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# EMPATHY CONVERSATIONS

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Testing their effectiveness as a policy-making instrument

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## A PILOT STUDY

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DR. LYNNE REEDER

2016

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## PROJECT SPONSORS

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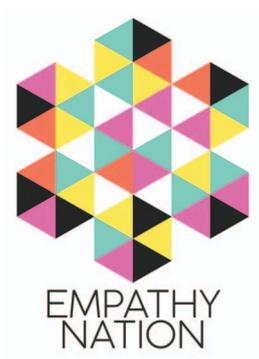


**Dr. David Morawetz, Founder and Director, Social Justice Fund**

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## PROJECT SUPPORTERS

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project draws on the notable work of Dr. Roman Krznaric on empathy, and Prof. Paul Gilbert on compassion – linking the motivation of compassion, with the competency of empathy – as potential tools for social policy change. Dr. Roman Krznaric is a cultural thinker and founding Director of the UK School of Life – and has dedicated his work on the power of empathy to transform lives. Prof. Paul Gilbert is leading global thinking on the science of compassion through his research centre – The Compassionate Mind Foundation, University of Derby, UK.

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### 1. SUMMARY

Empathy is often defined as the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. This pilot study tested a method for creating empathic exchanges between two groups of fourteen people – one group of seven, who were in a position to influence policy development, and the other group of seven who were experiencing financial and employment difficulties. The differences in the participants' lived experiences were significant, and included financial wealth, organisational influence, and educational attainment.

All participants were provided with background information and training, prior to having a phone conversation with a member of the other group. This preparation and conversation method was found to be practical and acceptable for both groups of participants.

The study findings indicate that the background training and empathy conversation processes provided to the participants, enabled them to connect with the person from the other group at a depth that both surprised them and allowed them to take on the others perspective.

Therefore this multi-disciplinary pilot suggests that guided empathy conversations can assist in bringing those with 'unlike' lived experiences into a shared connection and common experience of humanity within a policy setting.

Successfully demonstrating that empathic connections can take place between differing groups is important because some of the criticism of empathy is that we mostly experience it with those who are 'like' us. In addition, other studies have shown that those in positions of power find it more difficult to connect with others below them in a hierarchy, because feelings of power can inhibit a part of our brain that connects us with empathy.

It is recognised that pilot study methodologies do not guarantee success in subsequent full-scale projects, and a larger randomised study would need to be undertaken to confirm that the experience of empathy conversations would have similar results with a wider range of participants. This caveat notwithstanding, initial feedback from both groups indicates that all participants saw benefits in improving emotional self-regulation and empathy skills, and that further developing these abilities ought to be considered for policy makers.

It would also be worthwhile testing in a larger study if this particular method can maintain gains in empathy over time, and encourage compassionate action in policy development.

Empathy can be a framework for considering the more subtle effects of decisions that may not be the most obviously quantifiable in terms of tangible metrics such as economics... these impacts may have important long term consequences and should be considered for decision making to be collectively beneficial

*(Pilot Study Participant)*

### 2. PILOT STUDY CONTEXT

Key to the relevance of this study is the notion that both the competency of empathy, and motivation of compassion, have a role to play in business, community and political environments. This is important because although the capacity to understand another's perspective has been examined for its influence on social relationships, its potential impact on the policymaking process has largely been overlooked<sup>1</sup>.

In today's global and uncertain world, it could be argued that policy challenges require an ability to become more aware of and sensitive to the suffering of others. For that to happen, empathy and compassion need to be intentionally included and rewarded in policy and decision making settings. However, moving towards suffering requires a high level of emotional intelligence and an ability to better understand how our thoughts influence our capacity to connect with others.

This multi-disciplinary pilot is grounded in the emerging research from neuroscience, psychology, management theory and evolution. (Damasio, (2012); Gilbert, (2009); Goleman, (2013); Krznaric, (2014); Porges, (2011); Rameson & Lieberman, (2009); Rifkin, (2010); Siegel, (2012), Spikins, (2014) van der Kolk, (2014)). These research disciplines are bringing a renewed emphasis on the role empathy and compassion can play in improving social connections and in facilitating the decision making capabilities now required for a more challenging policy landscape.

In examining the inclusion of empathy conversations as a potential policy-making instrument, it is recognised that there are already many policy resources available including surveys, economic modelling, focus groups, meta-analysis, various forms of digital and mind mapping, SWOT analysis, etc. All these resources provide policy makers with a range of perspectives and strategies, but none require them to be directly open to the lived experience of those who will be impacted by those decisions. So this pilot was designed to evaluate a particular process of empathic understanding, and how it might assist in the development of more compassionate policy decisions, by adding empathy conversations to the existing tranche of policy resources.

To test this concept we partnered with a social welfare agency to recruit clients who for a range of reasons were experiencing employment and financial difficulties. Then participants in decision-making roles in government, business, and financial institutions were invited to take part in an empathy conversation with them. All participants were provided with training and background materials to support them in connecting with, not judging the other.

The ability for those in decision making roles to stay present in listening to those not 'like them' is important, as researchers have found evidence to suggest that feeling powerful can reduce the ability to connect with others. In addition many studies have also shown that when we are feeling stressed or threatened the physiology of the body is such that it shuts down the part of the brain associated with deep thought, as our bodies prepare for automatic flight/fight responses.

The following diagram (Figure 1, Page 4) outlines the workings of this physiology<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Wagaman and Segal, 2014:94

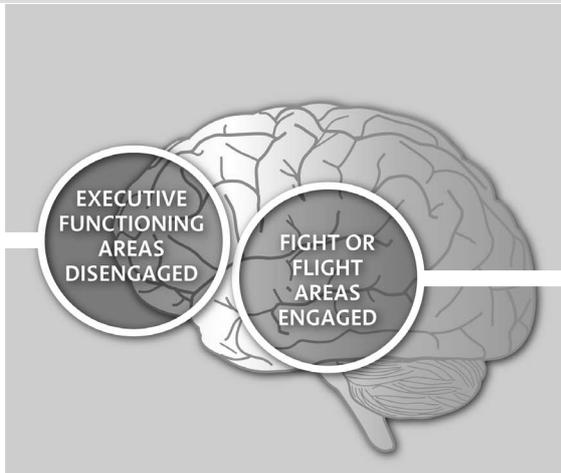
<sup>2</sup>[http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2016/Empathy\\_neuroscience.cfm](http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2016/Empathy_neuroscience.cfm), (adapted)

2. PILOT STUDY CONTEXT (CONTINUED)

Figure 1 Copyright remains with respective owners.

**FRONTAL EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING AREAS: DISENGAGED**

The prefrontal cortex is the 'CEO' of the brain. It regulates decision making, judgement, planning, moral reasoning and sense of self. Stressful experiences (academic pressure, sleep deprivation, substance abuse etc.) disengage the frontal lobes. Over time, this can lead to impulsive, short-sighted, even violent behaviour; increased anxiety, depression, substance abuse, learning disorders and stress related disease.



**SUBCORTICAL FIGHT OR FLIGHT AREAS: ENGAGED**

The subcortical arousal system – thalamus, hippocampus, brainstem, and hypothalamus – mobilizes the body for action; increasing heart rate, respiratory rate and muscle tone. The nature of this system is to bypass the frontal executive functioning and trigger the fight or flight mode.

There is still much to learn about the ongoing processes of the human brain and how the mind evaluates our behaviour and influences our actions; however with what we already know it is clear that improving our levels of self-awareness and emotion regulation should be considered an important attribute for more effective decision making.

Indeed empathy has been on the radar of management theory for a while and Daniel Goleman and Prof. Bill George have previously written on the benefits of empathy as a leadership skill. In his 2013 book *Primal Leadership*, Goleman notes that empathic people excel at:

*knowing and meeting the needs of clients, customers, or subordinates. They seem approachable, wanting to hear what people have to say. They listen carefully, picking up on what people are truly concerned about, and respond on the mark.*

And importantly it is not only the few who can empathise – studies are now showing that almost everyone can learn to be more empathic<sup>3</sup>. It seems that given the right conditions narcissists also have the capacity to empathise with other people's needs. Hepper has found that 'if we encourage narcissists to consider the situation from their teammates or colleagues' point of view they are likely to respond in a much more considerate way.' This suggests that even relatively anti-social members of society can be

empathic, and this may have implications for the education in radicalisation now being introduced into Australian schools. Of course there are barriers and alternate motivations for why people engage with empathy; in particular Zaki notes three – those of difficulty in dealing with suffering, material costs, and interference with competition<sup>4</sup>.

So why is it beneficial to demonstrate that empathy conversations could provide another resource for policy makers? We posit that they are worthwhile considering because using empathy conversations as a considered policy tool will deliver direct access to a range of diverse lived experiences to those in policy making positions; and that in turn provides enhanced information on which to base fully considered decisions. It is not surprising that our limited worldviews, based on our particular life experiences, inform our expectations and assumptions. If those in policy positions have not been a member of a discriminated or minority group, and mostly they are not, then what personal relationships have shaped their life processes?<sup>5</sup> Consequently empathy conversations may provide one way of cultivating the awareness and understanding of the lived-experiences of individuals in financial difficulty, by those developing welfare policy who have not directly experienced poverty or austerity themselves.

<sup>3</sup>Hepper, E. G., Hart, C., and Sedikides, C., 2014:1079-1091

<sup>4</sup>Zaki, J., 2014:1608

<sup>5</sup>Mark Baer, 2014 weblink

### 2. PILOT STUDY CONTEXT (CONTINUED)

And why bother getting direct access to those in financial distress? One reason is that the level of income inequality in Australia is growing – the gulf between those in the top range and those in the lower ranges of wealth is increasing. This is significant because income distribution has profound effects on population health and wellbeing, on educational outcomes, and there is evidence that inequality also impedes economic productivity and growth<sup>6</sup>. In an extensive study into the daily lives of people affected by financial crisis, from the 1930s Great Depression, to the US crisis of the late 2000s, Stuckler and Basu found a causal link between the strength of a community's health and its social protection systems; and that commitment to building fairer and more equal societies is pivotal to supporting overall population health<sup>7</sup>. So better understanding the lived experiences of those in financial distress may assist in developing more targeted policy options.

Both empathy and compassion were important components of this project – empathy in generating the connection to others, and compassion in taking action to alleviate that suffering. The use of empathy conversations to create social change has been championed by Roman Krznaric who refers to empathy as an 'essential, transforming quality we must develop for the 21st century'<sup>8</sup>. Krznaric contends that we should move beyond empathy in individual exchanges towards a collective empathy and the role that plays in tackling the confronting problems of our age. In taking a similar big picture perspective, Prof. Paul Gilbert believes that both the recognition of our interdependence and the increase in scientific data demonstrating the significant benefits of empathic and integrated behaviour are important components in progressing societal wellbeing<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>6</sup>Australia<sup>21</sup> addressed this issue in its report, 'Advance Australia Fair? What to do about growing inequality in Australia' 2014

<sup>7</sup>Stuckler, D., Basu, S., 2013

<sup>8</sup>Krznaric, 2014:186-196

<sup>9</sup>Gilbert, 2009:52-60

### 3. THE POWER OF CONVERSATIONS

When empathy is present in conversations through a better understanding of another's perspective, it allows us to transform an ordinary chat into an insightful exchange<sup>10</sup>. We know ourselves how important it is to be heard, and how being recognised validates us and deepens an understanding of ourselves and others. Neuroscience tells us that, we learn to feel others' feelings when we have the courage to better connect with our own minds and emotions<sup>11</sup>. When we put ourselves in someone else's shoes, we are using a part of the brain that has to do with creativity and social connection i.e. the right inferior parietal lobe and the right lateral prefrontal cortex<sup>12</sup>. Developing our 'empathy muscle' through good quality conversations based on a deep appreciation of another's perspective is pivotal in compassionate decision making. However, it could be argued that in our 24/7 digital, technological world, insightful human connections through inspiring and stimulating conversations are becoming the exception. If we choose to better engage with those around us, and in our increasingly divided world that is not a given, then our task is to reimagine how we interact with other people in order to gain greater insights into their worldviews<sup>13</sup>.

Conversations are based in language and therefore the words we use to describe human interactions are highly significant, particularly in the ways in which we conceive of ourselves and others, e.g. think descriptions such as 'illegals' versus 'refugees'. The terms we use to describe others have been proven to make a significant difference in how we relate to them. A recent study showed there was a major variance in the perceptions of the participants when using 'person first' language<sup>14</sup>. The findings of this particular study noted that the participants who received information using the term 'the mentally ill' displayed lower levels of tolerance than those who received information using the term 'people with a mental illness'. Awareness of our biases and assumptions inherent in our interactions is an important component of empathy in conversation.

Storytelling has shaped a large proportion of human development, and is a key part of the way in which we comprehend the world around us. Because story sharing has the ability to guide empathic connection, improving how we understand our minds and emotions is central in creating meaningful exchanges. In order to make what Krznaric calls the 'imaginative leap of empathy' – we need first to learn to 'humanise' the other', so as to discover what we share and what we don't with others. This is difficult to do when we feel threatened – our physiology responds in ways that prepare us for flight or fight and in so doing our actions become instinctive and our minds go onto automatic, shutting down our creativity and the mind centres responsible for reflection and complex ideas. In the project conversations held in this pilot it appeared that the participants were able to 'humanise' each other, by discovering what they shared in common.

<sup>10</sup>Krznaric, 2014:47&101

<sup>11</sup>Siegel, 2010:61-62

<sup>12</sup>McGilchrist, 2009:57

<sup>13</sup>Krznaric, 2014:101-102

<sup>14</sup>Haag Granello D., Gibbs T., 2016:31,38

3. THE POWER OF CONVERSATIONS (CONTINUED)

Going into more detail of what sets an empathy conversation apart from an everyday conversation, Krznaric defines six qualities (not, he stresses techniques) of empathy conversations as:

1. curiosity about stranger
2. radical listening
3. taking off their masks
4. concern for others
5. a creative spirit
6. sheer courage<sup>15</sup>

Each of these attributes was demonstrated in this empathy conversations project and the quotes below are from participants in this pilot study. The broader features of empathy are discussed in more detail in the Findings sections of this report – but as the quotes below demonstrate, the aspects that differentiate empathy conversations, from other human exchanges are openness, and the imaginative sharing of our common humanity in that connection.

