

# Emotional intelligence as a framework for understanding core child protection skills

Christelle Withers-Mayne

*Child protection is a specialised field but it appears that few studies have attempted to define and explain the competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management and relationship-building, that are fundamental to child protection work. This paper suggests that the construct of emotional intelligence provides a useful framework for articulating these key areas of competence in child protection. To this end, a model of emotional intelligence competencies and associated skills is proposed. Workplace strategies for developing emotional intelligence in the context of child protection are then explored. These include reflective supervision, with its emphasis on thinking, feeling and doing, and interactive training exercises.*

## EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence is broadly defined as 'a set of core competencies for identifying, processing and managing emotion' (Matthews, Zeidner & Roberts 2007, p.3). It encompasses social skills and the ability to recognise, understand and manage emotions in a manner that enables people to adapt to their environment and shape it to meet their needs. Therefore, skills in reading social cues, making accurate social inferences and processing affective information are considered to be an important aspect of behaving intelligently (Pfeiffer 2001). Researchers such as Salovey and Mayer (1990), Goleman (1998), Macaleer and Shannon (2002), Bar-On, Maree and Elias (2007), and Clarke (2006) have begun exploring non-traditional views of intelligence and are excited by the practical implications of emotional intelligence in fields such as management and human services where success does not appear to be directly correlated with academic prowess.

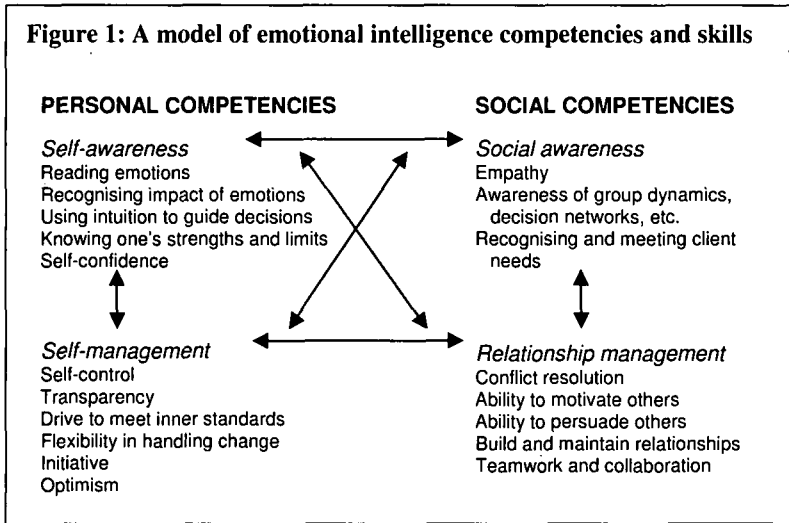
Murphy (2006) suggests that the emotional intelligence abilities are related to general intelligence in the same way as all abilities which involve active information processing. Murphy also believes that individuals differ in the degree to which they possess the emotional intelligence competencies just as they differ in levels of general intelligence. And, in the same way that different cognitive abilities are required to perform well in different jobs, the emotional intelligence competencies are more important in some jobs and roles in society than in others. As this paper will suggest, child protection may well be one of those jobs.

Macaleer and Shannon (2002) and Morrison (2007) have developed structured models of emotional intelligence competencies, or areas of ability, which they identify as Self-awareness, Self-management, Social Awareness and Relationship Management. Macaleer and Shannon (2002) did not develop a diagrammatic model but they did identify a number of skills which are needed to achieve each area of competency. Morrison (2007) designed a diagrammatic model and added the notion of the inter-relatedness of each competency. The following model combines the ideas of Macaleer and Shannon (2002) and Morrison (2007) in an attempt to illustrate the construct of emotional intelligence concisely.

---

Christelle Withers-Mayne, BA, B.Psych, PhD  
Department of Child Safety  
Murgon, Qld 4605  
Email: [Christelle.Withers-Mayne@childsafty.qld.gov.au](mailto:Christelle.Withers-Mayne@childsafty.qld.gov.au)

**Figure 1: A model of emotional intelligence competencies and skills**



therefore be deduced that whether or not child protection workers perform their tasks effectively and achieve the goal of their work will largely hinge on their relationship-building ability.

