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## Storytelling, Statistics, and the Ethics of Responsibility Researching a Welfare Reform Experiment

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**ABSTRACT** | In this essay, I reflect on the process of conducting research into an Australian welfare reform experiment that targets Indigenous people: the trial of a cashless debit card. Selectively deployed statistical research has been key to making and contesting the political case regarding the cashless debit card's effectiveness. However, pursuing narrative research in contradistinction to this preponderance of statistical research does not necessarily salve ongoing questions about power and research ethics, which have been reinvigorated amid renewed calls for anthropology's decolonisation. I draw on Eve Tuck's (2009) analysis of 'pain narratives' and Sujatha Fernandes' (2017) critical account of storytelling to probe aspects of my research. When settler anthropologists elicit, listen to, collect, and then disseminate stories gifted by Indigenous interviewees, this demands we take serious 'responsibility for the decisions we make as writers' (Birch 2019: 26). Demystifying the particular relations and everyday processes that lie at the heart of our research practice is thus warranted.

**Keywords:** Cashless debit card; narrative; responsibility; decolonisation; ethics



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### What counts as ‘thorough, robust research’?

Since mid-2017, I have been conducting ethnographic research into lived experiences of the cashless debit card trial in Ceduna, South Australia. Introduced into the Ceduna region in March 2016, the cashless debit card (hereafter ‘the card’) quarantines 80 per cent of income support benefits received by those of working age. Twenty per cent of payments are deposited into the recipient’s bank account and the remainder is available on a debit card barred from operating at any alcohol or gambling outlet across the nation. According to the relevant legislation, the trial aims to reduce the amount of social security payments that can be spent on alcohol, gambling and illegal drugs; determine whether such a reduction decreases instances of violence or social harm in trial sites; and encourage ‘socially responsible behaviour’ more broadly.<sup>1</sup> The card can be understood as part of a shift towards more conditional welfare state arrangements across the Global North (see Wacquant 2009). Ceduna was the first trial site for the card in Australia, which has now been extended to a further three sites. Indigenous people comprise around 25 per cent of the Ceduna region’s population, yet approximately 75 per cent of card holders in the Ceduna trial site are Indigenous.<sup>2</sup>

In spending time with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people affected by the card’s introduction, and in undertaking narrative interviews with them, I sought to establish and then animate a distinction between statistical research and storytelling.<sup>3</sup> Selectively deployed statistical research has been key to making and contesting the political case regarding the card’s necessity and effectiveness. This quantitative research is centrally concerned with behavioural change. It thus involves researchers being seen *as* the state, from the perspective of research participants, and of those researchers ‘seeing like the state’ (Scott 1998). How then to engage in research about the card on another basis? I emphasised that my research was different: I was interested in people’s stories – about their whole lives, and about life on the card. However, listening to people’s stories presents its own set of ethical questions regarding my complex imbrication with state effects, and the ways in which I might go on to write about difficult, sometimes desperate life circumstances. An introductory story helps set the scene.

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In February 2018, I travelled to the small rural town of Ceduna on the far west coast of South Australia to continue my research into lived experiences of the cashless debit card trial.

Also, in February 2018, Australia’s ruling Coalition government introduced legislation into Federal Parliament with the goal of facilitating the card’s expansion into other areas and extending two trials by then extant. On this summer trip, I rented accommodation near the deep-sea port, where salt is piled in steep pristine piles. I had withdrawn into the cool of my unit, out from the heat and away from the work of forging, sustaining, deepening and renewing relations that anthropological fieldwork involves. Here I listened to the replay of a February 7 radio interview with a South Australian parliamentarian, Rebekha Sharkie, in

which she outlined her reluctance to support the bill in its current form (ABC Radio National). Sharkie's equivocation was crucial: to pass the legislation, the government needed the support of the crossbench, a handful of representatives from minor parties including Sharkie. Sharkie told ABC journalist Sinead Mangan, 'We've said to the government – a further twelve months where you have your existing trials. Let's do some thorough, robust research on this.'<sup>4</sup>

Key card proponent and then mayor of Ceduna, Alan Suter, was interviewed after Sharkie. Mangan began by stating, 'We've heard from Rebekha Sharkie MP, who thinks there needs to be more statistics-based research...'. Suter responded in his familiar gravelly voice, 'I think we've got enough statistics to float a ship.' He continued, 'I would strongly advise Ms Sharkie to come to Ceduna, come and have a look at what is happening in the real world. And then make a judgement.' As the interview drew to a close, Mangan asked Suter, 'Have you done any research of your own locally?' He replied, 'I do research pretty much every day. The amount of feedback I get from community members is quite amazing and very heartening.'