*(Note: the two initials listed against each quote below indicate the initials of the participant's first name and 'G' indicates the group they were in, where /G1 are those participants from the social welfare agency Centacare and /G2 are the group of CEOs, financial consultants and ministerial advisors.)*

**QUALITIES OF EMPATHY CONVERSATIONS**

**1. CURIOSITY ABOUT A STRANGER –Ka/Gz:** I enjoy meeting people and learning from them – having the opportunity to hear people's stories is a great honour.

**2. RADICAL LISTENING –Na/G1:** I know that loneliness can be one of the biggest killers, thinking that you're alone in the situation that you're in, or that nobody else has experienced it, so I definitely do believe that talking with other people and sharing their experiences does help.

**3. TAKING OFF THEIR MASKS –An/Gz:** The fact that two strangers could connect and have a deep and personal conversation after a few introductory remarks was very impressive.

**4. CONCERN FOR OTHERS –Su/Gz:** Horrified to think of an agency like... assessing people with mental health issues over the phone and telling them to go seek work when they so obviously aren't in the headspace to do that successfully. I feel a bit angry when I think about the way she was treated and that the agency there to support her actually exacerbated her condition (anxiety).

**5. A CREATIVE SPIRIT –Ro/Gz:** There is a significant benefit in unpacking how we are responding to circumstances and to re-engage with less habitual responses.

**6. SHEER COURAGE –Sh/G1:** It was definitely different. I was scared as.

<sup>15</sup>Krznaric, 2014:102

## 4. PILOT METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 STUDY AIMS

The pilot study aims were to:

- Develop and assess a process for facilitating empathy conversations in a policy context;
- Ascertain whether the methodology employed within the present study was considered acceptable (i.e. non-onerous) and beneficial by both groups of participants;
- Gain some early indications as to whether the empathy conversation process could lead to changes in the policy-making and decision-making practices of Group 2 members.

In all, fourteen participants took part in seven empathy conversations, and the evaluation data comprised:

- Contributions from six of the seven Group 1 participants in the focus group discussions which took place two and three weeks following the conversations;
- Responses from five of the seven Group 2 participants to a survey carried out immediately after the conversation;
- Three responses to the follow-up survey sent out to Group 2 participants six weeks following the conversation.

### 4.2 PILOT STUDY METHOD

The study comprised two groups of participants: one group who had recently found themselves in financial and employment difficulties, and the other group consisted of people holding decision-making or leadership positions within government, business or financial institutions. All fourteen participants in this study were provided with a copy of the PLIS (Appendix 1), a consent form (Appendix 2) and a briefing document containing background information on the biological and neuropsychological underpinnings of empathy and information about how empathy conversations work, including a copy of the question prompts for their empathy conversation. (Appendix 3)

The empathy questions were derived from the literature and then tailored by the organising group for this pilot study. Of the ten questions only two were asked by the Group 2 person of the Group 1 participant; the other eight questions were asked and answered by both participants in

the conversation – i.e. the questions were designed so that for the initial and final set of questions on the list both participants shared information about their lives by answering questions such as:

*Have you had an experience where someone has shared a story with you and that story helped you at a difficult time? How/why did that story help? – and – What brings a sense of contentment to your life?*

The middle set of questions in the list were designed for Group 2 members (CEOs/Financial Advisors, etc.) to ask the Group 1 members questions about their experiences – with questions such as:

*How could the agencies and organisations you deal with better understand and be aware of your needs? For example, have you had positive experiences where they were responsive and you felt listened to and heard?*

The background reading material was designed to take participants approximately 30-40 minutes to read through. After reading over this information the individuals in Group 1 were contacted by the lead researcher to register for a training session and to book their phone call time slot. Group 2 individuals were also contacted by the lead researcher, who emailed them a link to the training material and booked their phone call time slot. Training occurred one week prior to the empathy phone conversation and took approximately one hour to complete. The training for Group 1 was held one-on-one over coffee, while Group 2 training was completed one-on-one over the phone. The empathy conversations were scheduled around one to two weeks after the training. Each of the Group 1 participants received their call in a quiet and private room at Centacare Ballarat, with the relevant Group 2 participant making the call from somewhere they deemed appropriate and where they were not disturbed. Participants were provided with the first name, the gender and location of the person to whom they were speaking, but did not have access to any other identifying information. The participants were guided in their 30 minute conversation by the questions and prompts provided.

All phone calls were recorded digitally for later transcription and analysis. An appropriately qualified support person was available to provide debriefing to Group 1 participants at the completion of their phone call.

### 4. PILOT METHODOLOGY (CONTINUED)

#### 4.3 PARTICIPANTS AND THE PREPARATION PROCESS

##### PARTICIPANTS

(N = 14: 10 WOMEN & 4 MEN)

**Group 1 participants** were recruited through Centacare, Ballarat, including from the Clemente program<sup>16</sup> (an educational collaboration between Centacare, FedUni and ACU). Centacare, Ballarat, is a Catholic organisation that provides social welfare and employment services. All Group 1 participants were experiencing financial difficulties for a range of reasons, e.g. single parent, redundancy, returned soldier, housing distress, health condition, etc. As Group 1 participants were being case managed, the case managers' role was to identify individuals who met the criteria for the study – and it was then up to the individual to decide if they wanted to participate. The case managers were not aware if their clients participated unless their clients informed them, and as such it did not impact on their relationship or on the services or therapies provided to the clients. Centacare case managers identified individuals who met these inclusion/exclusion criteria and provide their contact details to the lead researcher. They were then provided with a study information pack, which included a cover letter, the Background Materials for Participants document, PLIS, and consent form. Group 1 participants each received the phone call at Centacare's premises, and had the opportunity to debrief with an appropriately qualified support person.

To ensure there was not a great power imbalance between the two conversation groups, Group 1 participants needed to have completed some secondary education/training and have been employed in the recent past. Furthermore, while they may be stressed as a result of their current situation, they were not presently suffering from psychological distress or from a major mental illness.

**Group 2 participants** were recruited through Australia<sup>21</sup> networks, and The School of Life in Melbourne – The School of Life was originally established in the UK by Alaine de Botton and Roman Krznaric, and is an organisation '*devoted to developing emotional intelligence through the help of culture*'. The Group 2 participants were based in a number of Australian States and Territories, including New South Wales, Victoria, and the Australian Capital Territory. These participants work in areas of influence including as ministerial advisors, CEO's, financial advisers, consultants, and policy managers, and in these roles they hold decision-making or leadership positions within government, business, or financial institutions.

<sup>16</sup>The Clemente program provides humanities subjects on literature, history and philosophy taught at an academic university standard. Students are taught for free, have been selected from disadvantaged households, and are over the age of eighteen.

## 4. PILOT METHODOLOGY (CONTINUED)

### 4.3 PARTICIPANTS AND THE PREPARATION PROCESS (CONT.)

#### PARTICIPANT PREPARATION

All participants received an information package and some training in the neuropsychological underpinnings of empathy, compassion, and empathy conversations. As stated Group 1 participants received the training in person one to two weeks prior to receiving a phone call from a member of Group 2.

Prior to the conversation all participants were provided with some initial training on the emotion regulation system and with a number of mindfulness practices. This was an important feature of the preparation process, as the learning from neuroscience tells us that we are unable to connect with others when we are feeling threatened or over-anxious. In particular, the work of Prof. Gilbert was drawn upon.

Gilbert states that there are three aspects of our emotional regulation system and they comprise:

- Threat – survival and self-protection
- Drive – doing and achieving
- Soothing/Affiliation – contentment, connection, and feeling safe

He notes that we need all three emotion regulation systems – but we need to be more consciously aware of when we are in them and their influence on us. In our busy and agitated world our threat and drive systems are ‘on’ more often than not, while our soothing/affiliation system is seen as optional, and that imbalance is contributing to high levels of stress and anxiety. So to support the participants in coming to the empathy conversation with an awareness of their soothing and affiliation selves, they were given a briefing on these emotion regulation systems, and two associated breathing and mindfulness

exercises to work with between the training session and the conversation. For various reasons, including the times the trainer and the participant had available, these times differed, some had two weeks to practise the mindfulness exercises and some had only three days. But regardless of the time period they had available to practise, it is recognised that this short training could only provide an introduction to emotion regulation and mindfulness. It was not surprising that a number of the participants were still somewhat nervous prior to the conversation.

The phone conversation was guided through the provision of empathy question prompts to both participants, lasted approximately 30 minutes, and was recorded for qualitative data analysis. To gain information on participant experiences and insights a focus group was held with Group 1 participants approximately one to two weeks after their conversations, while Group 2 participants were sent a survey covering similar evaluation questions a day after their conversation. A second survey was sent to Group 2 approximately around six weeks later to ascertain any impacts resulting from their involvement in the project. Overall participation in the study took approximately 3 hours in total.

Group 1 participants were invited to return to Centacare approximately one week after the conversations to participate in a 1 hour focus group. These focus groups, were digitally recorded for later transcription, and were designed to gather information about the participants’ conversation experiences, the insights they gained, and their thoughts and feelings about the project methodology (Appendix 4). As Group 2 participants were located across Australia, they were sent a survey to gather this same information (Appendix 5 post-conversation survey). In addition both groups were sent a recruitment letter. (Appendix 6)

### 4. PILOT METHODOLOGY (CONTINUED)

#### 4.4 RISKS

The risks to participants were considered small. While Group 1 participants were screened for psychological distress prior to entry to the study, it was still possible that they may have found it distressing to discuss their financial difficulties and associated life experiences. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, including mid-phone call, if they found it was causing them distress. Additional to this, an appropriately qualified support person was available after the empathy conversations were completed to ensure any participant experiencing distress received the support that they required. It was not anticipated that Group 2 participants would find the conversations distressing; nevertheless the contact details for Lifeline were also included in the PLIS. Furthermore, both groups of participants were made aware of the nature of the questions to be asked during the conversation, through both the PLIS and the briefing document, which included the full list of questions and prompts. The lead researcher's contact details were provided to enable participants to make contact for any reason and at any time.

## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS

To assess the effectiveness of the qualitative methodology in achieving the pilot aims, the findings section below draws on a number of data sources, including the feedback from the evaluation surveys of Group 2 participants (decision makers), from the focus group discussions with Group 1 participants (Centacare clients), and where relevant, from the conversation transcripts themselves.

The qualitative data collected from the focus groups and evaluation surveys was identified and collated, before being subjected to thematic analysis. Interjudge reliability was assessed to ensure an appropriate level of agreement in relation to the coding of segments of data. In identifying common themes the conversation transcripts were sorted using an affinity diagram approach. This approach uses a technique designed to sort a large number of ideas and opinions into naturally related groups. The particular method for grouping used for this project included the use of colour coding. The pilot study transcripts were read through a number of times and as particular themes became apparent – they were accorded a colour. Each relevant segment of the focus group and conversation transcripts and the evaluation surveys were then marked in the relevant colours and two academic members of the organising group met to agree on the analysis, and finalise the thematic headings.

Approximately six weeks later, a second survey was sent to Group 2 to ascertain any impressions on them from their involvement in the project. It took participants approximately 30 minutes to complete each of these surveys. The three main themes and their sub-themes comprised the following headings:

### Theme 1

#### THE EMPATHY CONVERSATION EXPERIENCE

- 1.1 Sense of connection gained through openness; comfortable conversation;
- 1.2 Sharing of stories – ‘deeper identifications’ and ‘new perspectives’;
- 1.3 Awareness of our shared humanity and Awareness of different lived experiences;
- 1.4 Importance of deep listening and non-judgement.

### Theme 2

#### THE PROJECT METHODOLOGY

- 2.1 Appropriateness of background information;
- 2.2 Felt prepared and supported;
- 2.3 Motivations for involvement:
  - 2.3.1 Believe that empathy is important
  - 2.3.2 Wanted to contribute and learn more
  - 2.3.3 Referral person.

### Theme 3

#### THE ROLE OF EMPATHY IN DECISION MAKING

- 3.1 Empathy is important in and of itself
- 3.2 Empathy is central in understanding and connecting with others;
- 3.3 Integration of empathy into daily practice requires conscious effort;
- 3.4 Positive people in negative structures – implications for empathy training.

The themes outlined in this findings section recognise that the ‘keyness’ of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall project aims. The quotes listed in the findings text below come from participants who, to ensure privacy, are identified only by the first two initials of the first name of the person, and the number 1 or 2 to indicate if that person was from Group 1 (Centacare group), or Group 2 (Decision-makers group).

## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

## 5.1 THE EMPATHY CONVERSATION EXPERIENCE

This first findings section reviews a number of issues associated with the conversation experience itself. In the written and focus group evaluations, participants were asked to comment on how they felt during the conversation, the impression it had had on them, if any aspects of the conversation had surprised them, how they connected with the other person, and if they would consider doing it again. These questions were designed to gauge their direct experience of the process, assessing if it had immersed them in the empathy conversation in any meaningful way. If each conversation pair hadn't felt a sense of a connection during their conversation, then they would not have been in a position to engage in an empathic exchange.

## 5.1.1 Sense of connection gained through openness; comfortable conversation

One of the most striking outcomes from these empathy conversations was the level of connection all fourteen participants reported feeling during their conversations. From their feedback it was evident that they were having an empathy conversation and not a discussion, casual chat, or interview. Their responses indicated that both the empathy questions provided to them and the training they received prior to the conversation went some way to supporting the development of an empathic connection. This level of comfort and ease was experienced by the participants in both groups. During the focus group discussion, Group 1 participants expressed their sense of connection and curiosity about the level of comfort in the conversation exchange:

*I found it relaxing, talking to some stranger. I mean it wasn't rushed... it just had the atmosphere that it was calm as well. Sh/g1*

Likewise Group 2 participants stated they felt a sense of connection with the other person, but they also expressed surprise at the deep level of association they experienced.

