send emails to our coordinator and to our manager if things are inappropriate and whatnot. But it's the frustration of it continues to happen. Yeah, that's the frustration. You

just wonder—Are you being heard? Are you being respected? Are you just a tokenistic tick and flick to say that’s part of the Carmody Report that we are now engaging with more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? (Missy)

What you’ve got to say is not valued or important. Dismiss. That’s how it was. I was dismissed. (Sarah)

4.4.6 Ability to effect change

The participants described that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often employed in entry-level positions within statutory child protection agencies because of a lack of tertiary qualifications. The participants explained that these positions lack the authority and decision-making delegation to effect a real and tangible change in child protection practice related to Indigenous families and communities:

It’s very hard because you want to make change, but I felt even if I went there and worked as a CSO, I wouldn’t be in any sort of position of where I could really make change. I really believe that unless you’re in, like, a team leader or manager position, or higher, ultimately, you really can’t make change because you can’t make the decision. So—although it will be good for our families to have Indigenous CSOs. The turnover rate of staff there is phenomenal, so even if they did get staff in, I don’t think they would necessarily stay. (Emma)

Some participants expressed that more Indigenous people with bachelor-level qualifications and higher would be advantageous because they would be able to apply for positions that carry more delegation and authority, which would enable them to effect real change:

If we had people who were qualified in social work who were sitting in proper CSO positions or even team leader positions ... if there was an office that had a senior practitioner who was Aboriginal, I would jump at the chance to work in

that office because I think if you've got somebody with that sort of power and delegation who has that cultural knowledge—I think that's the other thing is that we need to clarify that it's not just about having somebody who's Aboriginal, but having somebody who knows the local communities ... I think if we had Indigenous CSOs who were leading those investigations, there would be very different outcomes I think for those families ... it would be nice to see more social work graduates or human services graduates who were Aboriginal who were interested in working in child protection ... I think that would solve a lot of the issues. You don't want to put the responsibility on those individuals to save the relationship between the Aboriginal communities and child protection, but at the same time that responsibility is there regardless of whatever they want it to be. (Alice)

Participant Isabella shared that, even when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners do hold management positions, it is still very difficult to effect change because they are often a lone voice:

When I was even a team leader here before, out of all the team leaders and managers across the entire state of Queensland, I was the only black face.

(Isabella)

Briskman (2014) argued that 'changing the culture of an organisation in which white Western paradigms are dominant becomes a herculean task' (p. 187). Many participants described pain and frustration because of being unable to effect change in a meaningful and tangible way for their communities:

It's just like the Stolen Generations. It's just like where they're coming over to meet with us and they're just bashing us and belittling us and making us feel unworthy. (Missy)

I refuse to be a token black in the organisation. (Sarah)

We were working out a reconciliation action plan as an organisation. I pulled away because it just seemed like it was going to be a glossy document for the coffee table. It just didn't have the substance to it and the integrity. (Isabella)

The participants outlined that a major barrier to their ability to effect change at an operational and systemic level is that often there is only one Indigenous identified position in mainstream child protection services. Niemann (2003) argued that tokenism 'handicaps members of racial/ethnic minority groups who find themselves working alone or nearly alone among members of another social category' (p. 2). The experiences of isolation shared by participants were consistent with the outcomes of Zon et al. (2004), who found that Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory felt less like token workers and in stronger positions to assist Indigenous clients when they were not the sole Aboriginal worker in an office. The current study participants stated:

You're a minority in that office. So it's very difficult, I think, to be assertive and bite the hand that feeds you sometimes and cause conflict or ask questions because it's frowned upon because the processes need to be done. If you're asking questions and making it difficult to fulfil that process, then we don't want you involved, sort of thing. (Mary)

For us to stand our ground was extremely lonely for us. Very, very lonely. It was a really tough time. (Isabella)

Collins (1999) coined the phrase 'outsider within' to describe the experience of minorities 'caught between groups of unequal power' in the United States (p. 85). The current study's participants described being an 'outsider within' in their workplaces because of their inability to effect change in the way child protection authorities work

with Indigenous families. Many participants described being ‘token blackfellas’, who were employed so that their workplace could claim it was culturally inclusive:

Most of the time, I don’t tick the box that I identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander because I’m afraid that it’s going to mean that I am just there to fill a seat, rather than I deserve this position—so my job with [name of organisation], I didn’t tick that I was Aboriginal because I didn’t want it to be, ‘Oh look at us, look how forward thinking we are. We’ve got an Aboriginal social worker’. (Alice)

Collins (1999) argued that experiences similar to Alice’s occur because ‘people who claim “outsider within” identities can become hot commodities in social institutions that want the illusion of difference without the difficult effort needed to change actual power relations’ (pp. 87–88).

4.4.7 Recognised Entity services

As discussed previously, in Queensland, the Recognised Entity (RE) must be consulted by statutory child protection workers at all decision-making stages if a family identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. This consultation is legislatively prescribed and not negotiable. RE services are delivered by non-government service providers and are often located within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical and/or social health services. Some participants in this study worked for an RE or worked closely with them. Many participants stated that, despite the increase in Indigenous-controlled organisations that work to challenge and improve disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, power fundamentally remains with the state:

We tell them things ... but the department are putting up a resistance—a strong resistance to stop this child from going to be with kinship carers—we don't know what the reasons are. It's quite frustrating. (Missy)

All except one participant heavily criticised the design of the RE, including the narrow scope of their work, their inability to challenge mainstream practices and the tokenistic way the RE is consulted by statutory child protection services:

I would like to be valued and respected as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worker, being able to assist the process and the decisions that the department make with our children and to be taken more seriously. When we are a part of those decision-making conversations, that we are more respected and taken seriously. Sometimes if we speak up, we're not heard. We feel like we're quite tokenistic and we feel like we're not taken seriously. (Missy)

Briskman (2003) argued that the refusal of the dominant group to acknowledge and incorporate alternative Indigenous knowledges typifies the relationship between Indigenous people and the state. The current study participants described dismay at how the RE services could be a valuable tool to reduce the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care, yet it is viewed as a 'tick and flick' exercise by statutory child protective authorities:

I think their biggest role is to do advocacy for that child, and it's not really done—more like used as a rubber stamp. (Elvina)

I guess the other issue too is even working with the REs is almost like an annoyance. It's something that they just tick the box—'Oh, they're black, we have to get the RE'. (Mary)

Some participants argued that the allocation of additional resources to address the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care would not

have the desired effect because of the tokenistic way statutory child protection services view the consultation process with the RE. Briskman (2014) argued that acknowledgement of racism at a structural and organisational level is critical because ‘recognition is crucial precursor to triggering action’ (p. 76). The study participants expressed that, regardless of which practice framework is implemented or how many additional Indigenous workers are recruited, unless the attitude of statutory organisations change, the issues will remain. This sentiment is consistent with a study by Nikolova, Lwin, and Fluke (2017), who found that ‘organisational culture is a key component that determines whether or not behaviour will be adopted and endorsed in the long term’ (p. 7).

Some participants felt that the tokenistic way that RE services are currently being used is supported by the current state legislative structure. There is a legislated directive that outlines that RE services are to be consulted; however, there is no legislative requirement for statutory child protection officers to implement the advice provided to them:

I can’t tell you how many I&As [investigations and assessments] where I’ve gone, ‘Hey, I’ve got out here and this family’s Murri. I need to get an RE out’, and I was told, ‘Oh, just do it and just say an RE wasn’t available’. (Alice)

Some participants stated that the lack of legislative authority given to RE services was a demonstration of institutionalised racism. Briskman (2003) argued that there exists a mainstream welfare system and an alternative welfare system designed for the marginalised that is ‘under-resourced, over-loaded and run by Indigenous people who are under-paid and over-worked, whose experience does not count for anything and who are described as unqualified’ (Briskman, 2003, p. 97). Although the current study participants described RE services to be provided mostly by Indigenous-controlled

organisations, they also outlined that the service is solely funded by statutory child protection agencies. All participants who commented on the design of RE services noted that they are vastly under-resourced, resulting in a triage-like service that does not adequately service the children and families they are funded to support.

4.4.8 Management Responses to Incidents of Racism

The participants stated that the effects of both experiencing racism within their workplace and not having racism adequately managed by their supervisors were sometimes traumatic. Others shared that incidents of racism occur so often that it has almost become normal and that they manage these incidents by ignoring them and focusing on their work:

I've witnessed that quite a bit ... nothing much is said. I mean, I am the sort of person who would choose my battles. (Matilda)

So it's very real and so I will just not be in those conversations. So I learnt very, very quickly to step out of the room. So I do that now. I will absolutely step out of the room. (Isabella)

Some participants stated that they felt powerless to stop these incidents, while others described internalising their anger and begrudgingly accepting racism as part of working in the child protection system. Fook (2012) argued that the dominant group defines and controls the way things are seen, and subsequently has control over 'the way things are' (p. 43). The current study participants stated:

It's hard to call it out. (Mary)

Yeah, that's right, because it does make you voiceless. (Elvina)

I really wanted to kill a fellow staff member about her racist comments to me.
(Rosalyn)

During and after these incidents, the participants expressed feeling hopelessness, anger, shame, anxiety and depression, as well as not feeling good enough or competent enough to be employed by a statutory child protection authority. The participants outlined experiencing psychosomatic symptoms, including headaches, insomnia, digestive issues and weight loss or gain as a result of exposure to racist incidents. They also discussed the feeling of being oppressed because of their lack of belief that an incident of racism would be addressed by the management in their agencies. Participant Mary commented on the inability to challenge negative racially-based stereotypes: ‘The things that would come out of people’s mouths just made it really, really, really hard’ (Mary).

Authors such as Giddens (1991) and Hickey (2016) argued that individuals’ experience of racism can be a threat to their ontological security—that is, their experience of the external world is not ‘congruent with their sense of self’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 36). Eckermann, Nixon, Chong, Johnson, Gray, and Dowd (2006) used the term ‘internal authority’ to describe the way we view ourselves (p. 185). Muller (2014) suggested that processes such as colonisation that apply negative racial attitudes and ‘facts’ to oppress the marginalised can ‘form a person’s belief about themselves and can result in negative self-image’ (p. 21) or can challenge their ‘internal authority’.

The participants described varied management responses to incidents of racism in the workplace. Some participants expressed that their experience of racism was minimised, while others shared that their office management provided no response. Many participants spoke about witnessing senior staff in their office openly participating in these incidents:

Manager would never address it. Manager let it. I’ll be blunt, she—the person led it. (Isabella)

The team leaders are the prime offenders. (Sarah)

Quinn (2003) argued that ‘expressions of racism serve to assign power and privilege in society’ (p. 78). The participants who were asked directly about their knowledge of the complaints process stated that they were aware of anti-discrimination policies in their workplace; however, they felt these policies were ‘just words’ and that they had to ‘carefully pick their battles’. Members of organisational management who choose to engage in or ignore racism within their workplace demonstrate the privilege that comes with their membership in the dominant group. Briskman (2014) argued that those in the dominant group ‘internalise their racial positioning in the social order by accepting their own sense of entitlement to goods and services not readily accessed by those from less privileged social groups’ (p. 73). For the participants, their non-Indigenous colleagues exerted their privilege by engaging in racist behaviour without any regard for the wellbeing of others around them. The participants’ experience of racism had a disempowering effect on the participants, which affected their ability to improve child protection practice in their communities.

4.5 Conclusion

A core narrative throughout the experiences shared by participants focused on those who have power and those who do not. Briskman (2014) argued that the social construction of race divides communities into those who hold power and those who are subordinate or ‘other’. Quinn (2003) argued that the predominant practices and values of the dominant culture ‘becomes the benchmark’ for achievement, whereas the knowledge and practices of the ‘other’ are deemed to be ‘inferior, deviant or pathological’ (p. 78). The dominant group possesses the power to set the agenda, make the rules and change the rules, while the marginalised are relegated to the status of ‘other’ with little means to effect change (Briskman, 2014; Fook, 2012; Quinn, 2003). The picture painted by participants in this study reflects these claims.

The participants described a constant flux of change and confusion over what duties they should be performing, who should be directing them, and where their professional boundaries were positioned. Non-Indigenous colleagues and managers who consider themselves dominant—or, as Ife (2001) described them, ‘the superior’ (p. 63)—are in a position to define those who are not part of the dominant group, and subsequently control the rules and resources. Ife’s (2001) view that the rules can be changed at will by the controlling group, regardless of the effect on those to whom their decisions relate, is consistent with the experiences of the study participants. Many participants stated that their role responsibilities were monitored and arbitrarily changed by others, often without consultation or even warning.

In addition to the constant change, the participants described experiencing frequent incidents of racism within their workplaces, instigated by their colleagues and senior members of their organisations, accompanied by a minimisation or denial of the participant’s experience of racism. The minimisation or denial of a person’s experience of racism reinforces the power of the dominant group over that of those who are marginalised (Bourdieu, 1979; Hickey, 2016). The participants described a lack of faith that these incidents would be managed appropriately, and this rationale formed the basis for why they did not report these experiences to more senior staff. The participants described being kept on the outer by frequent incidents of racism, signalling to them that they were the ‘other’, the minority, and required to behave in a way dictated by the majority or face sanctions. The participants’ experience of looking in on a world that keeps them on the outside is consistent with Briskman (2014), who argued that ‘power issues and power relations permeate all aspects of engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups’ (p. 164). Some participants described feeling that their presence in the child protection sector was tokenistic, rather than an authentic commitment to

appropriately engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children, families and communities. Paradies (2016) argued that ‘it is largely through societal systems of racism that colonial structures maintain material and symbolic privilege’ (p. 84). The participants described feeling isolated with their workgroup because of the creation of singular identified positions—that is, they were the only Indigenous person in their workgroup.