It is tempting to belittle Suter's description that by living and working in the local community affected by the card trial ('the real world'), he is in effect constantly 'doing' research. This seems to me what Ghassan Hage might classify as a 'phallic' mode of comparison, whereby I could boast that my research practice is bigger and better than his research practice: I 'have' ethnography (Hage 1998: 287). Or, to express it in an Australian vernacular rather than Euro-theoretical terms, I could channel that icon of masculinist frontier Australian whiteness, Crocodile Dundee, and grin: 'Call that research? ... THIS is research.' Instead, it struck me that the immersive method of participant observation so valued by ethnographers bore at least *some* resemblance to the place-based, experience-centred approach Suter valorised. Going about everyday life in Ceduna, I too sought to talk with community members, especially those people using cashless debit cards, about their perception of the trial – I call it amassing anthropological material rather than 'feedback'. The radio piece thus directed me to interrogate anew critical questions about the ethical and methodological implications of my research practice in this settler colonial context.

First, note that the journalist transmuted Sharkie's comment about *thorough, robust research* into the sentiment *there needs to be more statistics-based research*. Statistical research, synonymous with 'data' in the debates surrounding the trial's evaluation, is clearly regarded as interchangeable with rigour: statistical research into welfare reform experiments alone are accorded the capacity to attest to policy success or failure. My interlocutors well understand that it is numbers that have a 'privileged status in political decisions' (Rose 1991: 674). Where then does that leave my resolve to distance myself from quantitative data collection and the goal of policy evaluation, instead inviting those people I got to know to tell their life stories? Narratives best serve, I remain convinced, to denaturalise the category of 'welfare recipient.' That is, the participants in my research are essentially 'the unemployed,' a designation that captures the thing that people do *not* do at present: waged work. Life stories might reveal instead the centrality of unremunerated care labour in someone's life, for example, or the

ways in which the disappearance of certain forms of precarious rural work on pastoral stations and railways has affected the region's economy and the life courses of individuals. The task of denaturalisation is neglected in much of the critical literature of welfare reform which simultaneously reproduces a category that makes invisible the myriad of ways in which people live and labour (e.g. Mendes 2013).

However, in undertaking research into lived experiences of welfare reform policies I have used methods that both allow us to know these lives in different ways *and* frequently re-centre suffering. I have recorded narratives telling of the lot of the dispossessed and marginalised, listening to details of sickness, racism, violence, poverty, and the awful deaths of infants and cherished kin. These might be termed 'pain narratives' (Tuck 2009), which risk (re)defining people in terms of lack and loss. The notion of 'pain narratives' is drawn from Eve Tuck, an influential Indigenous (Unangax) scholar working across Indigenous Studies, education and critical race studies. This essay proceeds to reflect on the doing and writing of ethnographic research in these settler colonial conditions, grappling with Tuck's demand we move away from 'damage-centred research' and towards a 'desire-based framework,' which is concerned to understand 'the complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives' (Tuck 2009: 416).

More specifically, after establishing the context in which I sought to distance myself from statistical and evaluative approaches, I outline the ways in which I was received as a researcher: as both a proxy for the state and as a conduit, who might be entrusted to both take people's stories 'back to the government' and to put into public circulation 'another side' to the cashless debit card story. This focus leads me to clarify the agency of the researched, who engage in an exchange with the researcher for reasons that the researcher is then ethically bound to try and honour. Research of this kind comes with serious responsibilities to others *and* to the task of writing about others' lives. As such, an honest if necessarily partial reckoning with the dilemmas involved is warranted, in order to demystify anthropological research practice amid calls for its decolonisation.

### **'Those statistics are gathered up...': The implementation and evaluation of the cashless debit card trial**

A vast literature draws on Foucault (2009) and Nikolas Rose (1990) to understand statistics as a biopolitical instrument, which make populations legible as an object of governance. Processes of quantification also make that which is hard to measure less visible (Espeland and Lom 2015). In the case of Indigenous Australia, the 'ongoing need to "measure, measure, measure"' (Lea 2005: 161) is a perennial feature of Indigenous policymaking, exemplified in current 'Close the Gap' targets and reporting practices (e.g. Altman and Russell 2012, see also Rowse 2012). More recent scholarship has emphasised the proliferation of practices of measuring and ranking, as 'audit culture' spreads to new realms 'both within and beyond the state' (Shore and Wright 2015: 22). Other theorists posit that it is algorithms rather than statistics that are fast emerging as the key numerical technique through which governmental power is exercised (Eubanks 2018).