Ruch (2002) believes that decision-making is enhanced by understanding the 'self'. She stated that child protection workers' emotional responses and intuitions can provide valuable information about how to work effectively with families if workers understand their own emotions and are in touch with their own intuitive ways of knowing. Gathering information in the way that the individual worker does best may lead to better decision-making.

O'Hagan (2007) also suggests that self-knowledge and self-awareness are important tools even in

such tasks as conducting an effective child protection telephone intake. The worker must elicit as much information as possible from an unseen person who may be anxious and reluctant to talk.

Speaking about general social work, Goddard and Carew (1993) make a related statement when they say:

An element of practice wisdom ... is the social workers' understanding of themselves. This knowledge is considered important because without it workers' actions could have negative consequences for clients (p.99).

And, in relation to the 'self', Neil Thompson (2000) states:

In social work ... an important resource to draw upon is the worker him- or herself. That is, much of what we have to offer comes from our own personality or our own personal resources, hence the commonly used term, 'use of self'. ... we are, in effect, a tool of intervention in our own right (pp.84-85).

Knowing that tool well and being able to use it effectively is crucial for social workers, child protection workers and any other professionals providing human services.

Relationship building, self-awareness and self-management, as described by these authors, appear to be areas of competence that they consider to be fundamental to effective child protection work. As such, they can be assumed to be core competencies.

**EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE COMPARED WITH CHILD PROTECTION COMPETENCIES**

When the model of emotional intelligence proposed in this article is compared with the ideas in the literature regarding core child protection competencies, it can be seen that there are many similarities. The child protection literature identifies the competencies of relationship building, self-awareness and self-management. The emotional intelligence model proposes four competencies – self-awareness, self-

It should be noted that the individual skills associated with each competency shown in this model are not listed in any particular order and the list is not exhaustive. Also, for the purposes of this paper, the terms 'competency' and 'skills' are used in the sense that Macaleer and Shannon (2002) have adopted – that is, 'competencies' are presented as areas of capability and 'skills' are the specific abilities that contribute to each competency. In the quotation from Matthews, Zeidner and Roberts (2007) cited at the beginning of this paper, it appears that they use the term 'core competency' in the same sense that Macaleer and Shannon use 'competency'. In this paper, 'core competency' will refer to the fundamental, essential capabilities that underpin effective child protection work. Interestingly, Pfeiffer (2001) and Murphy (2006), both of whom present reviews of the emotional intelligence literature, use the terms 'competency', 'ability', 'skills' and 'tasks' interchangeably.

**CORE COMPETENCIES IN CHILD PROTECTION**

If child protection is a specialised field that requires certain types of competencies, it would be useful to have a framework with which to conceptualise those competencies and the skills underpinning those areas of competence. Two major areas of competence emerge most frequently in the child protection literature and will, therefore, be treated as core competencies in this article, although no one appears to have tested this idea empirically. The first is relationship building and the second is the 'self'.

For example, Berg and Kelly (2000) rightly point out that the fundamental goal of child protection is ensuring the safety of children and, they state, this 'can be best achieved by connecting and building a positive working relationship with the parent' (p.78). Child protection work involves gathering information, making decisions and encouraging change through statutory interventions, case management and therapeutic interventions. All these activities occur in the context of interactions and relationships between the worker and client, referrer, carer or other stakeholder. It can

management, social awareness and relationship management.

Therefore, this article argues that the construct of emotional intelligence offers a useful framework for understanding the core child protection competencies. Applying this model to child protection practice will then guide child protection workers in enhancing and developing competencies that will improve the effectiveness of their information gathering, decision-making and case management. In addition, with a framework by which to understand the core competencies, specific skills that comprise each competency can be identified and targeted in training and personal reflection.

According to Murphy (2006) and Pfeiffer (2001), it is unrealistic at this stage to suggest that emotional intelligence can be accurately measured in the same way that other cognitive abilities such as verbal comprehension, perceptual-spatial organisation and memory are measured. One problem is that the construct of emotional intelligence has yet to be precisely conceptualised, and another obstacle is a lack of objective methods of measuring the components of emotional intelligence. As a result, there would be no benefit in suggesting that child protection workers should have their emotional intelligence tested in order to determine their suitability for the work. Even as a strategy for individual learning, the existing tests probably have limited value. However, as a guide for the development of skills, the model of emotional intelligence seems to have potential.