All the participants in this study expressed a desire to improve the lives of Indigenous children and families. They also stated that they wished to change the way that child protective services work with Indigenous people. For many of the participants, their experience of working in the child protection sector had been one of exclusion and marginalisation. The negative effects from these experiences on the wellbeing of participants may diminish their ability to effect the change that they desire. The next chapter explores the participants’ experiences of trauma, support and supervision while undertaking child protection work.

4.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I explored the research participants’ experience of being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people undertaking child protection work. In summary, I found that Indigenous child protection workers experienced unique pressures from self, family and community while undertaking child protection work because of their Indigeneity. They also frequently experienced racism in multiple contexts in their workplace, and they viewed their work in the child protection sector as an extension of their Indigeneity. The next chapter, titled ‘Trauma, Support and Supervision’, will explore findings related to the trauma experiences of Indigenous child protection workers in a historical and contemporary context, as well as trauma experienced as a result of working in a trauma-laden environment.

Chapter 5: Trauma, Support and Supervision

He started smashing his face into the wall repeatedly and just screaming. By this stage, he was starting to bleed at the nose ... there's blood going everywhere ...

The screaming was the scariest part. He's four. (Mary)

5.1 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I present the participants' experiences of trauma, support and supervision while undertaking child protection work. A number of ideas and experiences were consistently similar among the participant group, which indicated the possibility that these experiences are shared by Indigenous child protection workers in similar contexts. I have separated this chapter into two sections. The first relates the participants' experience of trauma while undertaking child protection work. The second relates to the support and supervision received while working in child protection, as well as the participants' ideas on better ways to support Indigenous child protection workers. I will explore and discuss both these areas throughout this chapter.

5.2 Trauma

As discussed in previous chapters, child protection work is difficult, complex and trauma-laden. Traumatic stress has been referred to as an occupational hazard (Pearlman, 1995) and as an inherent and inevitable part of the work (Dane, 2000; Geller et al., 2004; Levy & Poertner, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008; Munro, 2010; Wise, 2017). All participants described their experience of undertaking child protection work as complex and challenging. Many participants described being exposed to traumatic material and events in their workplaces as a result of undertaking work-related duties. In previous chapters, I outlined that statutory child protection workers are frequently exposed to the physical, psychological and sexual harm of children. Participant Missy stated:

We take it on—we hear, we feel all the disadvantage and the bad stuff that are happening to our children and our families. It's constant and it's different situations and different families every day. And it's constant. (Missy)

In addition, children and young people who experience trauma can present with a number of disturbing and confronting behaviours, such as public self-harm, drug overdose, harm to animals, perpetration of harm against other vulnerable children, and aggression towards their carers and protection workers. A number of participants who had undertaken statutory child protection roles outlined similar challenging experiences:

But I remember once, me and another case worker actually had to lock ourselves in a room with another [child] client in the service because they [child client] were just going crazy and smashing the place and throwing chairs and threatening everybody. We're trying to ring the police on the phone in this room. (Sarah)

Child protection workers also experience frequent and persistent threats of and actual violence towards them by adult clients:

It got to the point where he was standing in front of the back door preventing us from leaving. The police had to talk to him through the back door to convince him to let us out. (Alice)

Went to do a contact and was physically assaulted by the father, he shoved me into a [large hard object]. (Mary)

Many participants detailed occasions in which their physical safety was placed at risk because of violent and threatening behaviour directed towards them by child and adult clients. Many of the participants' stories contained identifying information in relation to participants, clients and locations. As such, I have not included those particular details in this chapter. However, studies by Stanley and Goddard (2002),

Littlechild (2005) and Hunt et al. (2016) examined violence towards statutory child protection workers and outlined a number of examples of the types of violence experienced by workers. The types of violence experienced included physical assaults, including with weapons and bodily fluids; damage to worker property (usually their car); threats to harm workers and workers' children, family and pets; stalking; death threats; and obscene and abusive telephone calls (Hunt et al., 2016; Littlechild, 2005; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). The experiences detailed by the current study participants in a statutory child protection context are consistent with these previous studies.

The experiences described by the participants while working in a trauma-laden environment are consistent with other studies examining the experiences of non-Indigenous child protection workers (Hunt et al., 2016; Littlechild, 2005; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). However, many of the participants described being exposed to sources of trauma linked to their Indigeneity in addition to those experienced by their non-Indigenous colleagues. The participants outlined how the history of forced child removal and/or issues that stem from that history affected them as Indigenous Australians when undertaking child protection work, particularly in a statutory context:

I was the one doing the removals and the frontline work, that's when I noticed that it would flare up some of my history ... the thing was, I thought that I could beat how I felt, but the passion for where I'd come from and where I'd been, to what was happening currently for me, clashed and I couldn't get rid of those feelings, so I knew it was time to depart because it was starting to affect my work. (Rosalyn)

When you think that it's—you know, and they say that it's one in 10 Indigenous people have had somebody in their family impacted by the Stolen Generations ... you know, you can't just say, 'Oh, that was so many years ago'. (Matilda)

I was burned out at one point because I had dealt with three very similar child sexual abuse cases at the time all going through both criminal court and child protection court. My family history involves some child sexual abuse. (Alice)

Some participants stated they had discussed with their supervisors feeling distressed about undertaking certain tasks, such as removing children, because of an individual and/or family history of trauma related to forced child removal. Participant Rosalyn described that there are many Indigenous people who have a direct history of forced child removal who work in the child protection field and struggle with its effects:

I know that there are people within the field that have some personal histories that can affect them ... some disassociate themselves from the reality of that stuff, but there's others who wear their heart on their sleeve—it can't do anything but impact on them. (Rosalyn)

All participants who discussed these feelings with their supervisor, except one person, described receiving a negative response from their line supervisor, with some participants expressing a view that their supervisors were either dismissive of their distress or suspicious of their motivations for raising the issue.

Many participants shared that they had experienced physical and emotional symptoms of traumatic stress as a result of working in a trauma-laden environment. The symptoms described by participants included the inability to manage emotions; excessive crying; anger and rage; inability to focus and manage time; disrupted sleep, including insomnia and nightmares; depression; anxiety and panic attacks; and excessive questioning of their self-worth, skills and decision-making capability. The participants stated:

I went to my doctor because I was an absolute mess. I couldn't open the door, I was hiding away from people ... it forced me to have severe depression and anxiety and that still, you know, still get angry about it at times. (Matilda)

I'd be in tears going to work, in tears after work. (Sarah)

I'd come home and lock myself in my room for two hours and cry before I could function. Having children, you can't do that. That distresses them. So that's when it was like that final straw. I can't continue like this. I can't do this. This is not worth maintaining an income, but not being able to maintain your wellbeing. (Mary)

Some participants described feeling disconnected from their family and feeling isolated and unsafe. For these participants, their experience of traumatic stress manifested in the non-completion of work, absenteeism, decreased motivation and flat affect while at work: 'If I am emotional, or upset, or things are on my mind, I can't focus on the other things. I couldn't manage my time' (Rosalyn).

Participants who described experiencing physical and emotional symptoms related to traumatic stress also described these symptoms to be ongoing and persisting after they had left their job in child protection:

I was like, I need to go and get help. That's when I really started to deal with the trauma that I have been through with child safety. That was the first time. Two years later, I did six months of counselling and trauma therapy to work through not just that incident, but a whole host—obviously feeling that my competency had been undermined, been devalued, trauma of my identity being questioned. There was a whole range of stuff. It took me a long, long time to get through that. The office itself in town is probably still one of my living nightmares. It really is. (Mary)

The first time I had to go out to my old office for a meeting, I had a panic attack. Yeah, it was really, really difficult. Yeah, it's just whenever I talk about it, like I am now, I get that thumping feeling in my gut. (Matilda)

5.2.1 Barriers to Seeking Support

I asked the participants about seeking support in their workplace if they found themselves struggling with symptoms of traumatic stress. The participants with a statutory child protection work history shared that they had been, and in some cases still would be, reluctant to seek support, especially from direct line supervisors. The participants described a workplace culture that does not allow workers to speak openly about experiencing symptoms of traumatic stress. Many participants believed that the clear message was that, if a worker was not coping, they were incompetent:

There was almost a culture of if you say you're not coping, then you immediately become incompetent and you're immediately treated as being incompetent ... basically, 'if you guys can't cope, maybe you should work somewhere else'. So it's almost like you don't want to speak up then because people think you can't do your job properly. (Mary)

I guess in some respects it's frowned upon, it's almost like, you know, 'Oh, get over yourself', you know, 'If you want to work in this place, you need to harden up'. (Matilda)

They would say, 'Do you think that's really something you should be talking about around the office? Aren't you worried that you'll lose your job?'. (Alice)

Additionally, some participants stated that, if a worker was experiencing symptoms of traumatic stress, they were not considered suitable for child protection work:

I'm being told, 'Maybe you're not suited to your role in the department'. I've been here [number] years, but okay, whatever. (Sarah)

I went and saw the manager about it and she said, ‘Yeah, well, maybe child safety work isn’t for you—maybe you could work in projects or do a different job somewhere else’. (Rosalyn)

Participants’ reluctance to seek support because of fearing a critical response from supervisors is consistent with Hunt et al.’s (2016) mixed-methods study of child protection workers and their experiences of organisational and management response after an incident with hostile parents. Hunt et al. (2016) found that a common response from organisations was to find fault with the worker, reiterate that exposure to violence is part of child protection work, and emphasise that employees should ‘improve their stamina and resilience’ (p. 14).

Some participants in the current study described their statutory organisation as unsympathetic and unconcerned for their safety or wellbeing:

Nobody’s making sure I’m safe. (Mary)

They got back to the office [after a traumatic event]—they didn’t get back until 6:30 pm and no one was there. No one. No one waiting for them. There was a note on her desk that said, ‘Please ring on call to let them know you’re back’.

No one waited for them. No one debriefed them. (Sarah)

Some participants described their supervisors as being unaware of their distress: ‘I don’t think the team leader saw it at the time. I don’t think it was a priority’ (Rosalyn).

Further, when some participants did seek assistance, they were ignored:

There was no acknowledgement of the fact that I was burning out. There was no acknowledgement of me actually saying those words ... because I was asking for help and nobody was offering. I didn’t know what to do. (Matilda)

To manage symptoms of traumatic stress, some participants took leave from their positions by obtaining a doctor’s certificate outlining that they were unfit for work:

I just rang and I said, 'I can't go back'. The more I think about returning to work, I actually get sick. I feel a fight or flight. (Mary)

[After a work-related incident] that affected me emotionally, I didn't care about the paperwork or what had to be done, it wasn't a priority any more. I'd already failed with the emotional side of that child, that child blamed me for removal from his family. So, when things like that happened, I could not—I felt like I was—I couldn't do the job anymore. (Rosalyn)

The participants who sought leave from their statutory position because of traumatic stress expressed that they were not provided with a human resources contact point and were not contacted by their agency until the end of the time stipulated on their doctor's certificate. In some cases, the participants used personal leave that was owing to them, such as long service or recreation leave, rather than using sick leave or income protection, because they were not told that this was an option available to them. Upon returning to work, the participants described having no discussions with their management about the reasons they pursued sick leave or what could be done to support them on their return. One participant stated that the reason they took sick leave was never discussed directly with them by their line supervisor after they returned to work. Another participant described being absent from work for many months because of traumatic stress, and then returning to the same position under the same conditions that caused the original deterioration in their mental health and wellbeing. This participant described that their manager's response was to reiterate that mental health issues came with the position, and that, if the participant continued to struggle, they should pursue another vocation. As aforementioned, a number of participants' accounts of their experiences included identifying information; therefore, these accounts have not been included in this chapter. However, the description of poor organisational response to

practitioner distress as a contributing factor to a decline in wellbeing is consistent with findings from previous studies (Hunt et al., 2016; Littlechild, 2005).

Of the participants who did seek support from line supervisors, only one expressed the experience to be positive and helpful. This participant described having their distress acknowledged, being provided with options for time away from their work, and feeling that their supervisor had a genuine interest in their wellbeing. This participant acknowledged that the supportive response contributed to their traumatic stress symptoms being resolved and them being able to continue in their position. A more detailed account of this participant's experience has not been included because of the quantity of identifying information within it. The experience of this participant achieving a resolution of their symptoms as a result of positive supervisor response is consistent with studies from Hunt et al. (2016) and Littlechild (2005), who found that the organisation's response to seeking assistance or support is critical to a positive outcome for the practitioner's wellbeing.

5.3 Supervision and Support

As discussed in previous chapters, supervision in a child protection practice context is identified in the literature as a process facilitated by an experienced practitioner (often a worker's line supervisor) that has an educational, supportive and administrative focus (Berger & Quiros, 2016; Davys & Beddoe, 2010). I also previously discussed the consensus in the literature that good quality supervision is a significant contributing factor to reducing the effect of vicarious trauma and other trauma-related illness, as well as strengthening practitioner satisfaction and retention (Foy et al., 1996; J. Gibbs, 2001; Hunt et al., 2016; Manthorpe et al., 2015). However, supervision has been found to be inconsistently delivered (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Littlechild, 2005; Manthorpe et al., 2015; Stanley & Goddard, 2002; Wilkins et al., 2017) with a heavy

administrative focus, potentially at the expense of practitioners' wellbeing and/or professional practice development (Bradbury-Jones, 2013; Ferguson, 2011; J. Gibbs, 2001; Rushton & Nathan, 1996).