What work have statistics been called upon to do in the particular scenario under consideration? First, there is the incantation of select statistics to justify the card's introduction to address complex local issues. Shocking statements such as 'Ceduna's hospitalisation rate for assault is 68 times the national average' appear across a range of media stories and in government statements prior to the card's introduction in early 2016 (e.g. Henderson 2015; Stewart 2016). As part of a fulsome analysis of the relationship between narratives and statistics, Akhil Gupta points out that numbers can be transformed into stories and vice versa (Gupta 2012: 153-158). The repetitive recitation of a group of statistics has here become an effective narrative device, crucial to establishing that an extraordinary and extreme backdrop led to the introduction of a bold and novel measure.

Second, there is the selective use of statistics to justify the card's retention. Evaluations of varying scope have consistently been undertaken of the income management initiatives that precede the cashless debit card. Rob Bray, involved in the largest of these evaluations, concludes that New Income Management (the largest Australian program that quarantines social security income to date) does not have 'significant systemic positive impact' (Bray et al. 2014:316).<sup>5</sup> Importantly Bray (2016) also summarises the way aspects of these evaluations circulate in public discourse, whereby positive findings are exaggerated by their selective use in public debates. So consistent is the pattern by which political figures rely on and emphasise favourable results that do not reflect the overall conclusion of evaluations, Bray (2016: 464) writes:

While the motivation to justify the success of programs might just be political expediency, the persistence of this behaviour points towards a more concerning situation where the level of commitment to the program, within elements of government and bureaucracy, has resulted in a process of rejection of evaluation findings when contrary to their belief in the program.

In the case of the card's evaluation, private research company ORIMA was contracted to evaluate the first two trials, in Ceduna and the East Kimberley. The shortcomings of the resulting report have been highlighted by numerous authors, who point out that self-reported behaviour change may well be influenced by the interviewee's reluctance to admit to engaging in drinking or, especially, illicit drug use (a limitation acknowledged by ORIMA) (see Hunt 2017: 1). Ensuing public debate saw both the selective circulation of statistics pointing to positive outcomes and the emergence of a counter-story that drew heavily on those academic criticisms of the ORIMA report's shortcomings. Linda Burney, a federal Labor MP and Aboriginal woman, who was shadow Social Services minister at the time, addressed parliament thus, citing the work of Australian National University academic Janet Hunt:

Hunt is critical of the methodology used in the ORIMA evaluation. She argues that people interviewed for the evaluation may have told interviewers that they drank less than when the trial began but that such

recall over a year is not likely to be very reliable. Furthermore, people had to give their identification to the interviewer. They may have said exactly what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear. They certainly would not have incriminated themselves. This is particularly true for the Aboriginal population, who, for historical reasons, are likely to view authority figures with deep suspicion (Parliamentary Hansard 2018: 5966).

Australian sociologist Eva Cox (2017: 8) took this further, positing that the ORIMA evaluation raised serious ‘ethical questions’ because it involved asking Aboriginal people about things they might find distressing. While her comment is well-meaning, it reconstitutes the very image of Indigenous incapacity that Tuck points to *and* on which basis the card’s apparent necessity has been established. Indigenous people are again cast as primarily damaged, vulnerable and in need of protection. The card nominally offers protection from either the vociferous demands of kin and, more broadly, cultural values that inhibit individuation and success, as well as the demands an individual’s addiction exerts. Cox implies that Aboriginal people need as well to be protected from research, which represents an unwelcome intrusion. As Kirsten Bell (2014: 518) observes of the doctrine of informed consent, which she argues has been embraced by anthropologists and ethics committees, ‘in presuming this relationship of inequality, the doctrine actively reinscribes it.’

In July 2018, the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) (2018) released a report highly critical of the data relied upon by ORIMA to evaluate the cashless debit card trial. The report outlined deficiencies in the data collecting method, pointing to key sets of statistics such as school attendance that were not available to evaluators. The ANAO concluded that it is difficult to ascertain ‘whether or not there had been a reduction in social harm’ as a result of the card’s introduction (ANAO 2018: 8). What is significant for the purpose of this essay is this: the ORIMA and ANAO reports in fact have in common a marked disinclination to talk fulsomely with people on the card themselves. In both cases, community figures were called upon to narrate the impact of the card on local life. Card holders were surveyed but were not to be trusted as narrators, a point I will return to later in this article.