For example, much of the effective work with child protection clients depends on the relationship that is established with them. Because of the power imbalance inherent in relationships with such clients, it is the responsibility of the worker to build a positive working relationship. Applying the emotional intelligence model then enables the worker to identify skills that will assist him or her in developing positive relationships with clients. The skills identified include empathy, collaboration, knowledge of conflict management, group dynamics, motivation and persuasion techniques and assertiveness.

The emotional intelligence model also indicates that information gathering will be enhanced by the ability to understand and interpret emotional responses in the self and in the client. Knowing that clients and informants are likely to be anxious will direct the emotionally intelligent child protection worker to watch for signs of heightened emotion and use their own self-awareness, self-control and relationship building skills to ease tensions and form a level of connection with the client. This creates an environment in which it is more likely that clients and informants will disclose more information and disclose more honestly, thus enabling better decisions regarding the safety of children to be made.

## DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE / CHILD PROTECTION COMPETENCIES

Pfeiffer (2001) has suggested that emotional intelligence is a useful framework for assisting counsellors in designing therapeutic interventions to assist clients with troubling social, emotional or interpersonal behaviours. Similarly, the benefit of adopting a model such as emotional intelligence to guide thinking about the competencies and skills required for effective child protection work, i.e. ensuring the safety of children (Berg & Kelly 2000), is that it provides a logical framework for professional development. Skill development and behaviour change are possible when workers, and clients, can define the target behaviour and measure their current behaviour against the target.

*If child protection is a specialised field that requires certain types of competencies, it would be useful to have a framework with which to conceptualise those competencies and the skills underpinning those areas of competence.*

In many fields, including child protection, supervision is one process for developing professional skills that has gained a lot of attention and acceptance. There are now few who would question the value of good supervision in the development of competent professionals (Morgan & Sprenkle 2007). However, according to Morgan and Sprenkle, not just any model of supervision will do. In many contexts, supervision has focussed on managerial tasks, decision-making, monitoring and evaluating performance, and teaching technical skills (Morgan & Sprenkle 2007; Wyles 2006). Unfortunately, this style of supervision does little to enhance the worker's ability in relationship building, client engagement and self-awareness – the very competencies that this article has identified as being central to effective child protection work.

Morgan and Sprenkle (2007) suggest that simply translating therapeutic techniques and models into the supervision encounter is not the answer either, although clinical models have commonly been used as a basis for developing supervision models. They believe that there is always a danger that supervision may become therapy when supervision is based on therapeutic techniques. This may be particularly pertinent if supervision is to be used as a vehicle for enhancing emotional intelligence competencies since developing these competencies is an area that is commonly dealt with in therapy. Therefore, any tendency for supervision to lapse into therapy would need to be

recognised and carefully contained (Morgan & Sprenkle 2007).

### Reflective supervision

The supervision models that appear to be most effective in child protection contexts are those based on adult learning theories such as reflective practice (Ruch 2002). Ruch suggests that reflective practice is comprised of intellectual and emotional sources of knowledge which impact learning and inform professional practice. Similarly, Senediak and Bowden (2007) suggest that reflective supervision revolves around self-examination of thoughts, feelings and actions. Reflective supervisors encourage supervisees to reflect on their practice rather than providing immediate answers or advice.

*The emotional intelligence framework suggests that reflection on work practices should enable workers to describe and evaluate their interactions with clients so that self-awareness is increased and the relationship dynamics are recognised.*

Reflective supervision, as described by Ruch (2002) and Senediak and Bowden (2007), provides an environment in which workers can consider what they think, feel and do in the course of their work. It is an opportunity to reflect on the relationship dynamics operating in their interactions with clients, colleagues and other stakeholders. It is an opportunity for workers to gain insight into their own contribution to the nature of interactions with clients and decisions that are made, to understand why they respond in particular ways to particular situations, and to explore different ways of interacting.

As such, reflective supervision appears well-suited to facilitating the development of emotional intelligence competencies. On a meta-cognitive level, for instance, the ability to be cognizant of the 'thinking, feeling, doing' concepts embodied in reflective supervision is closely related to the self-awareness and social awareness aspects of emotional intelligence. The process of being reflective is therefore a means in itself of enhancing emotional intelligence. Then, on a more practical level, the subject matter of the 'thinking, feeling, doing' process can be targeted to specific emotional intelligence skills so that the worker is able to examine his/her behaviour, consider its effects and plan changes.