*There was a lot of open disclosure for a first meeting, I felt quite comfortable to share and open up. An/g2*

*... I did feel a more personal connection, more than I had anticipated. Ro/g2*

*I felt a great sense of connection to my fellow conversationalist... I also felt a sense of warmth. Ka/g2*

One participant expressed a sense that there was no special feeling – but even that recognised a deeper level of connection.

*... it was like having a normal conversation, except that I don't know Na/g1 and we were talking feelings. Fr/g2*

The empathy conversations required the participants to respond to questions such as 'How do you deal with things when life is tough, and how does that work for you?' Answering questions such as these required a level of disclosure between strangers that would not normally be experienced during an initial meeting. Because of the emotional aspects of opening up to another person, one Group 1 person did experience this level of openness as a little challenging. Lo/g1 noted that she found the conversation to be initially quite emotional, but when in the focus group she was subsequently asked if she felt safe in the conversation she immediately answered 'yes'. In describing her experience she noted:

*I think it's just that on a daily basis I'm not that open and raw. I think the one thing that struck me was the other person described something to me that I thought was really private. But I felt in a way, quite honoured that they'd told me that information and trusted me. Lo/g1*

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5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

5.1.1 Sense of connection gained through openness; comfortable conversation (Continued)

While some of the Group 1 participants were a little tentative at the beginning, they were able to relax as they moved into the conversation. As well, the fact that the conversations were held over the phone provided a safety buffer and allowed the participants to focus on the dialogue, rather than their body language.

*... with being on the end of a phone you sort of, you're opening up - because it's no one you know... and then that keeps going. Ji/g 1*

*It was definitely different. I was scared as. Its setting just flowed. We had more of a conversation than anything really, it sort of flowed. Sh/g 1*

Once the participants became absorbed in the conversation their early nervousness abated, so that in the end all participants were comfortable with sharing in the conversation.

*Even though we didn't know the person on the phone it was like we did. Sh/g 1*

*Interesting. Not knowing how you were actually going to start it, sort of thing. As it moved further on, it became more and more interesting. Ji/g 1*

The project organising group recognised that the empathy questions would require openness in connecting with others in different financial circumstances. In setting up the conversations it was acknowledged that the Centacare participants, who are mostly in the process of job searching, might find it confronting to have a conversation with someone in a financially secure state. However, not only did all participants express a sense of safety following the conversations, not one person in either group asked for the debrief session from the psychologist, even though they had been reminded of the offer again at the time of the conversation. The project process seemed to facilitate a safe place for all participants to engage in the empathy questions.

*I was surprised by the amount of sharing of personal situations and open discussion of major family and personal challenges. The frankness and openness of the discussion and the level of sharing was surprising, but also very meaningful. An/g 2*

*I was a little bit surprised at how much the other person was willing to share with me, and I with her. It felt like a safe space and process so that was enabled. Su/g 2*

5.1.2 Sharing of stories – ‘deeper identifications’ and ‘new perspectives’

In their evaluations the participants remarked on the importance of sharing stories and reflected on the positive impact others’ stories had had on them during difficult times. Group two participants noted that the conversations had provided them a secure space from which they were able to pay attention to the other.

*... having the opportunity to hear people's stories is a great honour. To truly listen to each other is such an important thing to do. Ka/g 2*

*... there is healing and help for the individual in need when they are truly heard and listened to and their pain is acknowledged. It can be the beginning for them. Su/g 2*

Whereas the Group 2 participants focused on the depth of the conversation they were able to have, the Group 1 respondents noted that the empathy conversations had provided them with a new perspective. They reflected that even though the Group 2 person was financially better off, they too were experiencing life’s difficulties.

*You're not the only one going through this situation, there's others. Sh/g 1*

*... you start out with your basic story of I'm Joe Blow... but then you get into 'well I dealt with the government'... and hang on I've had the same experience... so it actually comes back to you again and you're listening to the person saying exactly what's happened to them. I thought I was the only one that did this sort of thing, you know? Ji/g 1*

*Everyone's got their different stories. Me/g 1*

## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

## 5.1.2 Sharing of stories – ‘deeper identifications’ and ‘new perspectives’ (Continued)

So there was a slightly different interpretation of the importance of stories from both groups: Group 2 members around a ‘deeper identification’ with others, while Group 1 participants focused more on ‘perspective taking’. This difference would be worthwhile reviewing to assess if it would be replicated in any larger study. Another aspect of stories commented on by four of the Group 1 participants were that they couldn’t recall someone ever having shared a story with them. Me/g1 reflected that in terms of a story she didn’t have a specific one:

*... and that’s strange isn’t it - I never thought about a specific person that I could say ‘yeah’ knowing you has helped me at this difficult time.*

Because of the lack of story sharing in her life Na/g1, in what constituted a deep level of personal awareness, remarked that she now understood the importance of stories in supporting and alleviating a sense of isolation in difficult times:

*No, I’ve never had anybody talk me through a rough time per se or share a story that has helped me in a rough time. But as a result I find that now, going through the hard time that I’ve had, I’m much more able to share stories with other people. So I’ve gone the opposite way. I didn’t really have anybody there to help me, but as a result I’m more than willing to help other people and to share my stories with them. (Na/g1)*

These comments from the participants emphasise that telling our stories to others, plays an important part in human connections and in learning from each other; and when that is done with compassion it seems we are better placed to glimpse the humanity in each other.

*The power and impact of sharing and active listening is very empowering... An/g2*

## 5.1.3 Awareness of our shared humanity and Awareness of different lived experiences

The empathy conversation outcomes have confirmed that given the right circumstance it takes very little time for strangers to find the human connections that unite us. For example An/g2 & Le/g1 discovered that both their mothers had recently passed away, Ro/g2 & Sh/g1 that both husbands were currently out of work, and for Re/g1 & Ch/g2 it was fatherhood. For Na/g1 & Fr/g2 whilst they didn’t have any particular life experience in common, they discovered a commonality in that they both had a high desire to be organised in their lives. These connections happened without any matching of participants on the part of the organising group. In saying that, it is recognised all participants chose to take part in this pilot project. Any larger research project would need to test this common humanity finding with people who have a range of approaches to life and other people. However, for this project it was clear that in every empathy conversation, participants found and connected with areas of common interest very early in the conversation.

*... a confirmation that people are the same at their core regardless of their circumstances. Ro/g2*

*... I realised that underneath it all, many of us cherish and value the same things. Su/g2*

*... the commonalities and the level of personal sharing was very unexpected but comforting. An/g2*

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## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

## 5.1.3 Awareness of our shared humanity and Awareness of different lived experiences (Continued)

This common humanity finding was also evident during the conversations – one of the empathy questions was *‘What brings a sense of contentment in your life?’* The answer to this question was very similar – regardless of what financial circumstances the participants found themselves in. For example the conversation response to this question from Ch/g2 & Re/g1 both young married men comprised:

*I guess knowing that soon I’ll have a baby – that makes me feel content because that’s the safe place to be, with my wife. That’s what makes me feel content. The closeness that I have with her. And how about you? Do you have things that help you feel content? Ch/g2*

*Pretty much the same. Family, people who you care and you love... If you’re safe and the basics are on the right spot, I think you are content... Re/g1*

Conversely, whilst the exchanges and evaluations identified the clear human connections that we can share – they also poignantly contrasted the lived experiences between each of the two groups. In one conversation Le/g2 was explaining that she’d chosen to cut back on her work hours so that she could devote more time to writing and therefore money was tight. To this Ji/g1 responded that he knew what she meant as he had recently accessed his super fund to pay the winter heating bill. Obviously there was a major gap in the experience of what it meant for money to be tight. In another conversation Ro/g2 had explained that her husband was out of work and Sh/g1 had commented that her husband was also out of work, and that would mean that she was unable to buy Christmas presents for some of the family, a choice Ro/g2 would not have had to make. Indeed the difference between the lived experiences between the two young men in the conversation above was significant – Re/g1 was a refugee who had spent time in a camp and had become so distressed at being separated from his wife and small son, he had attempted suicide in that camp, and Ch/g2 was a senior public servant living in Canberra – and family was everything to both.

These empathy conversations also elicited responses about our lived experiences and the role that fortune and the circumstances into which we are born plays in our lives. During one conversation a Group 2 participant commented that he had been incredibly lucky:

*I’ve had a lot of luck in regards to the education I was given, and things like that. Fr/g2*

Following their conversation the Centacare person said to the chief researcher:

*I really valued Fr/g2 realising that he was lucky in the life he was born into, and in recognising his luck. Just as I was unlucky to be born into a family of out-of-control drug takers. Na/g1*

This was a very insightful comment and one that emerged from a truly empathic interaction. Na/g1 was able to both step into Fr/g2’s life experience and then take that insight and reflect back on her own life, with a sense of curiosity and awareness. Group 2 participants also gained insights both into the lives of the Group 1 participants and into the fortune evident in their own lives.

*It (the conversation) has reconfirmed to me that I am fortunate to have many wonderful things in my life. Ka/g2*

*It made me realise the practical impediments that people face even if they are willing and wanting to find a way out of their financial difficulties. Also the pressures of unforeseen life and family circumstances that may compound financial difficulties but also make them less physically, emotionally or mentally able to proactively focus on financial goals. An/g2*

As a clinical psychologist, Prof. Paul Gilbert has made this point during many presentations noting that if his parents were part of an outlawed bikie gang he would not be the current version of himself – i.e. a world leading academic on compassionate mind therapy.

## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

## 5.1.4 Importance of deep listening and non-judgement

A necessary component of empathy is the ability to be open to another's experiences. The Group 2 participants reported that they were able to bring awareness and non-judgement to their conversations and this allowed them to 'step into the shoes' of their Group 1 conversation partners. In broader terms they also recognised that in the workplace it is important to bring awareness to times when, as managers they are just 'getting through' daily work requirements at the expense of connecting to other employees and peers through deep listening.

*I feel that many people in government or agencies that deal with people in difficult circumstances or who are disadvantaged in some way might pre-judge and not consider the personal story behind the circumstances. And it's only by listening that we can connect and then serve their needs in the best way. Without listening, it is too easy to assume what another person might need in a given situation. Su/g2*

*I did not feel the need to judge or problem solve, which I am pleased about. Ro/g2*

By their nature empathy conversations require a deep level of listening – really tuning in to the other person's response. The conversation process in this pilot project which included both pre-training and support for the conversations, seemed to facilitate this awareness.

*The gift of friendly conversation and an empathic ear... it made me reassess my relationships and interactions with friends and strangers. An/g2*

*To truly listen to each other is such an important thing to do. Ka/g2*

To assess if the conversations had provided participants with any 'ah ha' moments in which they had realised something, perhaps for the first time, they were asked if they'd had any new understandings during or after the conversation. Whilst overall the participants did not report having 'lightbulb' moments where they suddenly got a new insight – they did reflect that the empathy conversation had been deeper than they had anticipated. They also reflected how effortlessly more respected connections with others can happen when we engage empathically.

*The main 'lightbulb' moment was how easily we can connect with others & offer the gift of friendly conversation & an empathic ear. It made me reassess my relationships & interactions with friends & strangers. e.g. I talked to a friend who actively engages in conversations with homeless people on festive occasions & I have asked to do this with her and start being more proactively empathic towards the less fortunate or those that may be in need. An/g2*

In responding to the initial survey, Group 2 participants also reported having experiences in the short time since the conversation, in which they were able to draw on their learning from both the pre-conversation training and the conversation itself to apply in their lives.

*... in the last week, sometime after the conversation, I had an experience where someone failed to use empathy as part of their approach with me around a sensitive matter and I was reminded graphically of how critical the use of empathy is in building and maintaining relationships. Ka/g2*

In assessing the empathy conversation experience overall, every one of the participants who responded agreed that they would either take part in a similar conversation again or recommend it to other people they know. Further studies would need to test this response with a wider range of participants, particularly those who have set beliefs about the unemployed and those on welfare, to gauge if the training and conversation experience would elicit the same positive response in different groups. But for participants in this pilot study they all indicated they would consider doing it again.

*Sure. There is significant benefit in unpacking how we are responding to circumstances and to reengage with less habitual responses. Ro/g2*

*Yes, I would do this again and recommend it to others of all different ages and cultural backgrounds. The power and impact of sharing and active listening is very empowering and impactful. An/g2*

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## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

### 5.1.4 Importance of deep listening and non-judgement (Continued)

All participants were asked if there was anything that made them doubt their decision to be involved and whilst they all said they had no reservations – two commented on their circumstances at the time of the study.

*I had just started a new very busy job and my only hesitation was if I had the time to do justice to what was being asked. Ro/g2*

*I was very happy to be involved. Only doubt was whether I was a suitable participant for the research. An/g2*

Because of the non-judgemental connection participants experienced during the conversation, they appeared to very much enjoy the conversations. The lead researcher observed the body language of the Group 1 participants, which at the end of the conversations was very up-beat. The empathy conversations seemed to engender a sense of connection. Certainly it's not every day you have a conversation with questions such as: *Are you better at laughing or forgetting?* As previously referenced all participants chose to be part of this project – and this will have impacted on their experience and level of commitment, but even beyond that there seemed to be genuine levels of connection evident. The final comments in part reflected their ease with each other by the end of the conversation.