That which is summarised above is not just a scholarly and political concern but has permeated the setting in which I work. It manifests first in a cynicism about the use of statistics, research participants consistently raising doubts not just about their reliability but the ways in which they reduce contextual realities to numbers. A highly anxious and serious Aboriginal man, Dustin, told me:

But when you think about it, all of these statistics that’s gathered on to support this card, we’re basically getting punished for out-of-towners. Like the locals, we don’t use the Day Centre [(the Stepping Stones Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Day Centre)], we are not in the Sobering Up Centre 24/7 or the hospitals or Town Camp, and those statistics are gathered up to support this card. The people that are doing good by it, we was suckered

into believing it was a trial. Now that those statistics are all gathered up, it's kept the trial going...

There is a lot to unpack in the above quote but in this essay my focus is on Dustin's understanding of an instrumental process by which statistics are 'gathered up' to execute political plans. The statistic cited earlier about assault rates, among others, points to a situation of acute social distress but does little to help us understand the rhythms and reasons for scenarios that have been reduced to grotesque statistical anomalies against an invoked norm. Local conjecture held that the high rate of admissions to the sobering up centre in Ceduna, which was also heavily reported, allegedly captures the habits of a core group of people who do not reside in Ceduna, drink intensively, and who present at the sobering up centre for a bed for the night: here they will find somewhere warm and dry to sleep and somewhere to wash their clothes the next morning before going about their day. This service has been repurposed by its users, locals suggest, in tones that vary from bemusement to frustration to begrudging respect. And so, my research participants effectively relayed that data does not in itself ever say anything straightforward: local knowledge is needed to make sense of numbers.

A second manifestation of local understanding of the numeritisation of politics was less a matter of explicit conversation than something I gradually became aware of as I spent more time in Ceduna. I worked closely with a small group of passionate local advocates against the card, both Aboriginal and whitefella. I came to realise they worried my research was unlikely to be credible because of my aversion to producing generalisable statistics. When I posted out and emailed through a copy of a summary of my research that centred around the presentation of verbatim quotes, I had these advocates in mind when I wrote: **It is methodologically unsound to turn deeply qualitative research of this kind into statistics** (emphasis duly applied to original.) My imagined audience for this very sentence carefully tallied the quoted material and happily relayed to me that the overall message of my report was 'against' the card. Again, as Gupta notes (2012: 153-158), stories can be turned into statistics.

A final dimension of local opinion about the ORIMA evaluation deserves mention. A number of people expressed their disgust that ORIMA had provided survey participants with a token remuneration for their time, a fact they wielded to delegitimise the ORIMA evaluation. This is interesting in light of the fact that Australian university ethics committees, to the best of my knowledge, generally view such small gestures of remuneration of research participants in interview-based studies favourably, as it is seen as less exploitative of 'vulnerable,' and 'over-researched' peoples. Local ethical sensibilities here proved at odds with more bureaucratic formulations of research as a transaction in which the researcher gains and the researched give. In exchange, the researcher is also expected to give back a token remuneration. This was refigured by my research participants as a matter of being induced to say what the government wanted to hear.

### **‘Don’t tell the government.’ Stories and statecraft**

In disavowing the task of ‘gathering up’ yet more statistics, I was endeavouring to take up a vantage point on the cashless debit card distinct from the state’s. I asked that fundamentally anthropological question, ‘Tell me about your life,’ rather than the statistical yes/no possibility generator ‘Is the card working?’ However, I did not just endeavour to distance myself from evaluative and normative frames by moving *towards* anthropology but simultaneously wished to *distance* myself from aspects of my academic discipline’s past.

I carried into this research a considered reluctance to trespass on people’s intimate lives derived from decades of critique of anthropology’s entanglements with colonialism and concerns about ethnography as extractive. An earlier generation of critique (i.e. Hymes 1972; Asad 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Anderson 2003) has recently been reinvigorated in light of the fact that anthropology’s self-reflexive turn did not prove transformative of anthropological practice, teaching and of the canon (see for example Simpson 2014; Todd 2018; Burman 2018). The inference that anthropology’s ethical entailments are more suspect than those of other disciplines that produce knowledge about Indigenous people is not something I seek to perpetuate. Ethnographic research ideally involves a ‘painful porosity’ to others (Clark 2017: 12), whose objectives, insights, categories, experiences, and feelings serve to affect, teach, and change both the research and the researcher.<sup>6</sup> It’s not this relational aspect of the method – the involvement with others – I sought to keep in abeyance. Rather, it was the disquieting reality that the line between observation and prying is not easily drawn. Recording narrative interviews seemed to represent a less intrusive possibility, in that the research space was more clearly demarcated.