Unfortunately, the process of reflecting on personal competencies is anxiety provoking and anxiety is a major

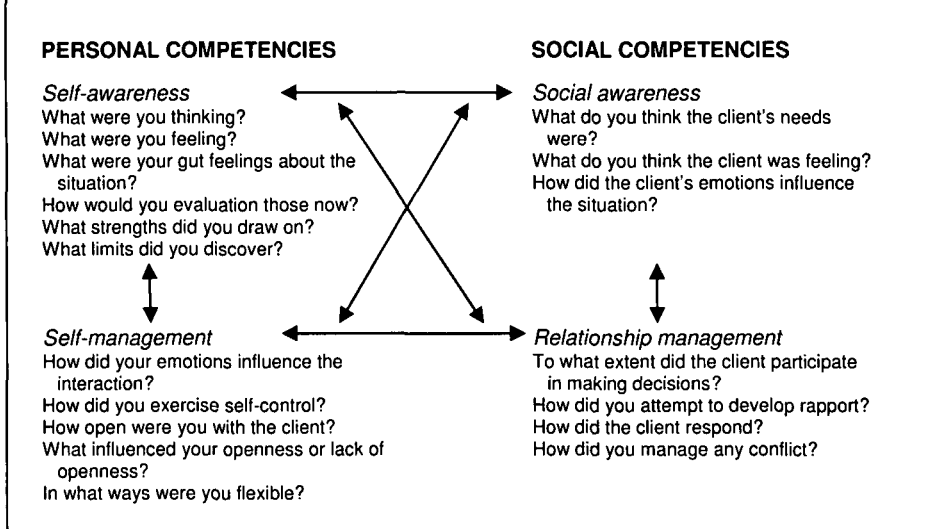
obstacle to productive, reflective supervision (Ruch 2002). However, adult learning models of supervision suggest that skill acquisition is probably best achieved in the context of a relationship with another professional who can encourage self-reflection, challenge inconsistencies and inspire behaviour change (Burke, Goodyear & Guzzard 1998). The nature of emotional intelligence would also seem to suggest that much learning of emotional competencies will occur in the context of relationships, as Clarke (2006) suggests. Therefore, providing supervisors who can foster trust and openness would seem to be critical to the development of both emotional intelligence and child protection competencies.

Clarke (2006) studied the development of emotional intelligence competencies in the workplace among a group of hospice nurses in the UK. He found that the competencies of managing emotions and using emotions to guide decision-making were enhanced in the workplace and the key mechanisms for learning were dialogue and reflection. Formal supervision and informal discussions were both valuable forums for assisting workers to understand and make sense of the emotional aspects of their work and explore various ways of responding to their own and clients' emotions. This could only take place, however, in an organisational climate that was 'psychologically safe', meaning that it was supportive and valued openness and acceptance.

The emotional intelligence framework suggests that reflection on work practices should enable workers to describe and evaluate their interactions with clients so that self-awareness is increased and the relationship dynamics are recognised. Alternative ways of interacting with clients can be explored so that workers become adept at choosing how they manage professional encounters, rather than acting and reacting automatically. Finally, workers' emotional responses to situations and clients need to be debriefed and unpacked for learning opportunities.

Senediak and Bowden (2007) have provided some examples of questions that can be useful in reflective supervision based on their 'thinking, feeling, doing' model. They have used their model as a guide to design appropriate supervision sessions. The questions they suggest include:

- What were you thinking at the time?
- What were you feeling?
- How do you understand those feelings now?
- Consider your actions during the session. What did you intend?
- Consider the interaction between you and the client. What were the results of your actions?
- What was the emotional flavour of the interactions?

**Figure 2: An emotional intelligence framework for supervision in child protection**

If it is accepted that emotional intelligence does provide a framework for understanding core child protection competencies, and that this framework identifies skills that comprise these competencies as depicted in Figure 1, it is now proposed that the emotional intelligence framework can be used to design supervision sessions that are relevant to the child protection context. The following model, depicted in Figure 2, combines the work of Macaleer and Shannon (2002) and Morrison (2007) as shown in Figure 1, with Senediak and Bowden's (2007) ideas. Questions based on the specific skills contributing to each competency are linked to each competency. These questions could be used as the basis for reflective-style supervision that is tailored to develop skills and support child protection workers.