5.3.1 Internal Supervision

I asked the participants specifically for their experience of supervision in their workplaces. All participants defined internal supervision to be supervision that occurs in their workplace, usually provided by their line supervisor. The participants' experiences of internal supervision varied depending on whether their agency provided statutory or non-statutory child protection services. The participants who spoke of their experience of internal supervision while employed by non-government, non-statutory organisations reported that they had good access to supervision that was supportive and useful:

It is fantastic ... community sector are much better at it, much better at supporting workers. (Matilda)

It's very good. (Missy)

It's been really good. (Grace)

However, the participants with statutory child protection work experience largely reported poor access to internal supervision, which they described to be administrative, task focused, compliance based, inconsistent and often not meeting their professional or practice needs:

It is very, very tasky. (Isabella)

My idea of supervision coming from social work was very different to what I found when I came to [government department] because the idea of supervision in [government department] was, 'Let's look at your board. Let's look at what cases you've got. Let's talk through that', and that usually takes an hour. 'Have you got any leave coming up?' 'No.' 'Alright, fine. You may leave now'.

Whereas social work supervision is more critical reflection: How can I improve my practice? How can I link my theoretical understanding of social work practice to what I'm actually doing on the ground? How can I engage with some self-care practices? That was my idea of supervision and so at first I was a little disappointed by the supervision that was available in the department. The only way I could solve that was by seeking external supervision with the social worker outside of the department. (Alice)

Many of the participants stated that the supervision available to them in their statutory child protection workplace did not tend to focus on their wellbeing or self-care needs:

It certainly wasn't about my wellbeing and it was generally me organising it. But definitely not about me, that's why I burnt out, because I had no support. (Matilda)

Supervision was more about getting the job done, paperwork-based type thing, compared to worrying about how I felt or what I was going through at the time. It was very bang, bang, bang, get the job done, bang, bang, bang, get the paperwork done. 'You should have this, this and this done by now. Why haven't you?' (Rosalyn)

A study by United Kingdom social work academics Wilkins et al. (2017) explored the content of supervision in a statutory child protection context and found that discussions mostly focused on managerial requirements, rather than focusing on reflective practice, critical analysis of cases or issues pertaining to the practitioners' wellbeing. The current study participants' experience with internal supervision lacking a focus on their wellbeing is consistent with the studies by J. Gibbs (2001), Abassary and Goodrich (2014), Berger and Quiros (2014) and Hawkins and Shohet (2000), all of which concluded that supervision that performed a solely administrative function was

not only detrimental to the wellbeing of the practitioner, but also had a negative effect on the quality of client service delivery.

Many participants described a lack of emphasis from their supervisors regarding the importance of supervision. The participants often experienced supervision sessions being postponed or cancelled to accommodate more 'important' matters:

I think the biggest thing is inconsistency and that's why I ended up finding the issue is, yeah, we have one month and then we reschedule for the next one because we were either both busy or our schedules didn't allow for a supervision session because something pops up. So you've got to go and deal with that. So it needs to be set in stone, it needs to be regular, it needs to be consistent. (David)

Some participants stated that regular formal supervision was never scheduled in their statutory workplace:

I could probably count on my two hands the number of times I had supervision in that [number] years. (Matilda)

I wasn't a statutory officer. I didn't require supervision, but even the statutory officers didn't get supervision. (Sarah)

Some participants described asking for supervision and their request not being fulfilled, or, in some cases, being scolded by their line supervisor for asking:

She came back and she went, 'I'm not your mother. I don't need to hold your hand and sit down and talk to you and rub your back for an hour every week. If you've got a problem, come and see me. I have an open door and you are not children'. (Mary)

The participants' experiences of feeling that internal supervision processes within their agencies did not meet their support needs is consistent with existing literature (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Hunt et al., 2016; Manthorpe et al., 2015; Wilkins et

al., 2017). Previous studies suggest that statutory child protection agencies struggle to provide their workforce with adequate supervision because of resources continually being diverted to matters that are politically or organisationally sensitive and demanding. These decisions are often made away from the frontline service delivery arm of the organisation (Hunt et al., 2016; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). Goddard and Hunt (2011) argued that managerial and organisational priorities tend to dominate the supervision and support needs of the child protection practitioner. Combining the roles of administrative/managerial compliance and professional supervision that maintains a focus on practice development and wellbeing in one session is being increasingly viewed as unfeasible (Harvey & Henderson, 2014). The experience of the participants in this study supports the work of Goddard and Hunt (2011) and Harvey and Henderson (2014). The participants who had worked in statutory child protection all expressed their dissatisfaction with the internal supervision available to them, particularly in relation to the lack of focus on matters pertaining to their wellbeing.

5.3.2 External Supervision

Almost all participants stated their preference for external supervision over the internal models of supervision that would usually be delivered by their line supervisors. The participants had a congruent definition of what they believed external supervision to be—that is, private sessions with an external experienced practitioner during which work and wellbeing matters can be discussed. All participants stated that they had either participated in external supervision while working in the child protection field or knew of colleagues who had. Some participants spoke specifically about the difficulty of being constantly exposed to the level of trauma they encountered as part of their work in child protection, and shared that, for them, external supervision was an essential part of managing this trauma:

I think it needs to happen everywhere, and particularly in somewhere like child protection because I think that—the issue is, is that people kind of lose themselves in that organisation because they just become so entrenched in the trauma and the, you know, the heartache that goes on. Their hearts either become super hard, or they break. (Matilda)

You're able to go and get things off your chest. The weight off your shoulder. For your own mental wellbeing, because what we take on every day is huge. To be able to talk to people and get stuff off your chest on hard cases is important. (Missy)

I think that outside supervision is good just to have that, you know, if stuff's building up and you're not able to talk to anybody, then you've got somebody that you can actually go out and talk to and it's somebody that you've chosen yourself. (Lisa)

Many participants shared that external supervision offered them a place of safety where they could discuss matters—both personal and work related—without fear. Participants used words such as 'freedom', 'safe' and 'private' to describe their experiences with external supervision. The participants expressed a reluctance to express their needs fully during internal supervision primarily because of fear of being judged unfairly by their supervisor or being viewed as incompetent:

It just gave me the freedom, I suppose, to feel like, okay, whoever I'm talking to, it's definitely not—there's no connection to the department in any way. (Alice)

Yes. Definitely. I can tell her anything and everything and she listens and advises me. But yeah, she doesn't have that connection back here. Because I feel you just don't—when you work in a place where you're not fully trusting of

everyone within that organisation, it can be a concern if you want to go yarn to someone about something. So the fact that you can go and talk to someone totally outside of the org[anisation] is good. Very good. (Missy)

The participants reported experiencing substantial benefits from external supervision, particularly in relation to worker wellbeing:

I don't think I would have lasted with [government department] or in child protection. I probably would have started to be one of those jaded people that thought child protection was a horrible place. (Alice)

Some participants viewed internal supervision in a statutory child protection context to be about tasks and case-related discussion, whereas external supervision was about them and their support and development needs:

I think it's good to have supervision with your team leader. I think that's required, I think that's needed. I think cases need to be discussed. But on the other hand, they need to have that emotional debriefing about how it's impacting on them along the way. (Rosalyn)

I think because I was getting the case discussion supervision with my team leader, I felt like my time with my external supervisor could be more focused on practice development and self-care. (Alice)

While the participants only reported positive experiences with external supervision, they did discuss a number of issues related to access. Two main access issues emerged from analysis of the participants' narratives: cost and time. The cost of contracting an external supervisor without the financial support of the workplace, at least in part, was described as a factor that would restrict access to external supervision for many practitioners:

You know, \$150 or \$160 a month for a session is sometimes out of our reach ... they give you the time off, but you have to actually pay for it. (Elvina)

I think if the department was to say, 'We will give you this money for some external supervision', then I think more people would take it up. I would like to advocate for [government department] to fund that for their staff because I think it puts a lot of pressure on if you're expected to fund it yourself. (Alice)

Others described the issue of time as a critical factor pertaining to accessing external supervision. The participants stated that, because of their heavy workloads, even if the workplace approved time for external supervision, they felt they would be unable to access it. Many stated that they would need to access external supervision during worktime because of heavy family commitments after hours:

I'm happy to cover the cost, but I need to do it during work time. So I've written that into my plan. (Isabella)

I mean, I had asked for it at [government department], but, yeah, it was 'pay for it yourself, do it in your own time'. (Matilda)

5.3.3 The Supervisor

Emerging from the participants' narratives were a number of similar attributes held by 'good' supervisors. The participants all described trust as critical to their ability to freely participate in and benefit from external supervision:

And the other thing is, is I need to keep that completely confidential ... completely external and—and private. (Isabella)

But every time I see her, I do feel good. I do feel like she listens and she gives me good advice. (Missy)

It has to be a regular thing and it has to be in a cone of silence, so nothing is reported back, and that trust in that supervision should be there. (Elvina)

I asked participants specifically for their views on whether supervision for Indigenous staff should be provided by an Indigenous supervisor. There was no consensus among the views of the participants in relation to the cultural background of the supervisor. Some participants stated they did not have a preference for an Indigenous or non-Indigenous supervisor:

Well, it's like my supervisor coming into that system supervising me, whether it's black or white or whatever origin. The supervisor just needs to have those skills. (Elvina)

Other participants stated that they would prefer an Indigenous supervisor; however, if one was unavailable, then a non-Indigenous supervisor would be suitable:

I had a couple of people at work that I could talk to—that was good enough for me. But I think if an Indigenous person had an Indigenous person to speak to, they would have better understanding of the historical stuff and be able to identify and relate to some of the issues that that person was going through at the time. (Rosalyn)

One participant stated that having access to an Indigenous supervisor was a non-negotiable for them:

There's just something about our shared experience and our shared inherent histories that connects us more than what it would to a white person. So, like, if you talk about Stolen Generation, she's going to have her story, I'll have my story. That's what connects us. Whereas it's not going to be the case for white people. (Isabella)

The varied views of the participants indicated that Indigenous child protection practitioners do not have homogenous supervision and support needs. Berlin (2002) argued that:

classifying people on the basis of group membership only gives us the illusion that we are being culturally sensitive, when, in fact, we are failing to look beyond easy characterisations for the particular and specific ways that *this* person is understanding, feeling and acting. (p. 144)

Moreover, participant Matilda stated:

We're all individuals. You know, like, you can't say all Aboriginal people are the same, and all Torres Strait Islanders are the same. We all come from different backgrounds, you know, it's not just about the culture itself, it's about all of those other cultural things, like, you know, what family means to us—we are part of a group, another sort of group. To me, I think that it's more about—I think it's more about having information and having support available to all staff when it comes to cultural matters. (Matilda)

There was consensus among participants that the provider of supervision must have child protection work experience. All participants expressed that a child protection work history was an essential element:

You do need a likeminded person to debrief with. (Elvina)

Yeah, just so that they can understand what it is that you're actually talking about and why you're perhaps feeling that way. (David)

I have two people that I go between because they give me different needs and both of them, particularly, have worked in the Indigenous space, as in with children and families, workers, organisations. So those two are the only ones that I'll go to. I won't go to anybody else. (Isabella)

Some participants expressed a sense of comfort and freedom in their sessions when speaking with a supervisor who had also worked in the child protection field:

I tend to use humour as a defence mechanism, but because of my work in child protection, I have a very dark sense of humour. So I would tell jokes during our sessions and if I had told that joke to somebody who didn't have that background, I think it would have been more uncomfortable, whereas for her, she got the joke, she got the fact that I needed to use my sense of humour in that way. Yeah, so that was also good. That was very liberating. (Alice)

Because she's got a strong child protection background, she's able to give me some good advice as well. If it was just a psychologist that was general and didn't know the child protection stuff, I think I'd just be trying to explain myself a bit more. Whereas I can just straight off the bat yarn to her about a case and she knows exactly the processes and exactly what should have happened or should be happening and will advise me on what to do. (Missy)

All participants categorically agreed that external supervision was their preferred model of supervision, particularly in relation to managing matters pertaining to wellbeing. All the participants expressed that external supervision sessions provided them a space of safety to discuss matters freely, which was not their experience of supervision provided internally by their line supervisors:

I would worry that she would question my ability to do my job. And so I will not put myself at risk like that. You've got to be careful about who you can go to talk about stuff. (Isabella)

You risk judgement being passed from a supervisor. So it's more about just sharing what you need to share within a work framework. Whereas the external one is unload without the fear of 'my boss is going to take this and do something with it', or 'and it's going to go on my file'. It is somewhere safe to go. (David)

I've got to feel really, really comfortable with the person I'm talking to about my personal stuff. At that time, we had a different team leader—I liked her, but I didn't trust her with my emotions. (Rosalyn)

The literature has noted that practitioners' feeling of safety within the supervisory relationship is a critical element in quality supervision and staff support (Davys & Beddoe, 2010; Pack, 2015). The experience of the current study participants is consistent with the work of Pack (2015) and Davys and Beddoe (2010).

5.3.4 Other Supervision Models

Some participants also discussed other models of supervision. Peer and cultural supervision models were communicated by these participants as having been useful to them while working in the child protection field. I will present and discuss both models in turn.