Let me clarify further what I mean by a narrative-based method. Ground-breaking Indigenous Studies scholarship emphasises ‘storywork’ and ‘yarning’ as Indigenous-specific narrative modes, through which research with Indigenous people might productively be undertaken (Archibald et al. 2019). In my case, I was working with a cross-cultural understanding of life narratives, which rested on Jerome Brumer’s analysis understanding that the ‘self is a product of our telling’ (2002: 85, see also Brumer 2004). To tell stories restores agency to the speaker, notes anthropologist Michael Jackson (2013: 186). However, inviting people to tell their life stories was not an uncomplicated methodological alternative to more obviously ethically fraught approaches.

### **Another tale**

Maude agreed to talk to me, saying she thought that Aboriginal people too should ‘put our yarn in’. I sat with this Pitjantjatjara woman aged in her 60s in her housing trust home in Ceduna. Two female relatives sat around the table too, chewing the grapes and sweet biscuits I had brought with me and listening to Maude tell of her childhood in the desert. Four other male relatives milled about between the kitchen and sunny front verandah: one sat on a milk crate listening intently to Maude’s stories, the others came and went to help themselves to biscuits, and to ask for cigarettes. ‘Get a job,’ Maude barked after one as she handed over a smoke. At one point I paused, saying ‘I gotta remember my questions,’ to which Maude



prompted, 'But grey card, you was talking about, you were asking about...?'<sup>7</sup> Was I here to talk about the cashless debit card or not? Maude wondered if I had gotten 'side-tracked'? Or, 'Do you want to know a bit more about me?' At this juncture, I explained again my interest in people's whole lives, which I had tried to convey at the outset. 'I want to hear more about you!'

We continued, eventually arriving at the topic of the card. 'We really want to get back to the money, you know. Handling the money,' Maude emphasised. 'We've got no money. Got to depend on the grey card.' She did not think it stopped people from drinking, 'They're clever. Aboriginal ones are. Lie and sneak and know.' She told me, 'There is a way.' Maude's story about how people get around the card to buy their Tawny Port was hard to follow. In any case, she warned me, 'But don't tell the government.' She glanced at my phone, which was recording our conversation: 'Well they've got it recorded.' Again, she repeated, 'Don't tell the government...' 'Only you'll know,' Maude continued, 'even though you're working for them.'

Having explained a number of times my university affiliation and research focus, then, it was still assumed that if I was there about a policy then I was there at the behest of the government. 'Are you not the state?' I have been pressed when presenting early versions of this essay. To be sure, I am entirely educated within the government-funded school system, and now work to produce knowledge in a public institution putatively dependent on government funding.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, I readily acknowledge the Foucauldian thrust of this query: I am formed through state effects that ensure my daily conduct and comportment fall clearly within a normative horizon of acceptable possibilities. But to grasp the relationship between the state and subjectification (while not reducing one's selfhood to a state effect) does not negate the importance of my interviewees understanding that I am not, in fact, employed by the federal government, either directly or via contracted research. Maude's confusion on this point was concerning and I spent considerable time talking further with her about who I was and what I sought to do. It was not easy for people in the field to distinguish my persona, aims and intentions from those of other educated outsiders, the likes of which frequently travel to places like Ceduna to enact consultation and evaluation processes.<sup>9</sup>

Maude's assumption was so explicitly put to me I could counter it directly. What was more disconcerting was a subtle sense I carried away from many other interviews, feeling I had been treated as a proxy for state actors. Aboriginal people well understand that even those cast in seemingly benign helping roles are also scrutinising their lives: staff who assist with tenancy issues also check that houses are occupied by 'responsible' householders; education and youth social workers are mandatory reporters of any signs that child protection issues could see the state become involved in family life, and so on. And, as Tuck writes research 'functions as yet another layer of surveillance' (2009: 410) – in this case in the lives of welfare recipients who are already closely monitored and deemed to be in need of reform. My sympathetic ear, grapes and mega-pack of Arnotts family assorted biscuits did not mean I might not also be simultaneously an agent of either consultation and/or surveillance.

Unsurprisingly then many interviewees crafted what I came to understand as ‘good citizen narratives’. When I interviewed June, for example, an Aboriginal grandmother and artist, she foregrounded details such as, ‘I had 8 kids. I was a good role model for my kids. I had to be a mother and father to my kids.’ I am not saying people pedalled in mistruths when they told me they were good parents or that they did not drink. Rather, I am drawing attention to the resolutely settler colonial conditions that shaped the research relationship, bringing about a situation in which – despite me never asking people whether or not they drink – interviewees consistently told me, ‘I don’t drink’ (as well as: ‘they should pick on the drunks’).