### Informal dialogue

Clarke (2006) found that discussions among peers were a useful avenue for developing competencies in understanding and managing workers' and clients' emotions. These discussions facilitated reflection on experiences, identifying the competencies and skills used and obtaining feedback, all of which are essential for workplace learning.

Formal supervision is not always the most effective place to conduct such reflective discussions. Amid the pressures of the workplace, formal supervision often focuses mainly on operational issues (Morgan & Sprenkle 2007; Wyles 2006). In addition, line managers are not always trained or equipped to foster the kind of psychologically safe environment required for reflective discussions (Clarke 2006). Some workplaces designate appropriately skilled and trained workers to provide peer support. It may be that peer support workers could facilitate the kind of informal dialogue that Clarke indicates is important.

### Training strategies

Learning to use emotional intelligence competencies could also be introduced in initial child protection training. Some training programs already include role plays as a means of practicing skills in interviewing in the child protection context. As an extension of such practical techniques, scenarios illustrating different styles of interacting with clients could be acted out and then discussed in small groups. For example, the following approaches could be demonstrated:

- blunt and official
- caring and sympathetic
- compliant and agreeable

- confronting and forthright
- direct and closed questioning
- open, narrative information gathering.

Each person in the group could then reflect on the following:

- the probable impact of each model on the likelihood of achieving the goals of the interview
- the likely emotional impact on the client
- the possible effects on the worker
- factors that might moderate those effects on worker, client and child protection goals.

Clarke (2006) suggests that one of the benefits of such training may be that it raises awareness of the competencies that underpin effective child protection work. In the workplace, following such training, formal and informal dialogue about self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship building is likely to occur. Ongoing development of these competencies will then be facilitated, as Clarke found.

### CONCLUSION

Child protection is a specialised field which is challenging on professional and personal levels. One of the reasons that it is so challenging is because the core competencies, relationship building and the 'self', are not subjects which can be taught in text books or university lectures. This paper suggests that training, supervision and reflection focussed on developing emotional intelligence competencies may better equip new recruits to cope with the inevitable challenges. The framework proposed in this paper will provide some structure and direction in achieving this.

To return to Thompson's (2000) argument outlined earlier in this paper, if the 'self' is a tool or resource in its own right, child protection workers surely have a responsibility to develop and use that resource to its maximum potential. In strengthening their emotional intelligence competencies, child protection workers will probably be better equipped to meet the goal of child protection – ensuring the safety of children. ■

## REFERENCES

- Bar-On, R., Maree, J.G. & Elias, M.J. (2007) *Educating people to be emotionally intelligent*, London: Praeger Press.
- Berg, I.K. & Kelly S. (2000) *Building solutions in child protective services*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Burke, W.R., Goodyear, R.K. & Guzzard, C.R. (1998) 'Weakenings and repairs in supervisory alliances', *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 52, 450-462.
- Clarke, N. (2006) 'Developing emotional intelligence through workplace learning: Findings from a case study in healthcare', *Human Resource Development International*, 9, 447-465.
- Goddard, C. & Carew, R. (1993) *Responding to children: Child welfare practice*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Goleman, D. (1998) *Working With emotional intelligence*, Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Macaleer, W.D. & Shannon, J.B. (2002) 'Emotional intelligence: How does it affect leadership?' *Employment Relations Today*, available from <www.interscience.wiley.com>.
- Matthews, G., Zeidner, M. & Roberts, R.D. (2007) *The science of emotional intelligence*, Great Britain: Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, M.M. & Sprenkle, D.H. (2007) 'Toward a common-factors approach to supervision', *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 33, 1-17.
- Morrison, T. (2007) 'Emotional intelligence, emotion and social work: Context, characteristics, complications and contribution', *British Journal of Social Work*, 37, 245-263.
- Murphy, K.R. (2006) *A critique of emotional intelligence: What are the problems and how can they be fixed?* New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- O'Hagan, K. (2007) *Competence in social work practice*, London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Pfeiffer, S. (2001) 'Emotional intelligence: Popular but elusive construct', *Roeper Review*, 23, 138-142.
- Ruch, G. (2002) 'From triangle to spiral: Reflective practice in social work education, practice and research', *Social Work Education*, 21, 199-216.
- Salovey, P. & Mayer, J.D. (1990) 'Emotional intelligence', *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9, 185-211.
- Senediak, C. & Bowden, M. (2007) 'Clinical supervision in advanced training in child and adolescent psychiatry: A reflective practice model', *Australasian Psychiatry*, 15, 276-280.
- Thompson, N. (2000) *Understanding social work: Preparing for practice*, Hampshire: Palgrave.
- Wyles, P. (2006) 'When the bough breaks the cradle will fall ... child protection and supervision: Lessons from three recent reviews into the state of child protection in Australia', *Communities, Children and Families Australia*, 2, 49-58.