*Thank you for having me. Re/g1 – Thank you. It was a wonderful conversation. Ch/g2*

*Thank you for calling and sharing this conversation with me. Me/g1 And thank you for sharing your life and your journey with me I really appreciate your time. Ka/g2*

*Thanks so much for this conversation Su/g2 this has been great this conversation. Lo/g1; Yes, it's been a very grounding experience – just talking to a stranger and yet finding out that we have lots in common – and so thank you Lo/g1. Su/g2*

### 5.2 THE EMPATHY PROJECT METHODOLOGY

#### 5.2.1 Appropriateness of background information

The background reading material provided to participants contained information on empathy and empathy conversations, including definitions of empathy, types of empathy, barriers to empathy, and some guidelines for empathic listening. This material also outlined what Krznaric identifies as the six personal habits that can cultivate our empathy. The feedback from both groups indicated that the background material provided was able to be absorbed, and contained about the right level of detail for those in this pilot project. However, whilst the participants reported learning from the emotion regulation training and reading material, it is acknowledged that in any larger project, participants would benefit from additional exposure to the comprehensive research into empathy and compassion currently underway. Any future project might investigate an optimal level of knowledge by setting up a number of groups, who are provided with differing amounts of background materials in order to assess if any variance in the information provided had an effect on the levels of empathy experienced. Group 2 participants were emailed the background reading material following the training session which took place over the phone.

*All material was useful and working with the coordinator very professional. Ro/g2*

*The background information was excellent and very interesting. Fr/g2*

*I had a read of all the materials now and have found them truly interesting. Le/g1*

## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

## 5.2.1 Appropriateness of background information (Continued)

For Group 1 participants, the lead researcher handed out the reading materials at the time of their one-on-one training. The Centacare participants also indicated that they enjoyed the training and found the background material easy to follow.

*It wasn't overly much. It didn't confuse anybody. It was easy to read. Ji/g1*

One aspect of the preparation and training that would need to be reviewed in any future study is that of the link between the emotion regulation training and the conversation. The training was conducted prior to the conversation on the basis that having a better understanding of the mind/body interactions assists in being able to access our empathic selves. Studies by neuroscientists show when we are stressed the part of the brain which registers empathy simply doesn't light up. Therefore this project added training that covered some emotion regulation, mindfulness and breathing techniques. During the training session, one Centacare person claimed 'Oh this is good to know and I'm going to use this in my daily life!' Some people 'got' that this training was provided to support a relaxed approach to the conversation and others didn't, which would indicate that the link needed to be better clarified at the time of the training session.

*See I didn't see that straight away – I thought they were two separate things. Lo/g1*

## 5.2.2 Felt prepared and supported

In the evaluations, all participants were asked about their experience and involvement in this project, including the usefulness of the emotion regulation training in preparing them for the conversation. These questions were intended to ascertain whether the methodology employed within the study was acceptable and beneficial to them. In terms of the background information document all participants indicated that overall the material had prepared them for the conversation. This was so of both groups and this would seem to indicate that a separate background document did not have to be developed for each group.

*I felt prepared to do the interview with the support and information I was given. Su/g2*

*It was straight to the point. Sh/g1*

*Background information document was very useful. It was enough information without giving too much away and detracting from the impact of the conversation. An/g2*

As referenced earlier, in preparation for the empathy conversation, all participants were also provided with emotion regulation training sessions that lasted around 30-40 minutes. The content of the training session was based on the work of Prof. Paul Gilbert, particularly on his interpretation of our three emotion regulation systems. When understood, the emotion regulation systems of threat, drive and soothing bring an awareness of the impact of each system on the body's physiology. The objective was that each person would come to the conversation with awareness of being in their 'soothing' selves and not with their 'threat' or 'drive' systems activated. As previously mentioned the training provided was not in-depth and so it was not surprising that many participants were still nervous at first, but nonetheless the training seemed to be sufficient to ensure that participants were able to quickly relax.

*Initially a little nervous as my conversation partner was confronting some difficult personal issues. However, as the conversation continued, I felt quite comfortable to share and open up. An/g2*

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## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

5.2.2 Felt prepared and supported  
(Continued)

Group 2 participants noted that the training provided beneficial material for why being in control of your emotions would better enable openness to others.

*Phone training was very useful and I really enjoyed talking with Lynne (Lead Researcher) and learning more about the context of the study and the field of empathy. An/g2*

Group 1 members also felt supported in their participation, and appreciated having the training delivered to them one-on-one in a relaxed setting over coffee.

*You could just disclose more about yourself. Or feel comfortable too. Lo/g1*

The training and background material seemed to provide both groups with awareness that the conversations they were taking part in were empathy conversations. This meant they came to the conversation mindful that they were engaging in a shared experience between two people. Empathy may lead to sympathy but is distinct from it. It was notable therefore that this awareness was reflected in some of the focus group comments by the Group1 participants.

*I don't think there was sympathy in there at any stage. Because, yes we did all have something to say but for the people who may have had a bit of a run down or run in, with somebody and had a bad experience, but I don't think there was any sympathy., 'Oh I'm very sorry about that' sort of thing. It was a case of we've done pretty well coming out of it with what you're doing.' Ji/g1*

Nevertheless there was concern for the other, and that went both ways as was reflected in the discussions earlier in this report (sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2). Some of the Group 1 participants had been through particularly difficult circumstances and that was reflected on by a Group 2 person in particular.

*It sounds like it's pretty rough but I guess the one thing that you can... be contented by, is that your family... and I hope that everything improves for you and you can sort of get the kind of assistance that allows you to go to work, and to provide for your family... I hope that happens because it must be terrible for you. Ch/g2*

During the preparation phase of this pilot study, the project organising group grappled with how much information should be provided to each conversation partner about the other prior to the phone conversation. For example, should it have been 'you will be speaking with a returned Vietnam Vet who recently suffered a heart attack', or a 'Ministerial Advisor with three grown daughters', etc. In the end it was decided to give each participant just first names, gender and where the person was physically located, e.g. Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney. This approach seemed to work well in engendering curiosity and during the focus group a Group 1 person in response to the statement 'do you feel you were given enough information about your conversation partner' noted:

*Actually you did it very well there. Because without the information, as to who you were talking to or anything like that, you went in blind and you made up your own mind. So it was better to do it that way than have, 'oh your talking to a 57 year old woman who lives in Melbourne with six grandkids'...we'd rather walk in blind and sit down and say 'how you going?'...and then you sort of learned more about the person. Ji/g1*

In addition to the amount of personal information about the conversation partner a Group 2 participant did raise the issue of how much personal disclosure should be made during the exchange. Following the conversation she noted that the only query she had was – *how much self to reveal vs the reflective listening focus Ro/g2*. However, having noted this matter, for Ro/g2 not being sure about how much to reveal prior to the conversation did not detract from her experience and her evaluation comments showed that she was able to feel comfortable with a deep level of engagement during the conversation.

5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

5.2.3 Motivations for involvement

The reasons the participants became involved in the project fell into three main categories – they:

- believed that empathy is important and wanted to progress inquiry in this area;
- wanted to support the project itself; and
- trusted the person who had invited them to participate.

**Believe that empathy is important**

Five of the participants undertook to be involved in this pilot project because of their belief in or connection with empathy work and its potential to influence new approaches to policy making. These participants chose to be involved because they believed that the world would be a better place if we treated each other with respect and empathy.

*As you are well aware there is learning on all sides to be done here and I'm pleased to have access to the cutting edge thinking being done about making the world a better place! Le/g2*

*... this project helps to formally demonstrate the impact of empathy. Ka/g2*

*I've been learning this at the Uni. I'm at Federation Uni doing Community Services. We learnt about empathy. Me/g1*

*I understand the value of empathy in creating more meaningful relationships. Su/g2*

**Wanted to contribute and learn more**

Five of the participants who responded became involved in this project because they thought it sounded interesting and wanted to assist in progressing work in the area of empathy, or to help out more generally. This was true of both Group 1 and 2 participants.

*It seemed like a worthwhile initiative and sounded interesting. Fr/g2*

*I didn't know what it was all about, I just love to help out. Ji/g1*

*I was very keen to learn more and be involved. An/g2*

**Referral person**

The final four of the participants took part because of the connection they had with the person who had directly invited them to be involved.

*I was asked to by someone I respected. Ro/g2*

*A friend of a friend contacted me and asked me if I would be involved in the project and I do appreciate that it's important that people engage at times –and in research it's not always easy to get people to help out, so when you can it's often a good thing to do that. Ch/g2*

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## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

## 5.3 THE ROLE OF EMPATHY IN DECISION MAKING

In assessing if the empathy conversations had led to any initial changes in leadership practices or decision-making processes of the Group 2 participants, this Findings section outlines four sub-themes identified from the evaluation surveys and in some of the conversations. These sub-themes focus on empathy being important in its own right; in empathy supporting better decision making; and that practicing empathy in a conscious way requires some level of attentive thought. In addition, feedback from Group 1 participants indicated that positive interactions with empathic individuals in welfare agencies made a difference to both their administrative outcomes and personal experience. This finding may have implications for formal empathy training in front-line positions in community, government organisations and businesses.

## 5.3.1 Empathy important in and of itself

In reflecting on the experience of being involved in this project, participants in both groups reported that the conversation had clarified for them that empathy had better enabled them to connect with others. They stated that this was because it allowed them to imagine what it would feel like if they had to go through those same experiences. They also reaffirmed how shared listening and connection supports and facilities an enhanced understanding of other people's viewpoints.

*... sometimes people act in particular ways that at first may seem foreign to us yet when put through the filter of seeing it from their perspective, we may reflect that in the same circumstances, we may have done the same thing. Ka/g2*

*If I don't listen, then I am assuming I know what the issues are and that's just arrogant and the person in need knows it. It's a terrible and hopeless feeling if no one is listening or you feel that no one understands. Su/g2*

Empathy requires that we humanise the 'other' to discover what we share and what we don't, and during the focus group session Group 1 participants gave their perspective of what it feels like being judged, noting that too often others deduce what an individual is like as a person from a range of very superficial cues such as body shape, clothes, marital status, etc. Most Group 1 participants commented on how that feels.

*I think they just tar us all with the same brush. Once we enter that... office you just become your reference number... I feel they don't listen they just want to get on with it and get home. Le/g1*

*we had a run in with a young DHS worker, who believed that anybody who had tattoos and piercings was not a mother. Me/g1*

In this project the training process and empathy questions required all participants to be open to the experience. It is suggested that for empathy conversations to be an effective policy resource those involved in the conversation need to be open and connected in the process, otherwise it would be more a case of pity, which studies have shown can lead to empathy fatigue. During one conversation when sharing their negative experiences of dealing with people in agencies both the Group 1 and Group 2 participants were able to reflect on those in front-line services and feel empathy for them. It seems that these empathy conversations allowed participants to genuinely move beyond blame and simplistic judgement towards an understanding and acknowledgment of their own and another's perspectives.

*It's probably the system that's broken rather than the actual people there (in agencies/ bureaucracies). An/g2*

*I know they have to deal with some very rude people themselves. And you have to make allowances for that I guess. Le/g2*

## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

## 5.3.2 Empathy is central in understanding and connecting with others

In considering the role of empathy in human connections, these project findings are drawing attention to similarities and differences between those in the two pilot study groups, and the complexities in moving between them. As noted, empathy is not about one group simplistically expressing sympathy for another, and in the Conclusion section (Pages 36 to 37) we suggest using empathy conversations as one tool for developing more compassionate policy options because they allow for improved understanding of the policy landscape within which decisions are being taken. But in the context of this particular findings section, it was clear that the conversation experience had assisted those in decision making positions to reflect on the experience of those going through employment and financial difficulties.

*... I think that our middle class bureaucracies have no idea in many instances how their actions and policies affect the people they are employed to serve. These agencies are here to serve others who don't share the same level of education and advantage as those working in the bureaucracies. We should be trying to work with others in a way that is useful to them, walk in their shoes, understand their world; but as it is, we expect them to come into the very strange world of government bureaucracy, e.g. government jargon, language, arbitrary rules, rotating doors and faces, etc. It should be more customer-focussed and centred. Su/g2*

*... the conversation had confirmed that getting into financial difficulty could happen to any of us, as most of us don't have a contingency plan. Ka/g2*

In getting some indication of whether the empathy conversations had led to changes in work practices – Group 2 participants were asked if they believed that empathy should play a role in decision making. Each one of the Group 2 respondents agreed that empathy is an important component of decision making, not only for the individuals in the interactions but also for the health of the organisation more generally.

*I believe that trying to understand the impact of your decision or the process you are undertaking before acting leads to a more compassionate workplace and helps to increase productivity and commitment from staff which is a better outcome for the organisation. Ka/g2*

*Yes, definitely. If decisions are going to be the best that's possible for all parties, empathy is essential. Fr/g2*

Again a larger study with a wider range of participants would need to be undertaken to examine the extent to which the participants brought these views with them into the project and to what extent they were influenced by the conversation experience. All Group 2 respondents concluded that empathy has a role to play in improving decision making processes. They felt that there was a direct link between a deeper level of understanding of the problem and improved decision making. Group 2 respondents also commented that no decision is made in a contextual void and taking into account another's perspective will have better outcomes for the direct and indirect stakeholders affected by it. They suggested that decision-makers need to at least try to understand the lived reality of people in difficult situations and listen to what they need when making decisions that will affect them.

*I totally believe that empathy should be a part of the decision making process that people use in their everyday interactions. I think it is vital that organisations have a non-judgemental approach that implies people cause their own issues but rather an approach of seeing how might I feel if this was happening to me and from there, deal with people with a framework that allows staff to respond in a considered way and that sees the person as 'a person like me' rather than as different. Ka/g2*

*Empathy can be a framework for considering the more subtle effects of decisions that may not be the most obviously quantifiable in terms of tangible metrics such as economics. However, these impacts may have important long term consequences and should be considered for decision making to be sustainable and collectively beneficial. An/g2*

And from another perspective, Group 1 participants reflected on their first-hand experience of interacting with those who have an empathic approach and those who do not.