This uncomfortable merging of my story collecting practice and perceived state objectives is further illuminated by turning to recent literature on storytelling, neoliberal statecraft and social change. Theorists and writers such as Didier Fassin (2012), Sujatha Fernandes (2017), Tanya Serisier (2018) and Maria Tumarkin (2014) draw attention to the deep penetration of storytelling into contemporary public and political life. Fernandes (2017) provides the most detailed analysis of ‘curated storytelling’ pressed variously into the service of advocacy, organising, therapy, and statecraft. For example, literate women in Afghanistan have been invited to tell their story of gender oppression in narrative forms that built support for the American invasion via a creative writing project sponsored by the US State Department (Fernandes 2017: 38-68). Fernandes also critiques storytelling’s role in advancing progressive political causes, analysing the stories migrant domestic workers told as they campaigned for a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in the US, as well as the kinds of stories they became unable to tell as part of the process. In response, Fernandes outlines (2017: 69-103), speakers might refuse the invitation to narrate or go off script.

It is entirely conceivable then that processes surrounding the cashless debit card’s rollout and extension might have involved the elicitation and circulation of narratives of self-transformation, whereby the card itself precipitated a transition into a life of responsible citizenship.<sup>10</sup> Fernandes flags a genre of ‘legal storytelling’ where defendants before a US drug court might successfully employ certain tropes to convey that once subjected to punishment – or in the case of the card, punitive governmental intervention – they were able to turn their lives around (2017: 28). Maggie Hall and Kate Rossmanith (2016) further analyse this legal genre, pointing to ‘constrained narratives,’ which are co-constituted by the speaker and the representative of the listening law. Instead, welfare recipients have not been invited to speak. Recall that as part of the evaluation process, community ‘leaders’ were depended upon to narrate the broader impact of the card’s introduction on to local life. Where community members who are on the card express their opposition to the policy to journalists, then their stories have been discredited as self-interested creations, motivated only by their desire to access cash for alcohol, drug habits and to play the pokies (see Holderhead 2018: 19). Former Human Services Minister Alan Tudge, for example, summarised opposition to the card in the following terms: ‘Some people are unhappy – alcoholics, for example, are never going to be happy about reducing their intake’ (Clancy 2017). It is worth noting that my research leads to a more nuanced

conclusion. Elsewhere, I have argued that ‘the most articulate and passionate critics of the card were often those attuned to broader colonial, racial and social injustices’ (Vincent 2019b: 18). Critics of the card are not then thinking narrowly about their own circumstances but broadly about social dynamics, history and power.

### **‘Are they listening?’ Stories and social change**

If I was a kind of stand-in for the state in the exchanges like the ones analysed in the preceding section, I was also understood to have privileged access to information about this policy – which I did, by dint of my educational capital – and as a conduit, who might be entrusted to bring stories back to the state. These additional aspects of the research relationship are each considered in turn below.

Visiting Ceduna’s Aboriginal arts centre one day in November 2017, a bunch of people clustered around me as I explained the purpose of my presence in town. They sought to have their say but also listened keenly when I explained the status of various federal government proposals regarding the cashless debit card’s future. They were aware of a mooted proposal to drug test welfare recipients, and for those who failed to be placed on the cashless debit card.<sup>11</sup> This was welcome news: finally, my interlocutors conveyed, the card would target just those people with addiction problems, as it was putatively designed to do. Somewhat apprehensively I explained that it was not that the proposed drug testing was designed to see less people on the cashless debit card but more: the proposed trial sites for the drug testing were in two east coast locations, and the Ceduna trial would continue to apply to all welfare recipients 65 and under (including those on the Disability Pension and on the Carer Payment). My interlocutors’ disappointment was palpable. So, the ‘welfare card’ was expanding then? Would it soon be everywhere in Australia? I told them about the then current plan to extend it to Kalgoorlie-Boulder in Western Australia and also to a region in Queensland (both plans have now been realised). I continued, explaining that in the Queensland trial site, only recipients of income support payments under the age of 35 would be affected. ‘Bullshit,’ a listening woman muttered furiously. The more narrowly targeted Queensland site would have a majority of non-Indigenous participants. In this exchange and others then, I was positioned as a mediator or even emissary, who possessed information about the workings of opaque state processes.

Nor did I just seem to my research participants abreast of fast-changing policy developments that would impact their lives, but it was hoped I had some capacity to influence the policy process. Tuck (2009) probes the assumption that research documenting hardship leads to policy change, which she sees social scientists as either sharing or perhaps fostering. Tuck points out that there is a de facto theory of change relied upon by many well-meaning researchers. She writes, ‘In a damage-centred framework, pain and loss are documented in order to obtain particular political or material gains’ (2009: 413). And so oppressed people consent to research that will attest to their oppression:

Native communities, poor communities, communities of colour, and disenfranchised communities tolerate this kind of data gathering because there is an implicit and sometimes explicit assurance that stories of damage pay off in material, sovereign and political wins (Tuck 2009: 414).