Peer supervision was defined by the participants to be an informal meeting of Indigenous child protection practitioners, either in pairs or smaller groups, where unguarded conversation could be held in a safe and peer-supported environment:

It's like these three black women just come together and so two of us are working in non-Indigenous organisations and it's really lovely because—and this is the stuff I really struggle with and the people don't actually realise—is that you constantly straddle two worlds. We find support within one another. (Isabella)

Whenever we came back from the difficult one or anything like that, the three of us most times at the end of the day would sit down and have a little debrief and a chat about what it was we dealt with that day and was there anything heavy. (David)

There was another lady who worked in the field and me and her used to just go into one of the interview rooms and have a cry and a hug and talk it through. We would very much relate to the issues that were very raw for us within the office.

(Rosalyn)

There's no cultural supervision. There's not even an acknowledgement of the need for it. Realistically, I suppose that's why then, within the workplace, you connect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers within the workplace. (Mary)

The experiences shared above by Isabella, David, Rosalyn and Mary all acknowledge that a shared sense of experience gave them a feeling of trust, safety and subsequently support.

Cultural supervision was defined by those participants who had experience with this form of supervision to be supervision that involves an Indigenous supervisor, where personal, cultural and practice matters can be discussed. Not all participants had experienced receiving or providing cultural supervision. Bessarab (2013) defined Aboriginal cultural supervision to be 'another form of professional supervision where the worker is supported so that they understand and apply a cultural analysis to their practice, aided by the supervisor, thus building their cultural competence and knowledge' (p. 75). However, Bessarab (2013) acknowledged that there is a dearth of literature related to cultural supervision and its application and effectiveness in an Australian context. I asked the participants their views of cultural supervision as a support model for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection practitioners:

I think it should be made available. I think you need to support Indigenous staff.

I think that's really, really important to support Indigenous staff to just stay.

(Lisa)

It would be up to them for when they need it, but have that freedom to do it when they need to do it. (Rosalyn)

Of the two participants who had experience with cultural supervision, both reported the experience to be positive and beneficial:

With the cultural supervisor, it's made a big difference. I'm feeling a lot more comfortable, in sharing personal too, I suppose ... I think because our cultural supervisor has a better understanding of some of my personal struggles too, especially being a blackfella, and then they can also advocate—well, you know, talk to our team leaders about some stuff too where I may not feel comfortable ... it's been really good having a cultural supervisor here. (Grace)

I think it's a very important position in the organisation because I think that—I think it just gives Indigenous staff a point to come and talk to about anything and everything. (Lisa)

Both these participants also noted that they would like to see cultural supervision provided to non-Indigenous staff, as well as Indigenous staff. They believed this would give non-Indigenous practitioners access to an experienced Indigenous practitioner for ongoing professional learning and development to strengthen their cultural practice competency. This position is supported in the literature by Bessarab (2013), who argued that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners 'often require appropriate Aboriginal cultural supervision that can assist them to address and understand the cultural and political issues emerging in their work' (p. 75).

5.4 Summary and Discussion

As discussed previously, I found consensus in the literature that practitioners undertake child protection work in a trauma-laden environment, where exposure to primary, secondary and vicarious trauma is an inherent part of their work (Dane, 2000;

Geller et al., 2004; Levy & Poertner, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008; Munro, 2010; Wise, 2017). While the Indigenous participants in this study experienced similar trauma responses to their non-Indigenous colleagues, their collective experiences also indicated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection practitioners are likely to have additional support needs. Specifically, Indigenous practitioners' and/or their families' experiences of trauma as a result of forced child removal policies create additional potential triggers of traumatic stress for Indigenous workers while working in a statutory child protection context.

A number of participants described times when they experienced adverse emotional reactions when undertaking work that in some way triggered either their personal history or their family's history of forced child removal and resulting trauma. Further, many participants shared their reluctance to seek support from their line supervisors to resolve the issues affecting their wellbeing because of a lack of trust. A number of participants felt that their line supervisors and other non-Indigenous colleagues did not acknowledge that the history of child removal and resulting trauma still play a significant role in the lives of Indigenous Australians. This lack of acknowledgement by line supervisors formed the rationale for many participants not seeking support. Many participants shared concern that disclosing distress would be viewed as not legitimate and instead be viewed as a signal that they were unsuitable to work in child protection. Briskman (2014) argued that trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians 'goes unrecognised in the policy and practice domain' (p. 101). The experience of many of the participants confirmed Briskman's argument.

A core narrative throughout the participants' experience of supervision was the need for trust and safety to be present before full participation could be achieved in any supervision model. The participants with a statutory child protection work history

indicated a lack of trust to be the primary reason that they would not seek support from their line supervisor. All participants nominated external supervision to be their preferred model of support. The participants stated that an external supervision model facilitated focus on issues of self-care and wellbeing, as well as professional and practice development. The participants shared that they felt safe to express themselves and their needs more freely within an external model of supervision. Further, the participants nominated peer supervision to be a model that has been beneficial to them in the past, citing trust and safety as primary reasons. Trust was also a consistent theme in the previous section of this chapter, which related the participants' experiences of trauma while undertaking child protection work, and ability to seek support from their line supervisors.

A lack of trust between Indigenous Australians and the state is cited frequently in the literature as originating from the discriminatory policies (which included forced child removal) that were forced on Aboriginal people (Atkinson, 2002; Harms et al., 2011; Menzies & Gilbert, 2013). This study did not specifically investigate trust, historical and contemporary child protection practices, and the effect of these practices on Indigenous people and their ability to participate in internal models of supervision. However, given the experiences of the participants in this study, further exploration of this phenomenon is warranted.

5.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I explored the research participants' experiences of trauma and the support and models of supervision they received while undertaking child protection work. In summary, I found that Indigenous workers are exposed to trauma as a result of undertaking child protection work. Further, Indigenous workers experience symptoms of traumatic stress similar to their non-Indigenous colleagues. However, Indigenous

child protection practitioners may have additional support needs as a result of either their personal history or their family's history of forced child removal and resulting trauma.

The Indigenous practitioners reported that they are often left to manage these trauma-laden experiences in isolation. The participants reported feeling unsupported by their supervisors and indicated a reluctance to seek support if they were experiencing difficulties related to traumatic stress. The participants outlined that external supervision was their preferred method of supervision, with a supervisor who they trusted, who was committed to confidentiality and who had a history of working in the child protection sector.

The next chapter, titled 'Statutory Organisational and Practice Issues', explores the findings related to the participants' experiences of practice issues with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This chapter also explores the organisational issues observed by the participants.

Chapter 6: Statutory Organisational and Practice Issues

I think it's very much statutory legislation based, rather than people based.

(Emma)

6.1 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I present the participants' experiences related to statutory organisational and practice issues. I did not initially ask the participants about their views of practice or organisational issues; however, during the interviews, it became clear that all participants held comprehensive views and observations about these issues that warranted further exploration and inclusion in this thesis. The participants' experiences related to the lack of culturally competent statutory service delivery, lack of induction and training processes provided for child protection workers, inadequacy of funded support services, and negative organisational practice culture within statutory child protection workplaces. As with the previous chapters, a number of ideas and experiences were consistently similar among the participant group, which indicated the possibility that these may be shared by Indigenous child protection workers in similar contexts. I will outline and discuss these areas throughout this chapter.

6.2 Absence of Culturally Competent Statutory Practice

As previously discussed, authors have challenged the way that child protection authorities have engaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (Bennett, 2013; Briskman, 2014; Lewis & Burton, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008). They have identified an absence of culturally competent practice (Bessarab & Crawford, 2013; Funston & Herring, 2016; Stanley et al., 2003) and a lack of understanding of the contemporary presentation of historical trauma (Atkinson, 2002; Bessarab & Crawford, 2013; Harms et al., 2011; Menzies & Gilbert, 2013; Westerman, 1997).

In the current study, deficiency in culturally competent statutory practice was raised by most participants, consistent with the reviewed literature. The participants outlined their concern at the lack of understanding and skill demonstrated by non-Indigenous statutory child protection workers when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families:

Because they don't understand Aboriginal people. They don't understand. They don't know. Sometimes I think even fear. I think a lot of people are actually scared of Aboriginal people because they're dark, because they're—I don't know, but I think that there is fear. (Lisa)

When I was there, I saw some gaps, as in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, so not having that cultural appropriateness. (Emma)

Some participants expressed worry that workers' deficient skills and knowledge when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families could either contribute to more Indigenous children in state care, or to non-statutory organisations closing their support case because of non-engagement, thereby leaving the family unsupported:

Families give up and then kids stay in the system. Because they're tired of having to deal with child safety not listening to them or not—just making it a clear, smooth process. It's always difficult. It's sad because I feel a lot of our kids could be out of the system and with family. (Missy)

The staff themselves identify they don't know how to engage in a culturally appropriate manner. (Mary)

The participants shared that Indigenous workers are often requested to attend client visits with their non-Indigenous colleagues in an attempt to broker engagement with Indigenous families. Some participants spoke of the frustration and embarrassment

they felt when having to accompany a culturally inappropriate colleague to such meetings:

So when you come knocking on the door, that's what comes into our mind. Our kids have grown up hearing these stories. So when you come knocking on their door, that's what pops into their minds. So take the time to converse with them, to have the conversations and to build the rapport, instead of just walking in and walking through. (Mary)

You can get frustrated and you can get angry and you can talk it out with people and get quite frustrated with the outcomes or how a child safety officer may have spoken or acted. (Missy)

The participants felt they did not have the authority to refuse these requests from colleagues who they believed were deficient in culturally competent practice, which left them in a precarious position: 'I had to take her and I was almost at the point where I'd be apologising before I'm bringing her into the house' (Mary). Further frustration was described by some participants because of a lack of management response to poor practice by non-Indigenous workers with Indigenous families:

There was this one colleague that I had and on the investigation team ... nobody liked working with this woman. She was completely incompetent, but because it's hard enough to get somebody into those positions, it was sort of like, well, unless she does something really bad, we can't get rid of her. (Alice)

Significant frustration was expressed by participants who lamented that there are still statutory workers who lack culturally competent practice skills, and discussed the effects this was having on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, as well as what it would take for this to change: 'The consequences for their own ineptness, you know, Aboriginal people are paying for it' (Lisa).

Participant Missy raised an alternative practice delivery model that could potentially address the cultural knowledge and skills deficit described frequently by the study participants:

Even if there was a specific unit that only worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that specialised in—rather than just these random CSOs doing a mainstream job and then, oh, we’ve got an Indigenous job. Like there are actual specialised child safety officers who are completely over and understand and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families only. I don’t know why we don’t have that. (Missy)

The experiences described by the participants suggested that statutory child protection agencies struggle to deliver culturally competent services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and have some way to go to ‘bridge the divide’, as argued by Wells et al. (2009, p. 1166). The quality of culturally responsive practice as a contributing factor to the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in the child protection system was not the focus of this study. However, authors such as Briskman (2014) and Crawford, Dudgeon, and Briskman (2007) argued that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners’ voices are too often missing from policy discussions relating to the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children requiring the services of child protection authorities.

6.3 Intergenerational Trauma Symptomatology Presentation and Effects

As discussed in previous chapters, intergenerational trauma refers to trauma and trauma-related behaviour that is passed from generation to generation (Auerhahn & Laub, 1998; Bennett, 2015; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Hill et al., 2010; Palacios & Portillo, 2009; Prager, 2003; Westerman, 1997), and is widely argued to be the basis of

contemporary issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as violence, alcohol and substance misuse, chronic mental and physical health issues, poverty and poor parenting knowledge (Cunneen & Libesman, 2000; Haskell & Randall, 2009; Herring et al., 2013; King et al., 2009; Memmott et al., 2001; Stamm et al., 2004).

While I found consensus in the literature on the nexus between historical trauma and its contemporary presentation (Haskell & Randall, 2009; Herring et al., 2013; Stamm et al., 2004), some participants expressed concern that non-Indigenous statutory child protection workers did not have a thorough understanding of how historical trauma presents for Indigenous people and communities contemporarily:

They don't understand the anger and the hurt behind it. I mean, some families still come in and say, 'Oh, you're just like the Stolen Generation, you're going to steal our children again, which is the Stolen Generation all over again' ... I don't think we go back to the origins of that family and speak to their fear and history of the family. (Rosalyn)

You have to have some empathy for people who have gone through—who are going through stuff. I think the department needs to be more empathetic when they do talk to our people about the history. They keep saying, 'it happened, whatever'. But it didn't happen a long time ago. It happened not long ago ... it needs to be in the forefront of every department worker's mind. (Missy)

Of great concern to participants was that behaviour exhibited by clients during investigations is interpreted by non-Indigenous child protection workers to be a demonstration of parents' denial or minimisation of child protection concerns. Parental aggression, threats, attempts to intimidate or refusal to engage were interpreted by the

participants to be a trauma response because of the presence of child protective authorities, rather than a minimisation of child protection concerns:

Our interventions ... need to be trauma informed because we're talking about people coming in who have got complex trauma, but we might say they're more oppositional, defiant or got mental illnesses. But they're just coming to us with complex trauma, so our more difficult clients who are angry and want things to happen straight away, and they can't think properly ... they can't remember things. (Elvina)

Menzies and Gilbert (2013) argued that 'making the link between separation and assimilation and trauma may assist social workers to accurately identify the origins of behaviour and avoid inaccurate assessments and negative assumptions of Aboriginal clients' (p. 62). The current study participants held the view that the misinterpretation by non-Indigenous workers of these behaviours was a demonstration of them not 'making the link', which could potentially lead to premature removal because of a lack of proper assessment of their protective needs, rather than an actual risk of harm:

There was a black mother with four children and [she] was notified on because [she is] a black mother there with four children. And she went into fight or flight mode. Her automatic response is, 'Okay, now it's my turn to have my kids taken away from me'. Not able to love properly because of how they were raised ... so they don't know how to love and engage ... It's almost like being removed because of the symptom of transgenerational trauma, but, in fact, we're exacerbating and continuing that cycle and that trauma. There's no healing. (Mary)

I've also found, because the Indigenous parents tend to not engage as well because of that transgenerational trauma, they just go, 'They've taken them.