*I've come across a lot of brick walls and it can be very discouraging, especially when you meet someone with an offhand attitude, 'oh well go somewhere else'. Lo/g1*

## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

## 5.3.3 Integration of empathy into daily practice requires conscious effort

The participants acknowledged that it does take extra time and effort to both further develop self-awareness, and to interact with others in non-judgemental or non-critical ways; but they also agreed that the benefits outweigh any additional time spent in bringing empathy to workplace interactions. Empathy approaches can manifest themselves in many ways in work practices, including better listening skills, suspending judgement, kindness to self and others, and even in the language used in agencies, i.e. it is accessible and clear.

*I better understand that some personal situations are very complex and not easily or readily fixed within a short period of time. It might take years for someone to recover from a trauma. And recovery time is an individual thing, not one size fits all. So some people will need support over a period of time, and it might not be 6 weeks or 6 months. And adding financial stress on top of another kind of trauma just makes it that much harder to heal the original issue. And I think that it's very easy to judge someone in financial hardship, e.g. 'why can't they just get a job?' but it's not that easy. Su/g2*

*Personally I want to strive to be respectful and understanding to everyone I engage with and I think this will enrich my personal and professional life. An/g2*

The Group 2 participants focused on the positive and negative aspects of bringing empathic approaches into organisations, and on the positive benefits that integrating empathy into workplace practices has for the culture of an organisation. Any future study might investigate the implications of this positive impact for leadership and management education, noting that there already is a growing movement for mindful leadership, of which empathy is a major component.

*Like many I am guilty of being task focused at times but as I have matured in my leadership style I believe I have a stronger sense of mutual understanding, and empathy and I am constantly trying to improve my reflective listening skills – which I am not always successful at when busy! I believe it needs to be a cultural value for an organisation and that requires constant nurturing and leading by example. (Continues).*

*I will endeavour to build this into my current organisation. It was certainly a value in the last organisation which I led. This was created by employing the right people and supporting them so they were empowered to use their best judgement in all circumstances. Ro/g2*

*I try to mirror the other person in the pace that they need to tell their story. I have to say though, I am not supported in this approach as there is an urgency to 'get through the work' and I've been accused of spending too much time with a client. I understand that there needs to be some balance – workers can't spend hours to identify the issue. Su/g2*

## 5.3.4 Positive people in negative structures – implications for empathy training

The feedback from Group 1 participants affirmed their experiences when dealing with empathic individuals within welfare agencies, and how this made a difference to both their administrative and personal outcomes.

*One lady she actually helped me remember? I did it all online and I still didn't get any payment, this was when (husband) had his heart attack. Still didn't get any payment. I went in there and she (agency person) she went 'no bugga this' She did it all on the computer and I got paid. If you get the right person then it's fine. Me/g1*

One of the observations made by the Centacare participants was the relief they felt when meeting an individual who made a difference to their experience of dealing with bureaucracies.

*I've been lucky to find ones that are compassionate to my circumstances you know being a single parent – some very caring, compassionate people that do understand that heaping more stress on somebody in an already stressful situation isn't the right way to go. And that sometimes a gentle leading hand or giving them a bit of space can help them to clear their mind – because it certainly helped me as well, having the pressure off. Na/g1*

5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

5.3.4 Positive people in negative structures – implications for empathy training (Continued)

In their responses Group 2 participants agreed that those in decision-making positions and in front-line services should be provided with training in empathy as part of the processes they practise in their interaction with others. They stated that empathy is not only good for the individuals involved, but for the organisations they are employed within, so that organisational processes will also need to be considered. Much of the current writing on creating nurturing environments and minimizing toxic environments by writers such as Anthony Biglan is now bringing this perspective to the fore<sup>17</sup>.

*These organisations are made up of people and decisions have to be the best for the people involved. Fr/g2*

*... in the end the government and businesses and financial organisations are service providers. Their big picture mission is to help people achieve outcomes and without understanding the multi-faceted motivations and challenges of their clients (i.e. through empathic connection), organisations will not fully achieve their mission or leave their stakeholders with a feeling of disappointment. E.g. our conversation talked about the challenges of dealing with government agencies and how the service and environment made clients feel disempowered and discouraged. An/g2*

*Yes. I described to my co-workers when they asked about what I was doing, that it is a much more empowering and rewarding way of decision making and systems will need to support this approach, just as the HR landscape has emotional intelligence as an implicit value in HR processes. Ro/g2*

Group 2 participants also commented on how since the conversation, they are using empathy in their leadership processes both in their professional lives and in their organisations, noting that professional success lies beyond short term financial outcomes. Valuing relationships and the opportunities to connect and learn from others are more and more being highlighted in management and leadership courses.

*... overall I have been very fortunate in my life circumstances and therefore I should strive to make a positive impact and engage with others in an empathic and positive way (i.e. engage and value each individual and their circumstances). I believe that I use empathy in all of my interactions at work... I aim to see things from the perspective of others; just listen – not always speaking; acknowledging what the person has said and how they felt and not making a judgement about the person and their message before they have actually delivered it. (Ka/g2)*

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<sup>17</sup>Biglan, A. et al 2015

## 5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

## 5.4 RESULTS OF FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

Approximately six weeks following their conversation, a second survey was sent to the Group 2 participants to determine if there had been any long term impacts resulting from their involvement in this pilot study. The follow-up survey was designed to take participants approximately 30 minutes to complete. To test how sticky the experience was for the Group 2 participants the survey asked four questions around any changes they had noticed to their leadership and decision making processes, if these conversations would be beneficial in government and industry, and if they had other ideas for how empathy practices might be encouraged in other settings. Only three responses from the seven Group 2 participants were received to this follow-up survey and the answers are listed against each question. The fact that less than half the participants responded might suggest that in any future study more weight be given to this aspect of the project as part of the participant requirements.

The follow-up survey responses received indicated agreement that empathy is a good tool for decision making. Overall, it would appear that the experience of taking part in this survey made them more mindful of establishing a connection with others in preparation for decision making. There was also awareness that the higher up within a government or business hierarchy a person reaches, the more removed managers are from people who rely on the services their organisation provides. This removal then compromises their ability to make wider informed decisions. They also believed that the information neuroscience is now providing on how the mind works when under pressure, and the implications that has for decision making, should have decision-makers and leaders looking more closely at the role of empathy in all their relationships.

**Since participating in the empathy conversation, have you changed the way you approach your leadership and or decision-making processes in your professional life to make them more empathic? If yes, what are you doing differently?**

*Am certainly more conscious of the need to be empathic. Fr/g2*

*The experience has made me more mindful of establishing a connection with others before launching into the business at hand (when appropriate and relevant). I'm also more mindful staying open to hearing another perspective and experience from others and not rushing to a preconceived notion towards a decision. Su/g2*

*I haven't had much interaction with external stakeholders since the empathy conversation, but have been responsible for supervising colleagues, although it's possible that I am behaving somewhat differently towards them. My supervising style generally involves open and direct two-way communication, as I find this is the best way to understand colleagues' motivations and draw out from them the external issues that may be influencing their engagement with work. The empathy conversation has reinforced in me the importance of this approach. Ch/g2*

**Have you discussed your involvement in the empathy project with any of your work colleagues or professional associates? If yes, what was the nature of these conversations?**

*Yes, I've spoken about the project and how it's useful to stay more open and present. I've also discussed how enlightening and more impactful it was to hear about the other person's story from her directly. Su/g2*

*No, I haven't – the appropriate opportunity hasn't really come up. Indirectly, I've spoken with colleagues about the strengths and advantages of open and thoughtful professional discussions, which I think is in some ways comparable to empathy conversations. Ch/g2*

*No. Fr/g2*

5. PILOT STUDY ANALYSIS AND PROJECT FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

Given your experiences with this project, do you think that it would be beneficial for leaders and decision-makers working in government, financial institutions and business to participate in an empathy conversation of this type? Why/why not?

*Yes, definitely. It would make them more conscious of the impact they have and their decisions have on other people. Fr/gz*

*Yes. I think that there is a degree of group-think that emerges among senior decision-makers in government and business (less so in politics, though, where MPs are required to speak with their constituents as part of their duties). Senior executives speak with other senior executives, with the result that they rarely have the opportunity to speak with people who are dependent on the status quo or vulnerable to changed services. Ch/gz*

*I hope that most leaders and decision-makers would already have a high level of empathy, but maybe it can never hurt to reinforce the awareness of its importance. And maybe some decision-makers and leaders are removed from the people/constituents they are responsible for and would benefit from the experience. Su/gz*

Do you have any other ideas for how we could encourage leaders and decision-makers working in government, financial institutions and business to become more empathic in their everyday work practices?

*It is probably a slow process. You just have to keep raising it as an issue and slowly, slowly, people will recognise the benefits. Fr/gz*

*I suspect that leaders and decision makers already believe that they are empathic. I think the information on neuroscience is an engaging way to get leaders to look more closely at the role of empathy in their positions and relationships. Su/gz*

*Any opportunity to break senior decision-makers out of their professional and social circles and encourage them to meet people from different parts of society would be useful. Charity services like soup kitchens are examples. Also, events like the Vinnies CEO Sleepout is a way to encourage decision-makers to step outside their usual environment. Ch/gz*

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## 6. REFLECTIONS/DISCUSSION

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In testing a process for the use of empathy conversations as a policy resource, this pilot study has explored a number of questions including why empathy, why compassion, why conversations, and why mindfulness training? The sections below provide some details on why empathy and compassion were incorporated, on why this is a multidisciplinary study, and on some of the implications for policy development.

### 6.1 Importance of including both Empathy and Compassion in this Study

This project purposely incorporated both 'empathy' and 'compassion' – it did so to combine an empathic association with others, alongside a desired commitment to respond to that connection. Both are important because the competency of empathy supports better emotional understanding and perspective taking, while compassion is a motivational system linked to suffering with a desire to do something about it. The background materials, which included information on these definitions, were provided to support participants in better connecting with their conversation partner. In addition for those in Group 2 these resources were designed to allow them to reflect on what the experience of the empathy conversations might mean for them as policy makers. The face to face and phone training was based on the work of the Compassionate Mind Foundation and was included to provide the participants with at least some exposure to the ideas around emotion regulation – a key attribute in their ability to stay present throughout the conversation, and also highlighted the notion of 'action on behalf of' not simply a 'feeling for'.

Definitions of the ways in which the terms 'empathy' and 'compassion' were used in this study are important because words are subject to many interpretations, can be often used in unrelated contexts, and are sometimes used interchangeably. The original use of the term empathy comes from a translation of the German word *emfühlung* which means to 'feel the other from within', and was originally used with the context of fine art, so has always had a cultural basis.

Krznicaric states that while the terms empathy and compassion overlap in some ways they are distinct concepts. His interpretation is that while compassion means to 'suffer with another' – empathy also includes sharing their joys as well as their suffering, and therefore using empathy and compassion as synonyms should be resisted<sup>18</sup>. Certainly both suffering and joy were commented on during the empathy conversations in this study. Empathy can be construed as an emotional response to a person's situation or wellbeing, or a connection that simply understands the other without necessarily needing to change that situation. In that sense it could be argued that showing empathy is a passive interaction with another person. While empathy is often associated with distressing circumstances in which you try to understand how an anxious individual may be feeling, as mentioned, compassion has more to do with taking action. Because of this difference, some recent studies have indeed confirmed that people are more likely to suffer from empathy fatigue than they are compassion fatigue<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup>Krznicaric, 2014:12

<sup>19</sup>Klimecki, O., & Singer, T., 2011 as cited in Ricard, M., 2015:708

## 6. REFLECTIONS/DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

## 6.1 Importance of including both Empathy and Compassion in this Study (Continued)

Many reviewers of empathy have identified two major components: affective and cognitive. Affective empathy is the capacity to respond with an appropriate emotion to another's mental states or being affected by another's emotional or arousal state; while cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another's perspective or mental state<sup>20</sup>. In addition many scholars have sought to unpack the differing features of empathy to examine its complex and multi-faceted nature. For example Batson in researching empathy extensively has identified eight aspects of empathy as:

- Knowing another person's internal state
- Motor and neural mimicry
- Emotional resonance, initiating or projecting oneself into another's situation
- Imagining how another is thinking and feeling
- Imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place
- Empathic distress feeling another's suffering
- Empathic concern – becoming aware of the other's needs<sup>21</sup>.

In his recent book, *Altruism*, the Buddhist scholar Mathieu Ricard<sup>22</sup> states that of these eight aspects, Batson believes that empathic concern is the most crucial because it provides an impetus to take action. It could be argued however that becoming aware of another's need does not necessarily mean action is taken to resolve the source of their suffering. In discussing this issue of motivation, Zaki and Ochsner address the psychological processes involved in empathy, including *experience sharing* and *metaling*, but add a third key element that of *prosocial motivation*, which they describe as the vehicle through which individuals share and understand the other and are often then motivated to help<sup>23</sup>. In this they recognise and reference Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments (1720) stating that 'experience sharing can produce powerful and even instinctive prosocial motivation', but with the caveat that they by no means always do - indeed this is why this pilot incorporated both empathy (for the connection) and compassion (for the motivation to respond).

The focus of this study is on the potential role that empathy conversations might add to policy options in developing more compassionate decision making - so it is of interest that the emerging research themes identified by Zaki and Ochsner include – i) the motivated nature of empathy and ii) the assumption that empathy is always desirable<sup>24</sup>. Both these research themes are relevant to this study. In deliberating on the motivated nature of empathy, Zaki and Ochsner challenge the notion that empathy just 'happens', particularly when there is a large amount of suffering – for example aid agencies are aware that an image of one person is more powerful in eliciting support than is an image of thousands of people. They go on to suggest that additional intervention approaches will be required to increase empathy focus on both training in empathic skills and in the necessary motives to feel empathy.

In terms of the assumption of empathy as always being desirable – this study agrees that it is not always so – empathy can be used to manipulate, think advertising agencies using positive emotional images that connect with the target group, but sell products that are detrimental to health. As well, empathy can leave people open to emotional exhaustion, particularly carers and those in the medical and social welfare professions. With this in mind, those progressing empathy conversations as a policy tool should take into account the undesirable aspects of empathy including 'manipulation' and 'fatigue' when developing processes that as much as possible militate against them in policy settings.