Certainly, I had been embraced by a handful of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Ceduna who saw in me and seized an opportunity to ‘get the story out there.’ Robbie, a non-Indigenous person, or ‘whitefella’, I had interviewed in October 2017 and had since grown closer to, stopped me in the street in February 2018 and asked me intently: ‘Are they listening? Or is it falling on deaf ears?’ I had picked up this expression about ‘getting the story out there,’ and was using it as part of my justification for the value of this research. To this end, I published a free, magazine-style online article soon after concluding the intensive fieldwork phase of this research (Vincent 2019a). But as Tuck outlines, an underlying assumption that the research endeavour has inherent worth rests upon a powerful idea as the social scientist as ‘litigator,’ collecting evidence in order to put ‘the world on trial’ (2009:415). Tuck points out not only that this is a flawed theory of social change but also that there is a long-term effect for marginalised communities of ‘thinking of ourselves as damaged.’

On closer examination, however, some aspects of my research project’s unfolding complicate Tuck’s characterisation: people sought to tell their stories for manifold reasons, and had a far more active role in shaping these intersubjective exchanges than is captured in an account of the researcher/researched relationship emphasising *only* the structural power imbalance. This seemed to me especially true of my interactions with people living in the remote community of Yalata, the second locality in my fieldwork, which I introduce below.

I was working in Ceduna because I had a long-term relationship with this town, having conducted fieldwork here since 2008 (Vincent 2017). However, Ceduna’s suitability as a policy trial site was centrally about its proximity to the remote desert community of Yalata, which lies around 200 kilometres west of Ceduna. Yalata people, who are Pitjantjatjara speakers, as well as Indigenous people from further afield, flow through Ceduna to visit family, for appointments and also to ‘party,’ as one woman told me, miming drinking with her hands. In Ceduna, my network grew organically owing to the relations I already held. I was reluctant to ‘impose’ myself on Yalata, as I saw it: it was not a place that I already had a relationship to and I was not in a position to move there and get to know people slowly.

Compounding my ambivalence was the fact that Yalata is an extremely important place in settler colonial historical terms, and the community’s ‘story’ circulates and holds significant value within a contemporary economy of narrative politics. Yalata community members hold memories of the British atomic testing program and have been called upon to tell their story before Royal Commissions, as well as authoring a collective account of their community’s past (Yalata and Oak Valley Communities, 2012).

I was in contact with a whitefella who had a long-term relationship with Yalata and who thought it manifestly unfair that Yalata people would not have the opportunity to speak with me. When this person next travelled to Yalata they took information about my research with them, and I was soon invited to visit by then chairperson of the elected community council. This scenario, in which Aboriginal people assert their right to speak with a white anthropologist and an outsider, albeit under encouragement from my whitefella friend, is seriously at odds with current sensitivities surrounding the ethics of research in Indigenous communities (Cowlshaw 2015). Why would community members seek out this possibility?

My first visit to Yalata saw community members both ask me numerous questions about the card's future, as per my conversation at the arts centre, and to voice a set of concerns I was previously unaware of: people expressed to me that the cycle of losing cards, replacing cards, forgetting passwords, setting new passwords and using public computers had seen some lose control of their accounts, with more techno-savvy community members illicitly transferring funds between card-holders' accounts. I recorded material for many hours. Yalata residents made careful use of my presence, often switching into Pitjantjatjara to confer before returning their attention to me (as well as frequently dispatching me to the community store for 'cool drinks'). They asked me to take their 'stories back to government,' not so much naively trusting this would bring about change but evincing a weary determination to voice their perspective on policy developments many saw as imposed and unwelcome.

Importantly, any attempt of mine to collect *stories* on this occasion, to learn of people's whole lives, was waved away, and dismissed as irrelevant to the purpose of my visit. When I explained that I like to hear people's life stories, an influential and senior Yalata community member, Norma, frowned. 'Wiya' (no). The terms of my presence were clear and Norma directed me firmly. I should say, 'Hey, what do you think of that card?' And I should be sure to ask 'some who like it and some who don't' (which I did). I had been warned by another white person, a former teacher, that I would likely not be welcomed at Yalata for there is apparently nothing Aboriginal people 'hate more' than a white anthropologist getting out their pen and writing everything down – a familiar truism. Two younger Yalata women, however, were unimpressed with me sitting at an outdoor table in a public place, my phone casually lying on the table recording and me listening along. 'Take out your pen,' they stated carefully. 'And write everything down.' I complied, of course, and scribbled furiously, while the phone went on recording. Repeatedly Norma, who called out to people to come and sit with me, checked: 'I was going to take these stories 'back to government,' wasn't I?'