To all our readers,  
authors, reviewers  
and other contributors  
and supporters,  
we send you  
season's greetings  
and  
best wishes for 2011



# Australian Academic Press

Australian Academic Press was founded in 1987 as an independent publishing house servicing both the behavioural and social sciences. It takes an innovative global approach to the complex world of 21<sup>st</sup> century digital and print publishing, and remains at the forefront of worldwide trends and advances in online information management, producing a quality range of journals, books, and applied behavioural programs, with worldwide distribution in print and digital formats to over 35 countries and more than 20,000 libraries.

From 2011, Australian Academic Press will become the publisher of *Children Australia*, in both print and online versions.

## INFORMATION FOR SUBSCRIBERS

Current subscribers to *Children Australia* will receive their 2011 renewal direct from Australian Academic Press.

Subscription enquiries should be sent by email to:  
[subscriptions@australianacademicpress.com.au](mailto:subscriptions@australianacademicpress.com.au)

## INFORMATION FOR CONTRIBUTORS

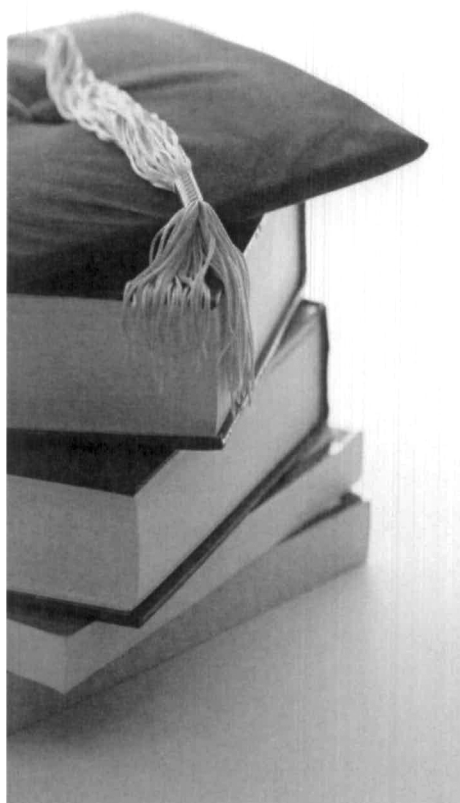
In the short-term, papers to be submitted for publication should be directed by email to the Editor, Dr Jennifer Lehmann ([j.lehmann@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:j.lehmann@latrobe.edu.au)), but an online submission system will be available early in 2011.

Authors need to be aware that future submissions should follow Australian Academic Press style guidelines which are based on the format and style described in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (5<sup>th</sup> edition). Spelling and punctuation should conform to the Macquarie Dictionary (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Further style guideline details are featured inside the back cover of this issue.

If you have any queries, please email Dr Jennifer Lehmann ([j.lehmann@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:j.lehmann@latrobe.edu.au))

Further information on Australian Academic Press can be found on their website:  
[www.australianacademicpress.com.au](http://www.australianacademicpress.com.au)

**'TRACING THE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION  
FROM A UNIVERSITY BY WOMEN WHO HAVE  
OUT-OF-HOME CARE BACKGROUNDS'**



**Are you a female university graduate  
with a care background?**

**If you are, please consider contributing  
your experience to the above titled study  
that traces the pathways to higher  
education of ex-care women.**

**This unique study is carried out by a  
social work student of La Trobe  
University, Bendigo for her PhD project  
and has the University ethics approval  
(FHEC10/65).**

**If you are interested, please leave a message with your name and  
telephone number on 5444 7326 and I will contact you to discuss  
further details.**

**Your contribution will be highly valued and your privacy and  
confidentiality will be protected.**



School of Social Work and Social Policy

Faculty of Health Sciences

La Trobe University

Bendigo Vic 3550