**Empathy defined by Dr. Roman Krznaric: the art of stepping into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives and using that understanding to guide your actions.**

**Compassion defined by Prof. Paul Gilbert: being sensitive to the suffering of others with a deep commitment to try and prevent or relieve it.**

<sup>20</sup>Rogers, K., Dziobek, I., Hassenstab, J., Wolf, O.T., Convit, A., 2007:709–15

<sup>21</sup>Ricard, M. 2015:46-50

<sup>22</sup>Ricard, M. 2015:44-51

<sup>23</sup>Zaki and Ochsner, 2015:3-25

<sup>24</sup><http://ssnl.stanford.edu/publications>

6. REFLECTIONS/DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

6.2 Neuroscience and Evolution

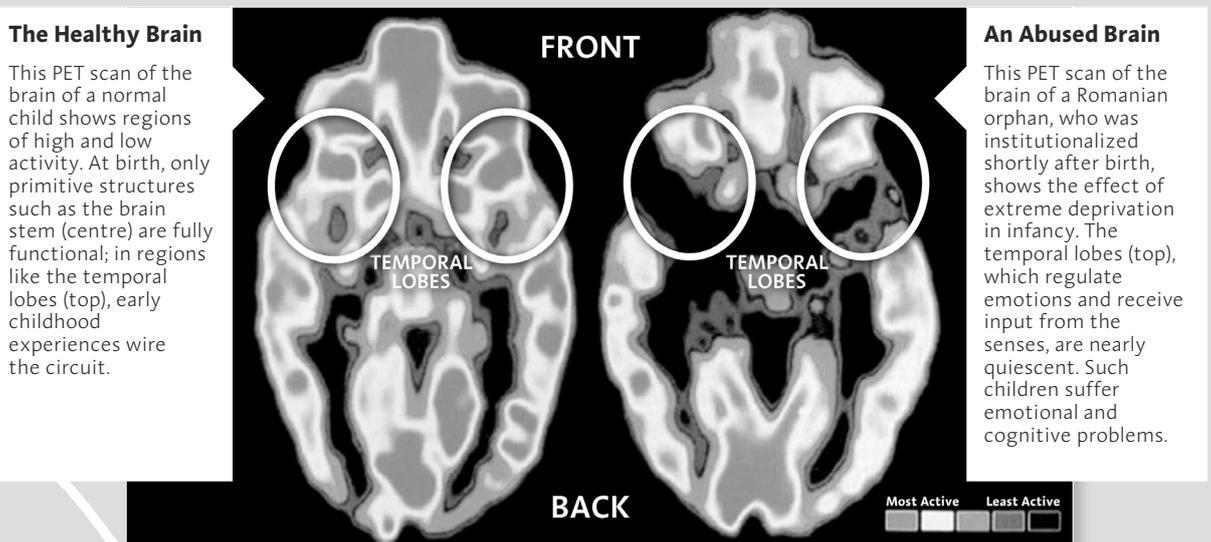
We live in an age where brain scanning technologies, such as MRIs are constantly improving and we can literally ‘see’ the parts of the brain that light up when we are feeling fear or experiencing empathy. Understanding how our negative emotions and the ‘reptilian’ survival brain can drive automatic and self-serving decisions that have negative impacts is important not only for social reasons, but for economic ones – consider the traders who made millions when they figured out how to ‘short’ the market prior to the financial collapse in 2008 and in so doing contributed to the global financial crisis. Indeed one of the world’s most respected neuroscientists Antonio Damasio has called on policy-makers to inform themselves of the latest learning from the neurobiology of consciousness stating that:

*The time will come when the issue of human responsibility, in general moral terms as well as on matters of justice and its application, will take into account the evolving science of consciousness. Perhaps that time is now. (Damasio, 2012:29)*

Whilst there is still much debate on the definition and nature of human consciousness, Damasio contends that CEO’s, politicians, or senior managers can no longer ignore the way in which the mind and body work together when making judgements and taking decisions that affect others. In referencing a specific example of social

behaviour Damasio says ‘... lawyers, judges, legislators, policy-makers, and educators need to acquaint themselves with the neurobiology of consciousness ... in order to promote the writing of realistic laws’ – i.e. laws that take into account how this knowledge can contribute in ‘preparing future adults to an adaptive social existence.’

The technical resources now used in neuroscience tell us that positive and caring human connections support the development of the brain and body in ways that are conducive to health and well-being. PET scans (see Figure 2) of the brains in children who have been left alone with little or no human interactions show that their brains fail to develop the synapse connections required for loving human interactions. Higher levels of self-awareness have been shown to improve our understanding of others and if developed further may well assist in creating the organizational structures required to deal with the complexity now surrounding us. The cultural context is also an important one and language is a key component of that context. McGilchrist’s important point is that because language evolved from music in particular from drumming (think Morse code) that our left and right brain hemispheres need to better integrate if we are to nurture our commonality. For if human language did begin in music it began in the right hemisphere and those functions are related to empathy and commonality, not competition and division<sup>25</sup>.



<sup>25</sup>McGilchrist, 2009:122-123

Figure 2 Copyright remains with respective owners.

## 6. REFLECTIONS/DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

6.2 Neuroscience and Evolution  
(Continued)

Building better awareness of the competency of empathy and the motivation of compassion is important because, as Gilbert states, developing a compassionate mind can create ‘certain patterns in our brains that organize our motives, emotions and thoughts in ways that are conducive for our own and other people’s well-being’<sup>26</sup>.

We know ourselves that we get along with people only to the extent to which we can accurately gauge their intentions as benign or dangerous. As work and home experiences contend even a slight misreading can lead to painful misunderstandings in professional and personal relationships<sup>27</sup>. We have evolved to make quick assumptions on the basis of better safe than sorry – and that is why we need to constantly learn ways in which to suspend our judgements when engaging with others who aren’t ‘like us’. The neuroscience of empathy is another discipline area providing research of relevance on why empathy conversations should be considered as a policy resource. New concepts are being studied in conferences such as the 2016 British Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences neuroscience of empathy conference, which is examining the relevance of empathy for conflict resolution and for policy makers working in conflict resolution. The conference aims are to ‘enable dialogue and a better understanding of empathy, and to promote the development of evidence-based interventions that foster empathy in conflict zones’. If the application of empathy is being studied in conflict zones, then it should also continue to challenge the way in which we approach decision-making in less life threatening situations.

In a wider societal context, empathy is important as it has been shown to:

- *Foster insight into different perspectives, and promote genuine open-mindedness;*
- *Discourage hasty and superficial problem examination;*
- *Facilitate construction of more fully elaborated and frequently novel problem models;*
- *Discourage belief rigidity;*
- *Encourage cognitive and personal flexibility*<sup>28</sup>.

In order to get a wider ranging appreciation of empathy, it is also useful to review the evolutionary aspects of our development as humans. The parameters of this study do not allow for an in-depth examination of the new research emerging on the ways in which evolution has impacted on our empathic abilities. However because of the link to our brain and emotion development, it is important to at least call attention to the work of researchers such as Spikins (2014) which points to the fact that our evolutionary survival created us as social beings living in groups and looking after those in our tribes. Staying alive required us to develop the attributes which enable us to cooperate within our tribe and the skills to fight off the competitor – further describing it this way:

*Human evolution is usually depicted as driven by intelligence, with empathy and deeper emotions following. However, the evidence suggests it happened the other way round. Evolution made us sociable, living in groups and looking after one another, even before we had language. Our success since then, including the evolution of intelligence, all sprang from that.*

<sup>26</sup>Gilbert, 2013:87

<sup>27</sup>van der Kolk, 2014:42

<sup>28</sup>[http://www.opencolleges.edu.au.../fea.../empathy-and-learning/...](http://www.opencolleges.edu.au.../fea.../empathy-and-learning/)

### 6. REFLECTIONS/DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

#### 6.2 Neuroscience and Evolution (Continued)

Another comment on evolution comes from Frans de Waal. In his book 'The Evolution of Empathy', he notes that our capacity for empathy likely evolved because it served our ancestors survival in two ways – one, that we needed to be sensitive and nurturing to successfully raise children, and two that as a species we have depended on cooperation, *which means that we do better if we are surrounded by healthy, capable group mates*<sup>29</sup>. So in our global world which is being challenged by refugee movements, one of the emerging questions surrounding empathy and compassion is to do with how we connect with those outside our 'tribe'. Understanding how our minds and emotions can work together in judging and rejecting others is important, because our ability to empathise is shaped to a great extent by our personal relationships. In fact, a University of Virginia study conducted in 2013 found that we are hardwired to empathise – because we associate ourselves, with people who are close to us such as friends and spouses<sup>30</sup>. In other words, our self-identity is largely based on whom we know and bond with.

Our challenge therefore is to move beyond the accustomed empathy connections we already have, to develop the imagination required to be open to those with very different lived experiences and worldviews. The empathy conversations in this pilot study provided the opportunity for the participants to get access to another's perspective, and in so doing they were able to demonstrate that they had been influenced in some way by that experience. So at the very least the neuroscience of our brain development, improved understanding of our emotion regulation system and evolutionary traits should be recognized as influencing the ways in which we make decisions and in turn what that means for policy-making. This study recognises that this is emerging knowledge which will develop and unfold over the next decades and is therefore careful in the ways in which it interprets this material, but also recognises the need for further theoretical development and additional data to fully develop these multi-disciplinary approaches.

<sup>29</sup>[http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the\\_evolution\\_of\\_empathy/](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_evolution_of_empathy/)

<sup>30</sup>Beckes, L., James A. Coan, J., Hasselmo, K., 2013

## 6. REFLECTIONS/DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

## 6.3 Empathy and Decision Making

Management theory has long recognised the importance of empathy in decision making. It was in 1997 that Charles L. Martin in an article entitled, *Feelings, Emotional Empathy and Decision Making*<sup>31</sup> concluded that when ‘feeling’ the impact of their decisions, managers were better placed to make successful decisions. Martin suggests that management tools such as – flowcharts, presentations, decision trees, case studies, etc., are generally incomplete because they don’t encourage managers to look beyond factual information in order to directly engage an awareness of the impact of their decisions – something this study has also contended. Another phase management theory has seen a shift from a sole focus on operational and administrative skills to a focus on the development of more interpersonal capabilities. For example Daniel Pink suggests that those with strong right-brain qualities will be better placed to deal with future leadership requirements<sup>32</sup>. He specifically mentions empathy as a desirable attribute in creating more solid relationships. He also notes these so called ‘soft’ skills are difficult to outsource or automate, and yet are increasingly important to business. With the new advances in automation and robotics an aptitude for empathy may become even more important; and this is not something that might happen in the future – research centers such as, the Centre for Compassion Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University are already holding conferences on compassion and technology<sup>33</sup>.

In the global world of mobile workers, empathy is more critical to leadership development. Global companies with their headquarters in one country, their manufacturing in another, marketing and promotion throughout the world, are looking for graduates, who in addition to their base qualification such as engineering, law, accounting, can also appropriately deal with their

peers and customers across the world. Leadership in these companies now requires an intercultural empathy and a passion for diversity in life experiences. Commenting on this global aspect in a Harvard Business Review article Dr. Daniel Goleman isolated three reasons why empathy is so important: *i)* ‘the increasing use of teams, (which he refers to as “cauldrons of bubbling emotions”), *ii)* the rapid pace of globalization (with cross cultural communication easily leading to misunderstandings) and *iii)* the growing need to retain talent. These skills are important because leaders with empathy can *use their knowledge to improve their companies by considering employees’ feelings – along with other factors – in the process of making intelligent decisions*<sup>34</sup>.

It’s perhaps not surprising that empathy training is already occurring in the caring professions as improving empathy skills can boost the overall performance of those in medicine. It is understandable that patients who feel heard would be more willing to reveal important information and worries to medical staff. The more information they have, the easier it is to diagnose a condition and the more effective decision-making can be brought to the treatment. In emphasizing the important role that doctors have to play in addressing suffering, Epstein and Back in the journal of the American Medical Association note that addressing suffering can only happen if doctors learn to expand the way in which they work with patients. They note that, *some physicians use these approaches instinctively, yet most need training in responding to suffering. This kind of training is painfully lacking in medical education*<sup>35</sup>.

In considering how empathy might support better decision making, it is necessary to make a distinction between empathy and pity. Pity may be felt towards those who are marginalized or impoverished, but that does not mean any action would be taken to address their needs, and unlike pity, empathy stems from equality.

<sup>31</sup>Martin, C., 1997:12,5 33-44

<sup>32</sup>Pink D., 2005

<sup>33</sup>CCARE investigates methods for cultivating compassion and promoting altruism within individuals and society through rigorous research, scientific collaborations, and academic conferences – more at <http://ccare.stanford.edu/uncategorized/stanford-university-compassion-technology-conference/>

<sup>34</sup><https://hbr.org/2004/01/what-makes-a-leader>

<sup>35</sup>Epstein, Ronald M., Back, Anthony. 2015

### 6. REFLECTIONS/DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

#### 6.3 Empathy and Decision Making (Continued)

In looking at the viability of introducing empathy training in organisations in a more structured way Miller and Wallis note that research into empathy as a client service standard in information and knowledge services, suggests that professionals *can be trained in empathic interaction, but in different contexts and situations, suitable levels and types of empathy (i.e. cognitive and intuitive) would need to be determined and this would have implications for education and training*<sup>36</sup>.

In addition studies in schools have shown that empathy training programs improve students' levels of acceptance, perspective-taking, and ability to share and cooperate, and so may be one way of educating the next generation of policy makers.