We're done now'. Or they get really aggressive. So they get listed as being aggressive and because they didn't engage well, that reunification is less likely to happen. (Sarah)

Some participants spoke about the fear responses they personally experienced when engaging with child protective authorities as an example of contemporary presentation of intergenerational trauma:

There is still a bit of a—there's still fear of, like, white man and child safety ... Even myself, I guess ... I still have that fear of even going to child safety meetings ... I do get really anxious. (Grace)

An additional source of frustration for some participants was an observed lack of willingness by some non-Indigenous workers to learn and gain knowledge about the trauma related to previous child protection practices, including the period when forced child removal policies were in place:

The thoughts and ideas of the old ways of being are still there. I think that, you know, legislation has to be different. They have to be different in the way they actually look at things and then the way that they actually work out whether the child is in need of protection or not, you know. I think what needs to happen is they need to evaluate families better. If they evaluated the families better in a different way, they'll know whether those kids are safe. (Lisa)

One participant, Rosalyn, was herself taken and placed for adoption without her mother's consent. She shared that some workers did not believe that atrocities committed against Aboriginal people, such as the Stolen Generation, were of contemporary relevance:

The other part of it is that not everybody wanted to listen to that story, my story, because it happened so long ago, it's past history ... the newer generation of

staff coming through the door could not understand what that would feel like ...

it just doesn't happen. (Rosalyn)

Critical social work theorist Fook (2012) argued that the legitimacy of knowledge and its value is determined by the dominant group. Similarly, it is the privilege of mainstream structures to decide when knowledge has been used to its full capacity and is subsequently no longer viewed as significant. The experiences of the participants, particularly highlighted by Roslyn's quotation, appear to be consistent with Fook's work because the dominant non-Indigenous group does not place the same significance on intergenerational trauma and its contemporary presentation as does the Indigenous, more marginalised group.

6.4 Cultural Norms Assessed as Child Abuse

Some participants shared their concern that cultural practices and norms are being assessed by non-Indigenous workers as abuse and/or neglect. Connolly, Crichton-Hill, and Ward (2006) argued that differentiating between a cultural practice and what constitutes child abuse and/or neglect is a practice dilemma for many child protection services. However, some participants expressed that poorly trained statutory child protection workers were submitting assessments about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that were value laden and culturally ignorant, despite resources such as the RE being made available to explore these matters in detail:

So I think it's a huge thing that's not going to change overnight, but that differentiation between abuse and neglect seems to be the key thing for me.

Understanding the difference between lifestyle difference and abuse and neglect—what is actually significant? (Mary)

Some participants observed that, when Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander parenting values and practices are compared with those of the mainstream, they tend to be assessed as abusive or neglectful, rather than situated within a cultural context:

Yeah, I guess that's where its child protection or a cultural thing ... learning how to make rice or cleaning up, doing the dishes and stuff too, like, helping your elderly parents ... it's a cultural thing. She referred to her as a slave and I'm like, oh. (Grace)

Participant Matilda highlighted that some of the value-laden judgements could have a racist underpinning, particularly when it comes to Indigenous people, alcohol and parenting:

You know, there's no talk of good enough parenting and that's what it should be, that there's some work with parenting. Nobody's a perfect parent. Don't tell parents that they shouldn't be drinking alcohol around their children when you go home and, you know, the first thing you do is open a bottle of wine. (Matilda)

Many participants stated that they had observed the application of mainstream parenting values against Indigenous parenting values in relation to the recruitment and assessment of kinship carers. Participants shared many instances in which they believed an Indigenous child could be placed back within their family under a kinship care arrangement; however, these options were blocked by statutory child protection authorities. A consistent view held by many participants was that the statutory worker believed that the non-Indigenous placement in which the child was currently residing 'was a better option' than the suggested kinship option, fuelled by value-driven assumptions. Stereotypes and bias can compromise the validity of a practitioner's assessment because of the cognitive process of seeking out information that confirms one's bias, rather than information that challenges it (Nikolova et al., 2017). The

participants described that the way in which a kinship carer's suitability was assessed was complex and confusing. The process of assessing kinship carers was not included in the scope of this study and will subsequently not be discussed further. However, I recommend further exploration into the degree to which assessors' cultural competence affects the approval rates of kinship carers.

The participants working in non-statutory child protection agencies identified practice that was perceived to be culturally incompetent. However, the participants outlined strategies that their organisations have implemented as part of continuous improvement plans in an attempt to strengthen culturally appropriate practice. The identified strategies included the provision of cultural supervision available to all staff regardless of Indigeneity, and ongoing training that occurs on a half-yearly basis. The participants who shared knowledge of non-statutory organisations that implemented practice improvement strategies reported their satisfaction with these plans to strengthen culturally appropriate work undertaken with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. More detailed accounts of these organisations and their strategies have not been included in this chapter because of the identifying information contained within them.

6.5 Induction and Training for Statutory Child Protection Workers

The participants shared their awareness that statutory child protection workers attend mandatory induction and training as part of their employment. Induction processes within statutory child protection agencies were viewed by the participants to be vastly inadequate to prepare new workers for the complexity of their roles. Many participants stated that the induction to the role does not cover critical elements pertaining to practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families:

I don't think my training was enough for the day-to-day stuff, the paperwork and the time management stuff. (Rosalyn)

You have limited training. I didn't get trained properly until a year into the department ... which was kind of trial by fire ... I was working on contract, contract, contract. ... So you're just doing what you do. You're so used to going 'what I say goes and if you don't like it, I'll get the police'. So you become almost immune to compassion and tolerance. (Mary)

Some participants described not knowing who their supervisors were and subsequently not knowing who to approach for practice direction: 'In all honesty, I really didn't know who my manager or team leader was' (Matilda). Participants also raised the content of induction training to be a concern. The participants described training specifically relating to trauma and its presentation within the client group as critically important, especially when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However, some participants stated that this content was either not sufficiently thorough or missing from new worker training. These views were in relation to statutory child protection duties in general, as well as in relation to practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The participants felt that strong knowledge and skills regarding the historical and contemporary experience of trauma were critical, and that such training material should be provided to workers:

So how do you expect workers, white or black, to understand trauma when they've never had any training in it? They have to be doing that training before they even start ... they have to understand what trauma is and what the impacts of trauma have ... I'm sorry, but you come from a white Western family where your parents paid for you to go to uni[versity] and buy you a car when you're

21, and all of those things, there's no way in the world you can understand what it's like for these people. (Matilda)

I would love for the department to be more open and understanding about the whole trauma stuff with our people. (Missy)

The participants viewed the adequacy and frequency of cultural awareness training as insufficient to skill workers to appropriately engage with and assess concerns related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Almost all participants experienced instances in which cultural inappropriateness of non-Indigenous statutory workers was evident and resulted in negative effects on clients:

It was just a ridiculous situation and it was one of those cases of somebody who was culturally incompetent and insensitive as well, not even considering in some Aboriginal communities, you don't talk about somebody who's deceased. You don't say their name and she was ignoring that. She was saying the woman's name. So it was one of those really frustrating cases where it was just so evident that that cultural training that we supposedly get when you're an entry-level CSO, it's just not appropriate. It's not enough. (Alice)

Can I honestly tell you, I had one of my workers come to me one day and she said, 'I don't know how to deal with this because one of my carers that I support has asked me what do I feed these children'. You know, 'I don't know whether I need to, you know, go and talk to some Elders about, you know, different foods they might eat'. I said, 'Just feed them flaming children roast chicken and chips, whatever's going'. It was so—had such a, you know, just no idea basically, but she was thinking that these kids were, you know, going to want goanna and that kind of stuff. (Matilda)

Some participants had undergone the cultural awareness training delivered to statutory child protection workers in Queensland and viewed it to be inadequate:

There was no practical tools, no practical knowledge. People actually just walked away resenting Aboriginal people more ... So that's something that I think would have to shift for there to be a change at a government level. That's the issue—the practice policymakers are people who are in cities and they're saying this is appropriate or this is appropriate. But they're not actually down on the ground working. They don't know that it's not appropriate or that's pie in the sky. This is a real working model. But they're not seeing that. (Mary)

I would love for the department to ensure that their workers have constant and mandatory cultural awareness training that's continuous. You know, they update it every six months, every three months, whatever. It's mandatory that they are up to date with the latest policies and procedures. That they're updated on, you know, speak with Elders from the community. Speak with strong people from the community and learn about supports that these families can get. (Missy)

Of note was participant Sarah's view that culturally responsive practice education in undergraduate degrees is inadequate:

You need to take into account that a lot of the CSOs in there now are fresh out of university. Their cultural studies at university aren't up to scratch either. (Sarah)

The development and delivery of additional targeted training to new child protection practitioners as a standalone remedy may not generate the change that is required to reduce the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the care of the state. Canadian social work academics Nikolova et al. (2017) found that 'workplace obstacles such as lack of supervisory support, lack of

time, and a lack of necessary resources prevented full implementation of the new training into practice' (p. 6). Nikolova et al.'s (2017) argument that there are complex reasons that training does not appear to be improving practice assumes that reducing the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in care requires new and innovative thinking. Participant Isabella presented an alternative way of thinking about the upskilling of non-Indigenous child protection workers that was not solely reliant on a formalised training package:

What is the role that we can actually play outside of a formal cultural awareness training? Because I don't know if that has really the impact that we're looking for. I'm wondering about what is it that we can do if we're feeling strong enough to do that and capable enough doing that, where we can create safe places and safe spaces for our non-Indigenous colleagues to actually come to us. We create these places in organisation, in the workplace where non-Indigenous workers can actually come and ask the questions they're afraid to ask. Because how will non-Indigenous ever learn? (Isabella)

The consistent theme emerging across the practice areas discussed by participants in this chapter related to the unwillingness of statutory child protection systems to challenge their effectiveness and absorb new knowledge and ways of working. Mullaly (2002) argued that acceptable values, behaviours and practices are defined by the mainstream, thereby leaving the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledges to be determined by the dominant, non-Indigenous group (Fook, 2012). From Isabella's quotation above, it can be summarised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners may possess the skills and knowledge to address the issues underlying the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system, at

least in part, if they were given an opportunity to contribute to reform and have their expertise valued and implemented.

6.6 Negative Organisational Practice Culture

As previously discussed in this chapter, I did not directly ask participants to comment on the culture of the statutory child protection organisations for which or with which they had worked. However, almost all participants spoke at length about practice with Indigenous client families, as well as the management of workers. Given the significance placed by the participants on the organisational culture within statutory child protection agencies, it has been included in this chapter for presentation and discussion.

The participants felt that the poor attitude displayed by statutory child protection workers in relation to clients was not only unprofessional, but also contributed to poorer outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families:

If there's a culture within that organisation that 'this is our work and this is what we do' and 'that's their work and that's what they do', then you're always going to have that 'them and us' mentality. (David)

I think almost the culture is you're a law unto yourself, and you don't actually understand the impact that that one action could have on someone's life forever. (Mary)

I probably struggle with the language, it's really, really government, like deficit model language and way of doing things. (Isabella)

The participants shared frustration with what they described as the unwillingness of statutory child protection agencies to implement practice changes to reduce the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the child protection system:

It's from that simple acknowledgement; that's the key point. If we need to acknowledge this is what we've been doing. It doesn't work. Removing children at this rate and not expecting there to be a flow-on effect? You can't chuck a rock into the middle of a river and not expect ripples to flow out. It's just that ignorant. (Mary)

Many participants felt that, despite many inquiries and legislative and practice changes, statutory work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait families and communities has remained the same. Some participants shared that they did not understand the refusal to implement change, yet stated that they believed that a 'we know best' attitude was a factor:

We always bring it up. It's always getting talked about. Nothing is ever changed. Yeah. We've had child death reviews come through here and we tell them all this stuff as well. They feed it back to the department and, you know. (Missy)

You know, it sort of makes me think that, you know, the system is really, really wrong in the way that we treat our families, and particularly Indigenous families. There are ways that you could work that are actually better practice. (Lisa)

Similar to the last section of this chapter regarding culturally competent practice, the participants' narratives illustrated the theme of reluctance and in some cases refusal to critically examine mainstream practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

6.7 Attitudes towards Staff—Cliques and Retribution

For many participants, poor attitudinal culture was observed and experienced in relation to the ways the staff of statutory organisations were treated. Of concern to most of the participants was the physical and/or emotional threat posed to practitioners by

senior staff in the forms of bullying, harassment and retribution if these behaviours were challenged. Some participants stated that they had either witnessed or personally experienced incidents of bullying, harassment and/or intimidation by their colleagues, most of whom were in positions senior to them:

She screamed at me like I was a naughty child, stood over the top of me. I actually said to her, 'Don't stand over the top of me. You need to sit down. You're supposed to be a professional'. She lost her shit. She said, 'Don't speak to me like that. I'm your manager'. I said, 'No, you're another professional. We are professional to professional. You're my line supervisor, so I expect better behaviour from you'. Anyway, came back, the 20 cases I had were every single one of the complex trauma cases. All of them. They pile you with work. Pile you and pile you and pile you until you break ... Because I spoke up ... it was a nightmare. It was a living nightmare. (Mary)

Some participants indicated that they had witnessed physical assaults, as well as other threatening and emotionally intimidating behaviour directed towards less senior staff by more senior staff:

Then that team leader actually assaulted someone in front of me and I stood in. She did. She assaulted—she stood over a young girl who has had—the CSO was already mentally unstable. She's wasn't coping. She'd gone from being bright, vibrant, happy, achieving, to sitting under her desk with a small blanket, rubbing it during her lunch hour. She had a mental breakdown. In front of us all at work. (Sarah)

She stood over me. I had to ask her to leave my desk, which was actually a really big deal because she's a little bit scary. (Isabella)

The experiences shared by the participants indicated an ingrained culture of bullying, harassment and retribution within statutory child protection workplaces. All examples provided by the participants involved senior members of staff as the aggressor. To the knowledge of the participants, no further action was taken against these aggressors. The participants stated that they were aware of anti-bullying and harassment policies in their workplace; however, they stated that colleagues often did not make complaints because of fear of retribution, losing their job or minimisation of their experience:

They might be worried that it could make it worse, they might lose their job.

There's a whole range of reasons why they wouldn't talk about it with anybody.

You know, they might be just dismissed, like, you know, be told to grow a spine or something. Or just not believed. (Lisa)

Examples of bullying behaviour in the statutory child protection workplace described by participants included the allocation of additional work, allocation of complex work, isolation within the team or office setting, no longer being invited to lunch or coffee as a staff group, competence being questioned, being overlooked for promotion and being labelled as difficult or not a team player. The participants described this behaviour as being evident after an incident where questionable practice was identified, staff started to display symptoms of traumatic stress, or there was refusal to join the 'in crowd'. More detailed accounts of the participants' experiences have not been included in this chapter because of the quantity of identifying information contained in them. However, the participant experiences were consistent with a study by Tracey Whitaker, who, at the time of writing, was the Director at the Center for Workforce Studies and Social Work Practice in the United States. Whitaker (2012) found that 58% of respondent social workers had experienced bullying in their workplace. The culture of bullying within child protection agencies specifically was

also present in a study by Australian child protection researchers Hunt et al. (2016), who found bullying and fear of retribution to be a common experience among statutory child protection practitioners in their workplace.

A study by Stanley and Goddard (2002, p. 154) found that, the more intimidation and fear experienced by child protection workers, the more likely they were to experience symptoms of trauma. Littlechild's (2005) study into the effects of violence against child protection workers by clients found that practitioners' work can be negatively affected if they experience frequent incidents of intimidation and threats of violence. Neither the study by Stanley and Goddard (2002) nor the study by Littlechild (2005) canvassed the effects on practitioners' work or wellbeing if the intimidation and threats of violence came from colleagues, rather than clients. The effects on worker wellbeing and client service delivery from persistent fear of being labelled incompetent or other versions of retribution appears to be an under-researched area, particularly in a child protection context. While the effects on client service delivery of a bullying culture in statutory organisations may be unknown, Tepper (2000) argued that abusive supervisory behaviour towards staff might influence their 'decisions to quit, job satisfaction, like satisfaction, organisational commitment, conflict between work and family life, and psychological distress' (p. 179). The participants' experiences in the current study appear to be consistent with Tepper's work.

6.8 Recruitment of Indigenous Staff—Right People, Right Skills, Right Position

I asked the participants to share with me whether they thought an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the child protection field would help address the disproportionate number of Indigenous children in the system. Most participants stated that they were aware that there had been state government

recommendations to increase the number of Indigenous people working in the child protection area, primarily to reduce the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in state care. All participants believed that an increase would be beneficial, yet that positions needed to be filled by properly qualified individuals:

I think sometimes it needs to move beyond ‘we’re just hiring you because you’re Aboriginal’, not ‘we’re hiring you because you have the skills and because you have a passion for child protection’. It becomes more about that tokenistic ‘we need somebody to fill that slot’. (Alice)

More Indigenous staff would be good, but they would need to have the right skills and experience, as well as being Indigenous. (Veronica)

You should increase the numbers, but it’s about the people that you’re putting in those seats too ... You don’t want to make it tokenistic ... There needs to be some value adding to it. You can’t just add numbers for the sake of numbers. (David)

Some participants felt that recruiting more Indigenous workers into child protection work without the appropriate qualifications and experience would be detrimental to service delivery and the worker:

I have seen in other organisations that they’ve employed people solely because they’re black, with no experience, and they’ve been clients of services themselves. So that’s the only experience they have, really, and they’re out there dealing with people in their crisis, and I just don’t think that that’s right. I think there has to be a level of education and understanding that, you know, you can’t bring your own issues and your own crisis into your client’s life because they’ve

got enough to cope with. I think that if you're not coping very well with your own stuff, then you need to do something about that. (Lisa)

I believe that qualifications should come first. I really firmly believe that. I've seen a lot of Indigenous people who've stepped into work they're not competent for, and are just set up to fail ... if Indigenous staff are being employed to do a job that maybe they need some extra training in, or need extra support in, they should be getting it and not just left to flounder and left to fall apart, or, you know, crash and burn. (Matilda)

Additional recruitment of Indigenous practitioners was supported by the participants; however, concerns were raised about the level of appropriate support that would be afforded to them:

It would be really good to see some more blackfellas in the office, but I guess the skills side and I think for Indigenous people coming to, like, a mainstream service can be really challenging. (Grace)

The participants described multiple barriers that impede Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from being recruited and/or retained in the child protection field. Some participants discussed value conflicts in the way that statutory child protection currently works with Indigenous people:

On one hand, I think there do need to be more workers, but, on the other hand, I can see why there's not because I, myself, I could have worked there if I wanted to, but I didn't want to because there was such a conflict for me in how the government system works, and I guess you just feel like there's no win. It's constantly an uphill battle to even get, you know, any good outcomes. (Emma)

I've never wanted to work with [government department], only because I don't agree with how they work. It would be me, one person, against all of them. Or

trying to change all of them and that's not—I don't—if they don't want to change themselves, then I'm not going to try and work it. I've never wanted to work with [government department] only because of—people have said, 'would you work for the department?' No. I've worked in government all my life, but I'd never work with [government department] because I do believe there are people that are within [government department] that are unfair and do use their status and their position to be able to make decisions about our children that are unfair and are not for the best interests of the child. (Missy)

Dilemmas relating to culture and family were also common barriers outlined by the participants:

I don't think they can fathom how difficult it is for an Indigenous worker. Because I think I'm very smart, and I've been in the system for a while, and I was actually asked to go work for [government department] but you know what? I said I couldn't do it. I couldn't, because I had this deep-seated feeling I'm upsetting family members. I couldn't do it. (Elvina)

Other participants stated that there is a feeling among some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners that there would not be sufficient support available for them in the workplace, both in relation to practice and emotional support:

Our people have got a lot of really good talent, but they do need support because they have lots of traumas in their own life. (Lisa)

If you had a good support base for the Indigenous workers so that they could debrief when they need to and work with the families in the way that they need to be worked with, then I think that would overcome a lot. (Rosalyn)

As previously discussed in earlier chapters, many statutory child protection authorities are considering the recruitment of more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

workers as a strategy to reduce the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in the care of the state. However, the current study participants viewed the recruitment of Indigenous people into child protection work without the appropriate experience or qualifications to be detrimental to the individual worker and the client group. Some participants stated that it is necessary to challenge the often-stated rhetoric that Indigeneity alone qualifies an individual to work with Indigenous people within the child protection system. These participants' views are consistent with the view of Menzies and Gilbert (2013), who similarly argued that it is 'naïve' (p. 52) to believe that a worker's Indigeneity is the only qualification needed to work with Indigenous people.

6.9 Adequacy of Funded Services

The participants described a network of programs and services funded by the statutory child protection department whose purpose was to support and assist parents with child protection matters. These services were described by participants to include counselling to target numerous issues, intensive family support and parenting courses. However, the adequacy of these government-funded services was questioned by many participants.

Many participants discussed the lack of culturally responsive government-funded support services available to parents with children in the care of the state. Some participants described concern that the inadequacy of these services contributed to lack of engagement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, thereby leaving child protection concerns in their families unaddressed:

A lot of the time, it's run by white people. So not culturally appropriate. It might be 1-2-3 Magic and Emotion Coaching, talking about brain and behaviour and how to manage your child's hind brain and putting on the brakes. They're

looking going, 'Why are you talking to me about the limbic system? What's that?'. It's not appropriate. It doesn't work. (Sarah)

So you've got your mainstream services where everyone acknowledges there's trust issues engaging with those ... until we get services that people are actually going to engage with, that gap's going to widen. What the stats right now are saying [is] that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are being removed at a higher rate than at the Stolen Generation. (Mary)

The participants also discussed the content of these programs and the skill level of the staff delivering them. Some participants felt that the programs currently funded by the government to assist parents do not provide the specific interventions needed to cater to the severity and complexity of child protection issues present in Indigenous families. Many participants felt that the money allocated by the government to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents to resume the care of their children is not being used effectively. The participants also discussed the lack of positive outcomes for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families accessing these services as a possible contributing factor to the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children requiring protection by statutory child protection authorities:

The services who are funded to assist parents do not have the skills required to address the entrenched, intergenerational patterns of behaviour that our parents present with. Parents are not getting the assistance they need. There is so much money being invested in these services, but there are no outcomes for the investment. (Veronica)

Some participants shared concerns pertaining to the staff assigned to deliver these government-funded programs and interventions. These concerns included support staff not possessing the qualifications or skill level required to effectively work with the

complexities of the client group referred to them, and the lack of ongoing professional development available to upskill the workforce:

The issue is a lack of skill within the workforce. The workforce needs upskilling. (Veronica)

There's a lot of things that Indigenous workers do wrong, but I think, for the majority of it, it's because they've never had the training. They don't know what their job's supposed to be. (Matilda)

They should be encouraged to go that little bit further with learning all the organisational procedures properly, and all the practice manuals, and whatever they've got to do to learn what the scope of that job is. (Elvina)

Many participants expressed concern that the lack of programs and services focusing on underlying trauma as the cause of parental dysfunctionality is causing fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be returned to the care of their families. Green (2011) argued that bodies that fund programs need to be realistic about the length of time involved to change negative lifestyle patterns fuelled by trauma, and to fund these services adequately. The current study participants' experiences support Green's argument.

The participants also discussed the fact that Indigenous families who reside in regional or remote locations are disadvantaged because they do not have the same access to support services as do clients living in larger centres. Some participants stated that the adequacy of the service was a secondary concern, and that access should be the primary concern:

The other big issue, difference between north and south of the state, is there are a lot more resources in relation to support service ... Preventative. ... and appropriate support services in the south of the state. Here, there's—well, in

relation to Indigenous support services or trauma-related counselling or intervention ... None. There's none. (Mary)

Lack of availability was expressed by some participants to add to the structural disadvantage already experienced by Indigenous people living in locations outside of major town centres. For example, Indigenous parents who require support with alcohol and/or substance misuse issues, trauma-focused psychological care, specialist medical services or parenting support programs have limited or no access because of their regional or remote location.

6.10 Summary and Discussion

A core narrative throughout the experiences shared by participants was non-Indigenous workers' reluctance, refusal or incapacity to undertake critical reflection and appraisal of current statutory child protection practices and the effectiveness of their application when working with Indigenous people. Quinn (2003) argued that the practices of the mainstream become the standard to be achieved by all. Therefore, it is the privilege of the dominant group to choose whether their values and practices should be examined (Briskman, 2014; Fook, 2012; Quinn, 2003). Briskman (2014) argued that mainstream practice is predominantly constructed through an Anglo-Australian lens, at the expense of Indigenous knowledges and practices. Central to the experience of many participants was their inability to effect the change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families that they aspired to achieve when choosing to work in the child protection field. Many participants expressed that the child protection authority's refusal to recognise their knowledge and accept their advice was a core barrier to achieving improved outcomes for Indigenous children, families and communities. The experiences of the participants reflect the work of Briskman (2014), Fook (2012) and Quinn (2003).

Consistent with the previous two chapters, fear featured heavily in the experiences shared by participants. Many participants discussed experiences in which the underlying theme was fear and safety, or, specifically, the lack of safety. M. Smith (2005) stated that ‘we are taught to be afraid by means of archetypal signifiers which symbolise and embody the nature and impact of the fear experience’ (p. 31). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have retained the fear of statutory child protective authorities because of the pain they have caused historically (Atkinson, 2002). The participants’ experiences suggest that statutory child protection workplaces need to alter the ways they currently operate to reduce the ‘signifiers’ that indicate an absence of safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners. It remains unknown how client service delivery is affected by a workforce that experiences persistent concern for their safety, emotional and cultural. However, Sandic (1996) suggested that fear can impede practitioners’ ability to accurately assess the care and protective needs of children; therefore, further investigation is warranted. It is important to note that this finding relates only to concerns held by Indigenous practitioners for their emotional and cultural safety within their workplace while interacting with other staff. This study did not investigate fear and safety in the context of child protection work with clients.

6.11 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined and explored the participants’ experiences relating to organisational and practice issues regarding statutory child protection service delivery. In summary, many participants expressed concerns about the level of cultural competence demonstrated by non-Indigenous child protection workers and its effect of the numbers of Indigenous children being brought into out-of-home care. The participants questioned whether the induction process and training provided to statutory child protection workers is sufficient to equip them to manage the complexity of

working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in a child protection context.