Ashoka is a leading organisation in social entrepreneurship, and through its Changemaker Education program has found that measurements of empathy in youth, and particularly in schools, tend to take three forms:

##### I. Aggression and negative behaviours

- Reduced violence and bullying
- Reduced disruptive behaviours
- Reduced ethnic and racial tensions

##### II. Pro-social and positive behaviours

- Increased capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully
- Increased inclusive behaviour and openness to others
- Increased cooperation and fair play

##### III. Improved school culture and performance

- Improved school-wide morale
- Improved overall learning environment
- Reduced injury
- Reduced number of suspensions and incidences of violence
- Increased attendance<sup>37</sup>

The study of empathy continues to change through both the knowledge from neuroimaging techniques and qualitative research across a range of disciplines. Further exploring the cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy will be crucial to appreciating the ways in which our self-awareness and emotional intelligence shape our social interactions and the decisions we make on behalf of others. Working with the old 'survival' and new 'intelligent' aspects of the brain will require us to better integrate and reflect on how being in positions of power affects our ability to empathise with whom we interact, and for whom we make decisions.

<sup>36</sup>Miller and Wallis, (2011), Vol 52/No2

<sup>37</sup>[http://startempathy.org/sites/default/files/attachments/StartEmpathy\\_Toolkit\\_Final-web\\_o.pdf](http://startempathy.org/sites/default/files/attachments/StartEmpathy_Toolkit_Final-web_o.pdf)

### 6. REFLECTIONS/DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

#### 6.3 Empathy and Decision Making (Continued)

##### EXAMPLE OF WHERE EMPATHY MADE A POLICY DIFFERENCE<sup>38</sup>

Nepal had a problem with a high rate of infant mortality. Babies were dying from conditions that in other countries would be non-fatal because the baby could be cared for in an incubator. In 2008, a team from Stanford University set out to address the problem and increase the number of incubators available.

**At first, one might think this was primarily a matter of how to finance the supply of additional incubators. But a more empathic approach revealed that the problem had other – very different – dimensions.**

Most of the children who needed such care weren't in hospital and didn't have access to electricity. In addition the staff using them didn't have adequate training. So it was necessary to design a new kind of incubator one that would be easily transportable, wouldn't require power, would be simple to operate, clean and easy to maintain and not too costly. The team created a product which doesn't look at all like a modern high-tech incubator. It's a sort of bag, rather than a kind of ultra-sophisticated box. But it does many of the same things as well.

**And its cost went from about \$20,000 to around \$25 per unit.**



Image: <http://embraceglobal.org/embrace-warmer/>  
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Image: <https://www.changemakers.com/morehealth/entries/embrace-infant-warmers-prevent-mortality-india>  
Copyright remains with respective owners.

<sup>38</sup><http://embraceglobal.org/embrace-warmer/>

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

In Australia last year it was estimated that 56.8 million calls were made to Centrelink – that statistic speaks to the high levels of interaction between those in financial difficulty and the relevant government department with whom they interact. The relevance of this study is that it has examined a conversation process that enabled the experience of empathy in the context of the welfare and financial sectors; and its findings have informed the viability of implementing a larger scale empathy conversation project.

The training and empathy conversation processes provided to the study participants were found to be acceptable and beneficial. It is important to reinforce that using empathy conversations as a policy resource is not about asking people to be 'nicer' to each other, or to 'pander' to another's needs; rather neuroscience and psychology are bringing new insights to the understanding of the brain, and the way in which it interacts with our emotion regulation systems to allow for a deeper understanding of another's perspective. Gaining deeper perspectives may deliver insightful new policy options and organisational benefits. A further study would need to be undertaken to confirm if empathy conversations contribute to the formation of compassionate policy outcomes. However this pilot has provided indications that this could be so, with comments from the participants such as:

*I believe that trying to understand the impact of your decision or the process you are undertaking before acting leads to a more compassionate workplace and helps to increase productivity and commitment from staff which is a better outcome for the organisation. Kalgz*

And there are signs that empathy is already on the radar of Australian policy makers. For example the current guidelines for Australian Government regulators note that they must implement procedures with 'common sense, empathy and respect' (see Appendix 7). Empathy conversations could provide a solid resource to ensure that this guideline is operationalized more effectively. As well there are already examples of where empathy is now being experienced between those in financial difficulty and those in positions of influence. The Vinnies CEO Sleep-out event raises funds and awareness of the homeless in Australia. In 2015 it reached its 10th year of providing assistance to people experiencing homelessness. The quotes below were provided to this pilot study from the 2015 CEO sleep-out – they reinforce that empathy experiences can change the perspectives and the potential actions of CEOs:

*I tried to look away from homeless people on the streets as I was walking past them, now I look at them in a totally different way.*

**Marco Iacobaccio, Managing Director,  
EJM Financial Group**

*I learnt about how easy it is for some to fall off the radar quickly. Having resources available to help at this critical time can be achieved by Vinnies. I believe all CEOs can now help further.*

**Cameron Bertalli, Managing Director,  
Patterson Cheney Cars & Trucks**

*The CEO Sleep-out was an enlightening experience that allowed me to gain a deeper appreciation of the challenges around homelessness. The level of interest and discussion created in the workplace was great to see and had a big impact across the organisation.*

**Nial Finegan, CEO,  
Environment Protection Authority**

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## 7. CONCLUSIONS (CONTINUED)

This pilot incorporated mindfulness practices in preparing participants for the empathy conversations, on the basis that calming the mind allows for improved and attentive connections. It is of interest then that in October 2015 the UK government released a report entitled *Mindful Nation UK*<sup>39</sup>. It was written by the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group October 2015 and was set up to:

- Review the scientific evidence and current best practice in mindfulness training;
- Develop policy recommendations for government, based on these findings;
- Provide a forum for discussion in Parliament for the role of mindfulness & its implementation in public policy.

One of the UK report's main recommendations was that the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills should demonstrate leadership by promoting the use of mindfulness and by developing an understanding of good practice. Further the report recommended that:

*Government departments should encourage the development of mindfulness programmes for staff in the public sector – in particular in health, education, and criminal justice – to combat stress and improve organisational effectiveness.*

This study agrees that mindfulness practices can assist in bringing our physiology into a functioning state that allows for more open connections with others – and therefore maybe useful introducing into work settings. However, it does so with the caveat that alongside that training, thought needs to be given to reviewing the existing culture of those organisations, so that the situation is avoided where individual workers are being supported to work harder in ever increasingly dysfunctional structures.

Perhaps of most relevance at this time for Australia is that it has a Prime Minister who has publicly stated that he sees empathy as an important political asset. In one of his first interviews Malcolm Turnbull spoke cogently about the importance of empathy in policy making. When asked how he would relate to 'ordinary Australians', he referenced the importance of emotional intelligence, empathy, and imagination as enablers for 'walking in somebody else's shoes'. He said being able to sit down on a train and '*hear their story, and have the imagination to understand how they feel... is probably the most important asset – certainly for anyone in my line of work*'. We will wait to see how this political asset will make itself apparent – beyond the occasional tram ride – which is not to be dismissed as a tool for senior politicians directly connecting with those impacted by their decisions.

Whilst this pilot project was designed to evaluate how empathic understanding of financial difficulties might assist in creating more compassionate policy options in Australia, it is anticipated that findings would also be of interest internationally.

<sup>39</sup>Mindful Nation UK, 2015

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

In examining the empathy conversation processes used in this study, and to some extent their outcomes, the findings from this pilot have added to the emerging literature on the impact of empathy at the collective and policy level. From the analysis of the pilot study the following improvements to the study design are recommended:

- Because the participants in this project all chose to become involved any larger research project should include a wider range of participants with a more varied range of attitudes to ‘the other’;
- Given the short amount of exposure the participants had to the new research into empathy and compassion it is acknowledged that participants may well have benefited from more training and learning. Any future project might investigate an optimal level of knowledge by setting up a number of groups, who are provided with differing amounts of background materials, in order to assess if any variance in the information provided, shaped the levels of empathy expressed;
- Following the conversations, respondents reflected how effortlessly more respected connections with others can happen when we engage empathically, and this finding would also need to be tested with a wider range of participant types;
- In assessing the empathy conversation experience overall, every one of the participants who responded agreed that they would either take part in a similar conversation again or recommend it to other people they know. Further studies would need to test this response with those who have set beliefs about the unemployed and those on welfare, to gauge if the background training and conversation experience would elicit the same positive response;

- Any future study should consider incorporating a discussion into the training on how much of them they should reveal, and on how much they should act as a reflective listener. Raising this issue in the training would mean that participants have already thought about it prior to the conversation;
- One participant also requested follow up information and practical tips for continuing empathy conversations post-interview. For those participants who choose it, such a project value-add should be offered;

Two of the participants didn’t appreciate that the emotion regulation system information and mindfulness training was there to assist in consciously bringing them to the empathy conversations in their ‘soothing/ affiliation’ system. This indicates that this link needs to be better clarified at the time of the training session;

- Basic matters such as reiterating the importance of having your mobile phone charged prior to the conversation, and making sure the empathy questions are available for each participant should be highlighted – one participant’s phone battery ran out near the end of the conversation, so it was unable to be completed; and one participant didn’t have access to the questions and needed to rely on her conversation partner;
- This pilot wasn’t successful in gaining enough responses from the second survey sent to Group 2 participants. In order to assess if the conversation experience had any impact on them in their workplaces, any fuller study would need to make clear at the beginning of the engagement process that participating as a Group 2 member will involve a follow-up survey six to eight weeks after the conversation;

8. RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

- All respondents agreed that formal empathy training in front-line positions in welfare, government organisations and financial businesses is worthwhile. Any larger investigation should examine the viability of introducing empathy training in government, welfare, and financial organisations in more detail. Such training should take into account existing research studies in this area;
- From the Group 2 responses received there was some indication that empathy has a role to play in improving decision making processes, suggesting that decision-makers need to at least try to understand the lived reality of people who will be impacted by those decisions. Any larger study would need to incorporate a wider range of participants to examine issues of motivation in a mandatory setting – to evaluate the extent to which the participants brought these views with them into the project and to what extent they were influenced by the conversation experience;
- In reflecting on the benefit of bringing empathic approaches into organisations, Group 2 participants commented on how integrating empathy into workplace practices can improve the culture of an organisation. Any future study might investigate the implications of this positive impact for leadership and management education, noting that there already is a growing movement for mindful leadership, of which empathy is a major component.

How to move beyond teaching people **how** to empathize, to getting them **to want** to empathize in the first place.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Zaki, J., 2016

## 9. FUTURE PROJECT PROPOSAL

### BACKGROUND

The findings reported above demonstrate that the procedure tested in this pilot study is a successful method for facilitating empathy conversations between individuals with different life circumstances. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the participants found the training and conversation experiences were non-onerous, being considered interesting and beneficial. However, the poor response rate for the follow-up survey meant that we were unable to determine whether the empathy conversations had a beneficial impact on the work practices and decision-making processes of participants in Group 2. As such, the 'real world' impact of participating in the empathy conversation is yet to be verified.

### OBJECTIVES

There is a need for further research to increase and strengthen the evidence base for the use of empathy conversations as a method for improving decision-making within organisational and policy outcomes for society more broadly, by bringing people who have very different lived experiences into empathic contact with those developing policy on their behalf and/or making decision that will impact them. In particular, research is required to:

- verify the pilot study findings with larger and more diverse groups of participants, including those whose involvement may not be intrinsically motivated;
- determine the immediate and longer-term outcomes that participating in an empathy conversation has on work practices, decision-making processes, policy development, etc.;
- determine the optimal amount of training required by participants and the best method/s for delivering this training;

- identify the individual and organisational factors that impact, both positively and negatively, on the implementation and running of empathy conversation programs within organisations;
- develop resources and document processes, including facilitator training materials, to enable and support interested organisations to introduce empathy conversations into their workplaces;

### SCOPE

This pilot study was specifically designed to investigate the effectiveness of empathy conversations for bridging the gap between individuals who were in very different financial circumstances, so as to explore the potential of this methodology for improving decision-making and outcomes relating to financial policy. Yet, there is potential for a much larger scope. With some modification, the piloted empathy conversation methodology could be applied in any policy or decision-making setting where one group of people are making significant decisions on behalf of, or that impact on, another group of people. This could be government departments developing policies, executives determining business strategies, or non-profits organising service provision.

**If your organisation is interested in working with Australia<sup>21</sup> on any aspect of this proposed program of research, please contact:**  
Dr. Lynne Reeder – [l.reeder@federation.edu.au](mailto:l.reeder@federation.edu.au)

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APPENDIX 1

**SCHOOL OF HEALTH SCIENCES & PSYCHOLOGY, FEDERATION UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA**

<b>PROJECT TITLE</b>	<b>Australia21's Empathy Conversation Project Pilot Study</b>
<b>PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER</b>	<b>Dr Lynne Reeder</b>
<b>OTHER/STUDENT RESEARCHERS</b>	<b>Dr Liz Temple, Dr Lisa Petheram &amp; Kylie Marks</b>

You are invited to participate in Australia21's Empathy Conversation Pilot Study, which is being conducted by Dr Lynne Reeder and Dr Liz Temple from Federation University Australia, Dr Lisa Petheram from Australia21, and Kylie Marks from Social Impact Hub.

Australia21's Empathy Conversation Project seeks to increase government, financial institution, and business leaders' and decision-makers' awareness and understanding of the lived-experiences of individuals who are currently in financial difficulty, including the multitude of factors that led to their current situation and the things that governments, financial institutions and businesses can do to improve outcomes for such individuals. This study's objective is to pilot test empathy conversations as a method for doing this.

Information gathered through this study will be used to determine the viability of developing a wider-reaching program of empathy conversations to increase empathic and compassionate decision-making by leaders and key-decision-makers in Australia.