The participants also described an ingrained culture of bullying within statutory child protection agencies in relation to practice with clients, as well as during interactions with staff. Moreover, the participants frequently encountered reluctance by statutory agencies to accept and implement alternative ways of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

All participants supported the recruitment of additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into child protection work as a strategy to reduce the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in care, on the condition that these staff have the appropriate qualifications and skills. Finally, many participants discussed concerns about the quality of culturally appropriate and effective support services for parent clients in the child protection system, as well as the issue of access to these support services for parents who live in rural and remote areas.

The next chapter, titled ‘Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion’, will provide an overview of the thesis, including revisiting the literature review and research design, presenting recommendations and a discussion pertaining to the study findings, and presenting concluding remarks.

Chapter 7: Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

Can they not just see the humanness in it? (Isabella)

7.1 Chapter Overview

In this thesis, I have presented qualitative research informed by critical and decolonising research theory. I sought to explore the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking work in the child protection sector. I explored the overall research question guided by three main aims. These aims were to explore the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who work in the child protection field, to explore the effects of historical trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians and its symptomology within a child protection workplace, and to explore participant views of culturally responsive models of support for Indigenous workers within the child protection system.

Through semi-structured in-depth interviewing, the participants were asked to share their experience of being an Indigenous person undertaking child protection work. In collaboration with the 13 research participants and cultural broker, I was able to explore the experiences shared through a critical lens. Strong themes of marginalisation, isolation and oppression emerged from the participants' narratives. The overall purpose of this study was to effect practice change in relation to the ways in which non-Indigenous supervisors attend to the support and supervision needs of Indigenous workers. The experiences of the research participants tell the story of a deficiency in the child protection system, particularly in a statutory context, to meet the wellbeing needs of Indigenous workers and to provide a workplace that is culturally safe. All participants introduced to the research process solutions to the issues they identified, informed by their own knowledge and expertise.

This chapter is presented in two parts. In the first part of the chapter I discuss key findings that emerged from the participants' narratives through a focused critical lens. The findings I will examine include: experiences shared by participants about being Indigenous and undertaking child protection work, participant experience of persistent racism, the significance of trauma in the lives of Indigenous Australians, state funded program and service delivery, and support and supervision. In the second part of this chapter, I present recommendations in light of the study findings, and outline directions for future research. This will conclude the thesis.

7.2 Being Indigenous and Undertaking Child Protection Work

While exploring the experience of being an Indigenous person undertaking child protection work, the theme of power and control emerged strongly from the participants' narratives—specifically, the people who hold power and control the status quo, and the people who do not. I discussed in previous chapters my increasing awareness that the quest for sovereignty, ownership, recognition and control is an ongoing struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. A lack of control by Indigenous people over Indigenous affairs was a strong theme woven throughout the stories of participants. Indigenous practitioners expressed the strong view that they collectively hold the skills and knowledge to work towards reducing the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children requiring statutory child protection services. Critical social worker Fook (2012) argued that the dominant group defines 'what and whose knowledge is privileged' (p. 40). Jenkins (2015) argued that 'as white people in our society control the main institutions, they are able to claim the social and cultural mainstream, which means white understandings and practices are regarded as normative' (p. 119).

All participants stated that they wished to work towards effecting change for Indigenous children and families, to strengthen their communities and to facilitate ongoing access to culture. However, most participants described being unable to effect change because of the lack of power and control they hold as Indigenous people in a white Eurocentric child protection system. Fook (2012) argued that professionals ‘stand to lose quite a bit of power if alternative perspectives are accepted, so a challenge to the exclusive knowledge of professionals is a direct challenge to their power base’ (p. 43). Fook’s view could explain why, despite the increasing numbers of Indigenous children being removed from their families, the alternatives provided by Indigenous practitioners to current practices are not viewed as legitimate or valuable, and continue to be ignored by state-run child protection authorities.

7.3 Participant Experiences of Persistent Racism

The theme of racism emerged throughout the experiences shared by the participants. The participants expressed experiencing and witnessing incidents of racism frequently in their workplaces. Collins (1990) argued that racism ‘is a product of social thought and realities, categories that society invents, manipulates or retires when convenient’ (p. 6). The view that Aboriginal people are inferior to the dominant European population began during colonisation (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013; Krieken, 1999). Bennett (2013) argued that the racism presenting in Australia in the contemporary context can be traced back to strategies used by the Europeans who arrived in Australia, declared it Terra Nullius, and assumed ownership. Aboriginal people were viewed as being unable to adequately manage their own affairs; thus, the colonisers initiated state-introduced policies of paternalism, thereby effectively removing any power Aboriginal people held over their lives (Bennett, 2013; Tilbury, 2009). Aboriginality was viewed as something to be transcended (Briskman, 2014;

Dodson, 1994) and whiteness viewed as something to strive for (Bennett, 2013). Fook (2012) argued that an understanding of the beliefs and values that underpin ideas and practices is critical because it ‘allows us to make links between the social structure and individual lives by explaining how people internalise thinking about the social structure and their place within it’ (p. 65). The belief that Eurocentric dominant discourse is superior to the discourse of other non-dominant groups reinforces the marginalisation of Indigenous people in Australia. Walter et al. (2013) explained that race relations:

are essentially relations of power and in the contemporary Australian context, such relationships take place against the backdrop of colonisation and our shared colonial and post-colonial history ... it is these structures that support our existing racial stratification system. (p. 237)

Many participants expressed the view that statutory child protection practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is also framed by racism. Fook (2012) argued that ‘whatever group controls the way things are seen in some ways also has the power to control the ways things are ... whoever’s interpretation gets accepted will doubtless control how the idea is enacted’ (p. 43). Quinn (2003) argued that:

the values, beliefs, meanings and practices from the dominant culture become not only central, but also the benchmark. Other values and meanings are perceived as different and become constructed as inferior, deviant or pathological. These expressions of racism serve to assign power and privilege. (p. 78)

Fook’s and Quinn’s views are congruent with the participants, who expressed that, regardless of the ways they frame alternative approaches to working with Indigenous people, their suggestions are never adopted by the statutory child protection authority. The experiences of the participants are also consistent with Briskman (2003), who

argued that ‘the unwillingness to incorporate Indigenous cultural values has characterised the Indigenous relationship with the social welfare system’ (p. 97). Quinn (2003), Edwards (2006) and Tyson (2011) all argued that racism in an institutionalised context blocks access to power by marginalised groups. As stated by the United Nations at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (2001), ‘contemporary and covert manifestations of racism include indifference to remediation of suffering, the failure to commit adequate and appropriate resources and the refusal to acknowledge the wrongs and injustices perpetrated upon Indigenous peoples’ (p. 8). This quotation appears to summarise the experiences outlined by the participants in this study. Briskman (2014) argued that ‘power issues and power relations permeate all aspects of engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups’ (p. 164). In the case of the study participants, the non-Indigenous group was the state-administered child protection authority. The participants’ narratives presented a significant theme of lack of access to power and associated resources as a barrier for Indigenous workers to improve statutory child protection practice with Indigenous children and families.

7.4 Significance of Trauma in the Lives of Indigenous Australians

The participants’ narratives indicated a strong theme of a lack of understanding of the ways in which historical trauma presents in the lives of Indigenous people in a contemporary context. Australian authors Menzies and McNamara (2013) argued that ‘every single Aboriginal person is directly affected by the separation policies, practices and laws, and continues to feel the effects of trauma and loss’ (p. 46). As discussed in previous chapters, I found consensus in the literature that trauma experienced as a result of colonisation spans across generations, presenting as social dysfunction in a contemporary context (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2013; Menzies & Gilbert, 2013;

Sherwood, 2013; Westerman, 1997). Dysfunction in some Indigenous families and communities drives the large numbers of Indigenous children being taken into the care of child protective authorities (Cunneen & Libesman, 2000; Herring et al., 2013; King et al., 2009; Memmott et al., 2001). In addition to the consensus I found in the literature, the study participants clearly identified the role of trauma in the lives of Indigenous people as significant and of contemporary relevance. Despite the evidence (research based and anecdotal), non-Indigenous Australians continue to refuse to acknowledge and accept the significance of trauma in the lives of Indigenous Australians. Haskell and Randall (2009) wrote that the Indigenous experience of marginalisation is amplified by the refusal of dominant groups to acknowledge the effects of colonisation and how these effects manifest in a contemporary context. Haskell and Randall's summation appears consistent with the current study participants' experiences.

The power underlying the privilege to accept or dismiss matters of significance to an individual or group is reserved for the dominant group. In an Australian context, the dominant group is those who are white. The construct of whiteness is a 'universality' in Australia that allows the white majority to 'mask its privilege' and to deny its existence when challenged (Walter et al., 2013, p. 232). Indigenous Australian academic Moreton-Robinson (2004) described whiteness as 'the invisible norm against which other races are judged' (p. vii). The lived 'unconsciousness of white as normal' establishes the dichotomy of everyone outside of white as not normal or deviant (Walter et al., 2013, p. 231). Walter et al. (2013) argued that 'white privilege is maintained and reproduced by formally unrecognised, but highly entrenched and protected cultural practices' (p. 232). I propose that the refusal to accept the profundity of the pain experienced by Indigenous Australians as a result of colonisation could be one of the protected cultural practices discussed by Walter et al. (2013).

7.5 Service Delivery that Addresses Historical Trauma as the Root

Cause of Parental Dysfunction

Emerging strongly from the participants' narratives was the issue of some non-Indigenous workers' lack of understanding of the nexus between historical trauma and the contemporary social and family dysfunction present in some Indigenous families and communities. The participants identified good practice being impeded by this lack of skill and knowledge in two core areas. First, the participants questioned the capacity of non-Indigenous workers to deliver effective statutory child protection services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to reduce the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in care. Second, many participants viewed the design and implementation of services to support families who come into contact with child protection services to not reflect the significance of trauma as a potential cause of parental dysfunction. I will now discuss both areas in turn.

The participants outlined that negative parent reactions to the presence of child protection authorities is often interpreted by non-Indigenous workers as an indication that the parent either disputes the allegations of harm present in their families or is unwilling to work towards resolving those issues. However, the aggression and/or withdrawal commonly displayed by Indigenous parents could be a trauma response in reaction to the presence of child protection authorities. Briskman (2014) argued that 'proponents of the whiteness framework hypothesise that being white is not questioned as it is the standard against which everything is measured' (p. 73). The behavioural responses of Indigenous parents to the presence of child protection authorities appeared to the study participants to be measured against what is expected or 'normal' within a Eurocentric context. Fook (2012) argued that 'not only are individuals regulated by state power, but state power gives a life and identity for the individual through providing

appropriate categorisations, a fabric through which to live their lives' (pp. 60–61).

When the behaviour does not match the 'fabric' to which Fook referred, members of the non-dominant, non-white group can be viewed as deviant of normal, thereby risking sanctions and/or punishment. In the scenario described by the study participants, Indigenous parents displaying trauma-based reactions in response to the presence of child protection authorities risked, at the very least, the care and protection needs of Indigenous children not being properly assessed. At the worst, their children could be prematurely taken into the care of the state.

7.6 State-funded Program and Service Delivery

Many participants noted that services funded by statutory child protection authorities to help parents regain the care of their children often do not practice from an Indigenous-specific trauma-informed foundation. The participants were clear that programs that are not designed to address trauma as the root cause of parental dysfunctionality will not support Indigenous children to return to the care of their families. As previously outlined, the study participant group was representative of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection workforce. All study participants presented detailed alternatives to current statutory and non-statutory child protection practice and program delivery that they felt would more adequately address the needs of Indigenous children and families. However, the participants consistently reported that their suggestions were either not asked for or not genuinely considered as viable alternative options. The experience of the participants is consistent with the views of authors such as Briskman (2014) and Crawford et al. (2007), who argued that Indigenous practitioners' voices are missing from policy and practice debates.

7.7 Support and Supervision: Fear, Trust and Safety

While exploring with participants their experiences of support and supervision while undertaking child protection work, the themes of fear, trust and safety emerged prominently. As discussed earlier, many participants expressed the view that non-Indigenous practitioners did not understand the significance of trauma in the contemporary lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. The participants linked this lack of understanding to their reluctance to seek assistance from line supervisors regarding wellbeing issues. A strong theme emerging from the participants' narratives was a lack of trust that their pain would be understood or viewed as legitimate by non-Indigenous supervisors. Some participants gave examples of witnessing line supervisors interpreting behaviours such as lateness, missed deadlines and failure to follow directions as incompetence or a 'Murri thing', when these behaviours were actually indications that a worker was experiencing difficulties related to trauma. The participants described that misinterpretation by line supervisors, coupled with reluctance by Indigenous workers to disclose their struggles, sometimes led to practitioners being performance managed, rather than referred for psychological assistance.

There is a parallel here with the discussion above, in which the participants described a lack of understanding as potentially leading to the premature removal of Indigenous children from their families. The misinterpretation of certain behaviour exhibited by Indigenous practitioners may lead to premature performance management processes. Both outcomes contribute to the continued oppression and marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

The choice to not understand and/or seek alternatives to dominant Eurocentric practices may be contributing to the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in care; affecting the retention of qualified and experienced staff; and, as discussed in previous chapters, affecting the recruitment of kinship carers. Walter et al. (2013) argued that the ‘mechanics of the social structure produce and reproduce a position of privilege for those who are white, as well as disadvantage for those who are non-white’ (p. 233). The ‘choice’ is a privilege enjoyed by the dominant group, the consequences of which are endured by the oppressed and marginalised.

7.8 Examining the Dominant Discourse as Deficit

Issues of power and control, or lack of power and control, permeated the participants’ narratives. The participants all described detailed ways in which statutory child protection authorities could change their practices with Indigenous people to begin decreasing the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system. However, the structural barriers implemented and maintained by the dominant Eurocentric discourse have dramatically decreased the ability of the participants to effect the change that they feel is required.

For change to occur, the Eurocentric system of child protection needs to examine the power relations between their management practices with Indigenous workers and their professional practice with Indigenous clients. Zubrzycki and Crawford (2013) argued that:

we have all been colonised by societal views and beliefs about Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, with many Indigenous Australians unconsciously imbibing the negative views about themselves perpetuated by white Australia ... unless these unconscious and deeply held ideas and attitudes are challenged and changed ... will continue, usually unconsciously, to think of and treat

Indigenous Australians as ‘other’, as pitiable, in need of saving and as ‘cases’ rather than as equally competent, intelligent self-determining human beings.

(p. 192)

It is my view that we, from the dominant discourse, too often seek to ‘solve’ problems, such as the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in care, by seeking out, blaming and punishing the ‘other’ for their deficits. Walter et al. (2013) argued that what is needed is:

analysis of how the unspoken hegemony of race is used to problematise Indigenous culture ... this shifts the focus from Indigeneity to whiteness ... it opens the door to re-problematising the issues as something to do with the dominant *us* rather than the racialised *them*. (p. 237)

The number of Indigenous children in the care of the state is predicted to increase in the near to medium future (Bennett, 2013; Briskman, 2014; Lewis & Burton, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008), which indicates that current Eurocentric practices are not working. Thus, viable alternatives to current Eurocentric discourse and practice must be sourced and examined thoroughly.

7.9 A Note on Undertaking Child Protection Work in General

Throughout this research, the study participants described a number of phenomena that were specific to their cultural identity as Australian Indigenous people who undertake child protection work. I outlined these unique learnings in previous chapters. The study participants also shared experiences of undertaking child protection work that were consistent with previous studies examining child protection workers in a broader general context. The areas of similarity included exposure to trauma and violence (Littlechild, 2005; Stanley & Goddard, 2002), the experience of symptoms related to traumatic stress (Levy & Poertner, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008; Munro, 2010;

Wise, 2017), lack of quality supervision and organisational support (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Manthorpe et al., 2015; Wilkins et al., 2017), and a culture of bullying and harassment (Hunt et al., 2016; Whitaker, 2012). Given the similarity, I have concluded that undertaking child protection work is an innately difficult and complex vocation, regardless of a worker's cultural background. However, this study has revealed that, while Indigenous workers have some similar experiences to non-Indigenous workers, they also have additional support needs because of their experience of being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person living in Australia, specifically in regard to the historical relationship between Indigenous people and child protective authorities, the ongoing experiences of racism, and the continual quest for sovereignty and control of Indigenous affairs.

7.10 Recommendations

The narratives of the participants in this study have contributed to understanding what it might be like to undertake child protection work as an Indigenous person in Australia. This understanding is of particular relevance given the damaging history between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities and state-run child protection authorities, and the level of mistrust that subsequently remains. In light of the study findings, I present the following recommendations. I have also included a summarised table of recommendations at the end of this section.

7.11 Family support intervention programs designed by Indigenous child protection experts

As I have previously outlined, programs to assist Indigenous parents to address presenting child protection concerns, were viewed by participants to be inadequate. Specifically, that these programs lacked an Indigenous-specific trauma-informed foundation that would address the root causes of social dysfunction and family

breakdown. It is my recommendation that a family support program, specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, be designed by suitably qualified Indigenous child protection practitioners from the pilot locations. I further recommend that three distinct locations be chosen as pilot sites, namely, a city, rural and remote location. A following evaluation of these programs would then be able to consider fully the view of the participants that family support programs need to be tailored to the community being serviced.

7.12 Pilot of specialist statutory child protection units

Many practitioners in this study raised their concern that the accuracy of assessments relating to the care and protection needs of Indigenous children were questionable and at times informed by ignorance and/or prejudice. Participant Missy raised during her interview that she would like to see specialist statutory child protection units that solely respond to Indigenous families at risk. This model could facilitate an increase in culturally competent practice and more appropriate outcomes for Indigenous children and families. The model Missy suggested would be staffed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners who would have access to specialist training and resources. I recommend that inquires take place in regard to other jurisdictions that may be using this model and the feasibility of implementing a pilot in Queensland.

7.13 Separation of administrative and case tasks from practitioner wellbeing matters in supervision

The participants from this study expressed their strong preference for external supervision as it provided them a safe and confidential place to discuss matters pertaining to their wellbeing. The view of the participants is supported in the literature where I found strong agreement that internal supervision is often solely focused on

administrative and case task processes with little to no focus on a practitioner's wellbeing (J. Gibbs, 2001; Bradbury-Jones, 2013; Ferguson, 2011; Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Rushton & Nathan, 1996). I also found consensus in the literature that the provision of quality supervision that includes a focus on the wellbeing of practitioners decreases the effects of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and other mental health and wellbeing concerns (J. Gibbs, 2001; Bell, Kulkarni, & Dalton, 2003; Hunt et al., 2016; Manthorpe et al., 2015), increases job satisfaction and retention rates (Hunt et al., 2016; Jacquet et al., 2008; Russ, Lonne, & Darlington, 2009) and improves the safety of children (Ferguson, 2011; Hunt et al., 2016; Briggs et al., 2004).

A key reason provided in the literature and by the study participants for the inadequacy of internal supervision processes was the pressure and onerous workload placed on supervisors by their statutory child protection workplace. As I have previously outlined, a focus on administrative tasks in supervision is necessary because it serves as a mechanism for adherence to funding arrangements, performance monitoring, and consistent and quality client service delivery (Lonne et al., 2008; Stanley & Goddard, 2002).

With both administrative and wellbeing functions critical to achieving and maintaining a healthy, effective and experienced child protection workforce, it is my recommendation that the two functions be separated. It is my recommendation that matters pertaining to a practitioner's wellbeing be moved away from line supervisors and for practitioners be provided with access to regular, scheduled external supervision.

7.14 Specialist trauma-informed staff management training for supervisors

A number of the participants in this study outlined times when they had experienced symptoms of traumatic stress at work. All but one of these participants

experienced a negative response from their managers which included being told they were not suitable for child protection work. The negative responses received were described to have exacerbated traumatic stress symptoms and ultimately ended in resignation.

As previously outlined, the experiences of participants were consistent with studies by Hunt et al. (2016) and Littlechild, (2005) who found that practitioners were reticent to disclose wellbeing issues to line supervisors as they feared an unfavourable response. Given the lack of understanding demonstrated by supervisors and line managers regarding the support needs of practitioners who are experiencing traumatic stress related symptoms and acknowledgement in the literature that exposure to traumatic stress is an occupational hazard (Levy & Poertner, 2014; Lonne et al., 2008; Munro, 2010; Wise, 2017), it is my recommendation that specialist trauma-informed training be provided to line supervisors as a matter of urgency.

Table 1

Summary of Research Recommendations

Target of Recommendations	Recommendations
Supervisors of child protection workers	Specialist training to be sourced and provided to line managers regarding recognising and responding to traumatic stress among child protection workers.
Funding bodies	The creation of pilot Indigenous family support interventions that are informed by suitably qualified Indigenous child protection practitioners as content experts.
Child protection executives	The feasibility of separating the supervision of administrative and case management and the supervision of practitioner wellbeing and practice development to be investigated as a matter of priority. A trial of specialist units to be created within statutory child protection organisations specifically to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Specialist units to be staffed by Indigenous people, as well as non-Indigenous people who have intensive specialist and ongoing training regarding appropriate investigation, assessment and case planning needs.

7.15 Directions for Future Research

In this study, I have explored the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who undertake child protection work. It is my hope that this study will pave the way for further research with a broader scope. I have identified three key areas of research that I feel would be significant to the field in the short to medium term. These three areas, informed by the study participants, are practitioner experience of racism and culturally safe workplaces, culturally competent statutory child protection practice, and the ways in which untreated practitioner trauma affects client service delivery. I will briefly expand on each area in turn.

7.15.1 Practitioner experiences of racism and establishing culturally safe workplaces

The study participants described experiencing frequent incidents of racism while undertaking child protection work, perpetrated by their non-Indigenous colleagues. The participants further identified that these incidents of racism were seldom reported because of a lack of trust that the incidents would be appropriately managed. Research exploring which features constitute a culturally safe work environment for Indigenous practitioners in a statutory child protection context would be of great benefit to both Indigenous workers and non-Indigenous colleagues and supervisors.

7.15.2 Lack of cultural competency

The participants consistently raised the significant lack of culturally competent practice being undertaken with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in a statutory child protection context. Further studies could involve Indigenous-driven research regarding what is missing from current training packages, which barriers are contributing to a lack of cultural competency and how practice can be

improved. Indigenous child protection practitioners should also be involved as content experts.

7.15.3 Practitioner trauma

The participants discussed unmanaged practitioner trauma as a topic of concern, as discussed in previous chapters. Further research needs to be undertaken to examine the effect of unmanaged traumatic stress on practitioners' ongoing mental health. Additionally, further investigation is required regarding the effects of unmanaged practitioner trauma on the quality of service delivery to vulnerable children and families.

7.16 Concluding Remarks

This study arose from my desire to better support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners with whom I worked in the child protection field. In conclusion, it is my hope that this research contributes to the knowledge and literature pertaining to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection practitioners, and lays a foundation for further research.

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Appendix 1: Study Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET

PROJECT TITLE: Working for the Welfare: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Indigenous Child Protection Workers

Background/aims:

You are invited to take part in a research project to talk about your experiences as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person working in the child protection field. This study is being undertaken by Fiona Oates for a Doctor of Philosophy.

The aim of the study is to explore your experience working in the child protection field; explore the impact of historical trauma and its relevance within the child protection field and explore your views about appropriate models of support for workers. Findings from the data provided by participants will be included in a thesis.

What you are invited to do:

If you agree to be involved in the study, you will be invited to be interviewed. The interview, with your consent, will be audio taped, and will take as long as you need—approximately one and a half hours as a guide. The interview will be conducted at a location of your choice. You may choose to be interviewed one on one or with a support person of your choice. The questions will focus on your experiences in the field, your thoughts on how trauma caused by government policies affects workers and how workers can be better supported in their work.

You may also be invited to a follow up group interview to look at data once it has been recorded and analysed. You will be given the opportunity to add or delete information at this time. There is also the opportunity to be part of a group email to keep you informed about the project.

Confidentiality:

Taking part in this study is voluntary and you can stop taking part in the study at any time without having to give a reason or be judged in any way. Your responses and contact details will be strictly confidential however if you choose to be involved in any group settings with others, the researcher will not be able to ensure confidentiality

although all measures will be put into place to ensure this. Your name will not appear in any reports or publications or presentations as a result of the study.

What are the risks to you:

It is important to acknowledge that there is a risk that you may feel upset because of the personal and/or professional experiences you will be talking about. Before we start you will be asked to think about who you might be able to talk to for support if you feel sad or distressed. If you feel you would like to speak with a counsellor, details will be made available to you. Ms Kaylene Malthouse has been engaged as a cultural broker on this project and is also a point of contact if you have any questions.

Some other counselling services that you could access include:

The Employee Assistance Program: Ph. 1300 360 364

Lifeline: 13 11 14

What will happen to the results:

The results will form the basis of a thesis. Findings will also appear in a report which will be provided to the university. Reports will also be provided to relevant government departments and other agencies. The findings will also be published in relevant journals and presented at conferences.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:

Principal Investigator:

Fiona Oates (nee Godfrey)
College of Arts, Society and Education
James Cook University
Mobile:
Email: Fiona.Oates@my.jcu.edu.au

Cultural Broker:

Name: Ms Kaylene Malthouse
Email:

Primary Supervisor:

Dr Debra Miles
College of Arts, Society and Education
James Cook University
Phone:
Email: Debra.Miles@jcu.edu.au

Ethics administrator details

*If you have any concerns regarding the ethical
conduct of the study, please contact:*

Human Ethics, Research Office

James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811

Phone: (07) 4781 5011 (ethics@jcu.edu.au)

Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form

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Appendix 3: Participant Interview Questions

Participant interview questions

1. Q. Could you tell me a little bit about your family background?
Prompt areas:
 - Age
 - Where one grew up
 - Cultural background
 - Family make up

2. Q. Tell me about your experience working in the child protection sector:
Prompt areas:
 - Length of time
 - Types of organisations
 - Locations
 - Types of role/duties
 - Difficult times

3. Q. Thoughts on current child protection practices as they relate to Indigenous families:
Prompt areas:
 - Do you think Indigenous staff are used to their capacity?
 - Tell me about your view on the past – does it play a part now?
 - What are your thoughts on the high rates of removal of Indigenous children into out-of-home care? Why so many?

4. Q. How does your family view your work within child protection?
Prompt areas:
 - Positives?
 - Negatives?
 - Struggles?

5. Q. Can you tell me about the supervision and support you receive in your (current/previous) role?
Prompt areas:
 - Where do you find your support?
 - What kind of supervision do you get now?
 - Who provides your work supervision?
 - Is it beneficial?
 - Do you think your supervisor understands your needs?

6. Q. What are your thoughts on the kind of support Indigenous workers might benefit from and what would it look like?
Prompt areas:
 - Who might deliver supervision?
 - Location of supervision?
 - Culturally appropriate methods?