Participation in this study will take approximately 3 hours, which will involve completing the following activities:

- reading the Background Materials for Participants and completing the online training activities to assist in preparing for your empathy conversation (approx. 1.5 hours)
- participating in a 30 minute empathy conversation phone call
- completing a post-conversation survey about the experience and insights gained from participating in the empathy conversation and project (approx. 30 minutes)
- completing a 2 month follow-up survey (approx. 30 minutes)

We will be digitally recording the phone conversations (audio only), which will then be transcribed and de-identified prior to analysis.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can withdraw from it at any time. All data collected through the study is completely confidential and all efforts to ensure the protection of the data from being revealed will be taken. Any identifying information provided by you (such as your name and contact details) will be stored separately from the transcripts of your phone conversation and survey responses until the completion of the study, at which time it will be destroyed.

However, it should be noted that confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law (i.e., information provided by you may have to be disclosed if subject to a subpoena or other request from a law-enforcement body). Additionally, while we will use a pseudonym rather than your name in any reporting of direct quotes, due to the small size of the sample, it may be possible for people to identify you from your comments if they know you were one of the participants.

With the exception of some select quotes, the information you provide will be combined with the information from other participants for analysis and reporting of study findings so that you will not be personally identified. These combined results will be written up into a report for dissemination through Australia21, and may also be disseminated through academic publications and conference presentations. All data will be deleted after a minimum period of 5 years.

If you feel negatively affected at all by any of the activities involved in this study, please contact your doctor, psychologist, counsellor or local health service. Alternatively, 24 hour counselling assistance is provided by Lifeline (phone: 13 11 14; <http://www.lifeline.org.au/>).

*This study has received clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Federation University Australia.*

APPENDIX 2

**SCHOOL OF HEALTH SCIENCES & PSYCHOLOGY, FEDERATION UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA**

<b>PROJECT TITLE</b>	<b>Australia21's Empathy Conversation Project Pilot Study</b>
<b>RESEARCHERS</b>	<b>Dr Lynne Reeder, Dr Liz Temple, Dr Lisa Petheram &amp; Kylie Marks</b>
<b>Code number allocated to the participant:</b>	

I \_\_\_\_\_ (full name)

hereby consent to participate in the above research study.

I have read the Plain Language Information Statement and any concerns I had regarding this study have been resolved to my satisfaction.

I understand that:

- my participation in this study is voluntary
- my empathy conversation (i.e., phone call) and focus group discussion will be digitally recorded (audio only), with a written transcript produced to enable analysis
- all information I provide will be treated confidentially (within the limits of the law)
- all efforts will be taken to protect my privacy in the reporting of any direct quotes, such as through the use of a pseudonym
- any identifying data provided will be stored separately from other data relating to me that is collected during the study
- I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study, in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from me will not be used
- I have been advised not to participate if I believe that the nature of the project and tasks involved are likely to cause me distress and it is recommended that I seek professional support if I do become distressed

**SIGNATURE:**

**DATE:**

## APPENDIX 3

## GROUP 1 EMPATHY QUESTION PROMPTS

Who is talking	Question/prompt
Other person	Will introduce themselves and welcome you to the conversation
<b>You</b>	<b>Introduce yourself and then ask:</b> <b>1. How has your day been?</b>
Other person	Will answer and then ask you: 2. How has your day been?
<b>You</b>	<b>Answer and then ask:</b> <b>3. Why did you agree to be involved in this project?</b>
Other person	Will answer and then ask you: 4. Why did you agree to be involved in this project?
<b>You</b>	<b>Answer and then ask:</b> <b>5. Are you better at laughing or forgetting?</b>
Other person	Will answer and then ask you: 6. Are you better at laughing or forgetting?
<b>You</b>	<b>Answer</b>
Other person	Will ask you: 7. Where do you feel you are at in your life and what factors or circumstances have led you to your current situation?
<b>You</b>	<b>Answer and then ask:</b> <b>8. Where do you feel you are at in your life and what factors or circumstances have led you to your current situation?</b>
Other person	Will answer and then ask you: 9. Have you had an experience where someone has shared a story with you and that story helped you at a difficult time? How/why did that story help?
<b>You</b>	<b>Answer and then ask:</b> <b>10. Have you had an experience where someone has shared a story with you and that story helped you at a difficult time? How/why did that story help?</b>

## APPENDIX 3 (CONTINUED)

## GROUP 1 EMPATHY QUESTION PROMPTS (CONTINUED)

Who is talking	Question/prompt
Other person	Will answer and then ask you: 11. Can you tell me about a negative or positive experience you have had with financial, welfare or government systems and how it affected you?
<b>You</b>	<b>Answer</b>
Other person	Will ask you: 12. How could the agencies and organisations you deal with better understand and be aware of your needs? For example, have you had positive experiences where they were responsive and you felt listened to and heard?
<b>You</b>	<b>Answer</b>
Other person	Will ask you: 13. What is the one thing that if you could change, would make a difference to your current situation?
<b>You</b>	<b>Answer and then ask:</b> <b>14. How do you deal with things when life is tough, and how does that work for you?</b>
Other person	Will answer and then ask you: 15. How do you deal with things when life is tough, and how does that work for you?
<b>You</b>	<b>Answer and then ask:</b> <b>16. What brings a sense of contentment into your life?</b>
Other person	Will answer and then ask you: 17. What brings a sense of contentment into your life?
<b>You</b>	<b>Thank the other person for calling and sharing this conversation</b>
Other person	Will thank you and say goodbye
<b>You</b>	<b>Say goodbye</b>

## APPENDIX 4

### GROUP 1 FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS/PROMPTS

#### The empathy conversation experience

1. How did you feel when you were having the conversation?
2. Was it what you expected or were you surprised by how it turned out?
3. What impact, if any, do you think it had on you?
4. Has it affected the way you feel about yourself or your life in general?
5. Did you have any 'lightbulb' moments during or after the conversation?
6. Would you do it again, or recommend it to other people you know?

#### The empathy project methodology

1. What did you think about the background information document?  
Was the level of detail about right or was it too much or too little for you?
2. What about the training session? How did you find that?
3. Why did you decide to be involved in the project?
4. Was there anything that made you doubt this decision?

#### The role of empathy in decision-making

1. Do believe that empathy should play a role in decision making?
2. Do you think that government agencies, financial institutions, businesses and other organisations should have empathy as a key focus when they are developing their policies and processes? Why/why not?
3. If this was the case, what impact would that have on your current day to day life?

APPENDIX 5

**GROUP 2 FOLLOW-UP SURVEY**

1. Since participating in the empathy conversation, how have you changed the way you approach your leadership and/or decision-making processes in your professional life to make them more empathic? If yes, what are you doing differently?

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2. Have you discussed your involvement in the empathy project with any of your work colleagues or professional associates? If yes, what was the nature of these conversations?

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3. Given your experiences with this project, do you think that it would be beneficial for leaders and decision-makers working in government, financial institutions and business to participate in an empathy conversation of this type? Why/why not?

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4. Do you have any other ideas for how we could encourage leaders and decision-makers working in government, financial institutions and business to become more empathic in their everyday work practices?

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## APPENDIX 6

### RECRUITMENT COVER LETTER FOR GROUP 1

#### **You are invited to participate in Australia21's Empathy Conversation Pilot Study.**

You are being invited to participate in this study because we believe that you have knowledge and insights that will help leaders and decision-makers who work in government, financial institutions and business better understand the issues and difficulties facing Australians who are experiencing financial difficulties.

We believe that, by sharing your story and thoughts with one of these people through an empathy conversation, you may be able to have a positive impact on the way they make decisions that affect people who are experiencing financial difficulty.

We have attached some information about empathy and empathy conversations for you to read (see Background Materials for Participants) and information about what being a participant in the Empathy Project involves (see Plain Language Information Statement).

If, after reading this information, you decide that you would like to participate in this study, please complete the enclosed consent form and return it to XXXX at Centacare.

If you have any queries about the study please feel free to contact me on XXXX or via [l.reeder@federation.edu.au](mailto:l.reeder@federation.edu.au)

Regards

Dr Lynne Reeder  
Principal Researcher, A21 Empathy Conversation Project  
Federation University Australia

### RECRUITMENT ADVERTISEMENT FOR GROUP 2

#### **Are you interested in contributing to social change?**

If so, please consider giving up three hours of your time during July 2015 to participate in Australia21's Empathy Conversation project. This project will scope and evaluate one method for bringing empathy into compassionate decision making.

Inspired by the writings of Roman Krznaric author of *Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution* and Dr Paul Gilbert, author of *The Compassionate Mind*, this project will examine how empathic understanding of those in financial difficulties might assist in providing some insight into more compassionate futures.

As a participant you will be supported and trained in the new learning from neuroscience and evolutionary biology and will be provided with training materials in empathy conversations. The project report will keep all names anonymous.

For any queries please contact: Dr Lynne Reeder, Board Director, Australia21 - m) 0431 608 958

APPENDIX 7

TEN PRINCIPLES FOR AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT POLICY MAKERS<sup>41</sup>

1. Regulation should not be the default option for policy makers: the policy option offering the greatest net benefit should always be the recommended option.
2. Regulation should be imposed only when it can be shown to offer an overall net benefit.
3. The cost burden of new regulation must be fully offset by reductions in existing regulatory burden.
4. Every substantive regulatory policy change must be the subject of a Regulation Impact Statement.
5. Policy makers should consult in a genuine and timely way with affected businesses, community organisations and individuals.
6. Policy makers must consult with each other to avoid creating cumulative or overlapping regulatory burdens.
7. The information upon which policy makers base their decisions must be published at the earliest opportunity.
- 8. Regulators must implement regulation with common sense, empathy and respect.**
9. All regulation must be periodically reviewed to test its continuing relevance.
10. Policy makers must work closely with their portfolio Deregulation Units throughout the policy making process.

<sup>41</sup><http://cuttingredtape.gov.au/handbook/ten-principles-australian-government-policy-makers>

### FURTHER INFORMATION

#### REPORT AUTHOR

**Dr Lynne Reeder – Director, Australia21**

completed her PhD (Monash University) on the international relations theory of global interdependence, which included a focus on the ethical aspects of global governance. She is a member of the global compassion e-discussion group run by the Compassionate Mind Foundation at the University of Derby, UK. She trained as a meditation teacher with Deepak Chopra in the US, and currently teaches meditation at a regional hospital-based Wellness Centre. With a long standing interest in meditation and its influence on the brain and nervous system she also runs workshops on mindfulness based on learning from neuroscience. Over many years Lynne has been involved in external engagement activities at universities. This has required taking high level theoretical research and transferring it to lay audiences. She now applies that skill in taking learning from research, and conferences including those she has recently attended at Stanford University and the University of Derby, and transferring it into applied outcomes for each course she tailors and designs.

#### PROJECT DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

**Dr Liz Temple – Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Federation University Australia**

has almost twenty years' experience researching aspects of wellbeing in a broad range of population groups, including young people experiencing early psychosis, fly-in/fly-out employees in the mining industry, early childhood educators, university students, local government employees, and both recreational and problematic drug users. This experience, gained in university, NGO, and health settings, has informed Liz's holistic and empirical approach to investigating wellbeing across the lifespan. In particular, Liz's research focuses on exploring the complex interrelationships between physical health, psychological functioning, and social and emotional wellbeing. It also includes investigating the life circumstances and societal factors that can act to either support or undermine wellbeing, such as those contributing to ill-health, psychological distress, and/or problematic drug and alcohol use. Liz's current research projects include the development and evaluation of a holistic wellbeing program for employees.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

#### AUSTRALIA<sup>21</sup> PROJECT WORKING GROUP

**Dr Lynne Reeder – Director, Australia<sup>21</sup>**

**Dr Liz Temple – Senior Lecturer in Psychology,  
Federation University Australia**

**Dr Lisa Petheram** – is a social scientist, counsellor, arts activist, and community engagement practitioner with an interest in encouraging knowledge-sharing, empathy, compassion, and connectivity among people. In particular, Lisa is interested in ways that creative, playful and interactive approaches can be used to engage communities, and policy makers on complex social and environmental issues. Through her PhD research and previous work she has developed special interests and skills in visual research, participatory communication, and community engagement. Lisa is currently working as a research and project manager at the Youth Coalition of the ACT, and is a Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University and University Fellow at Charles Darwin University. Lisa also does private consultancy and counselling work, and is enthusiastic about being involved in visual arts and performance activism.

**Kylie Marks – Empathy Nation** – is Founder and Director of a social and cultural enterprise, Empathy Nation. The enterprise engages experiential campaigning, education and storytelling to create new infrastructure and tools for supporting a culture of empathy in Australia. Empathic conversation and communication is a key pillar of this work; in February 2016 Empathy Nation launched a series of public conversation dinners in Sydney and an online campaign One Million Acts of Empathy. [www.empathynation.co](http://www.empathynation.co)

**Lyn Stephens – Director, Australia 21** – was CEO of Australia<sup>21</sup> from 2012-15 and is now a Board member of the organisation. She has a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Queensland and a Master of Social Ecology from the University of Western Sydney. Her experiences as a counsellor in the mental health field, a Director of the Australian Centre for Dialogue at ANU, and as a consultant in the not for profit sector have contributed to a strong and ongoing interest in developing a more empathic approach to dealing with difference in our society and the importance of empathy in policy making.

#### ABOUT AUSTRALIA<sup>21</sup>

Australia<sup>21</sup> is an independent, not for profit research company which specialises in addressing the difficult issues facing Australia. Our Board comprises leading thinkers from a range of disciplines with diverse executive leadership experience in the public and private sectors. Because the challenges facing humanity demand new ways of thinking, we draw on the latest research and the best thinking in areas as diverse as youth wellbeing, Australian resilience, inequality, and asylum seeker policy.

Learn more at: [www.australia21.org.au](http://www.australia21.org.au)

#### AUSTRALIA<sup>21</sup>'S EMPATHY APP

As part of this project Australia<sup>21</sup> developed an Empathy App – in this App you are able to learn about empathy and the benefits it can bring to you (and your community), we will give you tips and exercises to help you learn to be more empathic, and you will be given the opportunity to have empathic conversations with other people through our chat room feature.



<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=subzdesigns.empathy>



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[www.australia21.org.au](http://www.australia21.org.au)

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