I 'put it through' to government, as June, introduced earlier, urged me to do. Tuck's thesis regarding the limitations of social research as a stimulus to social change proved instructive. I made both a written submission to a Senate inquiry and gave expert evidence before it; unsurprisingly, legislation extending the cashless debit card trial to mid-2020 easily passed both houses of parliament with little regard given to the voices of numerous academics and advocacy groups recommending against passage of the legislation.

**‘It’s a good read’. Research, writing and responsibility**

What next of this endeavour to listen to the voices of those affected by the cashless debit card trial, a seemingly naïve research objective but a meaningful one? First, there was the literal handing back of printed transcripts of my longer narrative interviews.<sup>12</sup> Returning these transcripts provided insights into the sense of value people might – or might not – derive from engaging with a researcher. I always took this opportunity to dutifully revisit the issue of consent, not in an overly formal way, but by reminding people that they could add or retract anything. A critical anthropological literature points to problems both with the doctrine of informed consent and the formalisation of intersubjective relations in the field via the ethics process (Bell 2014; Eickelkamp 2014; Wynn and Israel 2018). Indeed, my procedural preface was sometimes interpreted as an insult, leading one person to toss his envelope aside defiantly, ‘I stand by what I said.’

I tracked down another friend who had started drinking heavily again since I had last seen them, and had recently been in a psychosis, relatives warned me. I found this person at a local social service where they had an appointment, ‘charged up’ (i.e. drunk), unkempt and seriously short on sleep. They put the envelope I gave them in a plastic bag, tying the handles together carefully before we parted ways. I held no illusions that my friend was about to go home, review the record of our interview and contact me with corrections. In fact, they headed down the street and got into a fight, I learned later that afternoon. The ritual of returning this story was clearly about my compliance to a practice that made little sense in this particular moment. At the same time, I wanted to see this friend, who I was worried about, and having something to hand over served as the pretext for us getting together: it was a happy enough meeting and we talked for some time, even if the circumstances were troubling.

In other cases, the printed pages gave material form to that which was exchanged: according the physical object of the transcript respect and treating it tenderly serves to communicate that these stories would be similarly treated. A non-Indigenous woman, Gina, carefully corrected her transcript: I had misspelt the name of her former partner, a woman who had died at their shared home in her 50s. At the outset of our interview Gina had described finding her partner’s body, after I asked about a tattoo. In terms of what *I* would ‘do’ with this story, the deceased woman’s name would of course be altered if I ever sought to include this particular detail. But in this moment Gina’s relationship to the material was foregrounded: I made the corrections, printed it out again and Gina received it gratefully.

When I did re-return it, Andrea, a non-Indigenous friend of Gina’s was visiting for a cuppa. ‘It’s a good read,’ she commented, on seeing the envelope pass between us: I had also returned a transcript to Andrea earlier in the week. Was it really? Andrea was in the process of handwriting a list; atop it sat a simple word, badly misspelled. How confident a reader was she? After this chance encounter, I increased the font size and spacing on the transcripts I was returning and sought in many cases to suggest that I read the interview back, (‘Maybe I should read this? Save you the hassle?’). I read Maude’s story aloud. In this case I was not thinking about her literacy but the fact that her eyesight was failing,

affected by diabetes. ‘That’s true!’ she kept exclaiming. She laughed hardest when our conversation took an abrupt turn. Realising that she would soon be 65 and exempt from the card, she commented breezily that she did not mind it really.

What to do when someone who told me mildly that ‘he didn’t like the card’ suddenly swerved into fantastical tales? A family member was listening in and later sought me out to instruct me not to transcribe or return that part of the interview. The first part was ‘great,’ they enthused. The rest was a serious mental illness talking: it would be irresponsible to give that life on the page. I returned only the first part of the interview, again reading it aloud. This interviewee’s kin shouldered the responsibility of caring for him and had enjoined me to also take care of him, on their terms. But what to do when an intelligent and intense person shared with me their story, detailing the shame produced by dealing with the mental health system and Centrelink (the card was nothing, compared to that)? Later, this person concluded that I was in the same structural position as many others that had humiliated them. I probably recorded their story only to ‘sit back and laugh.’ This person did not want their story returned and now occasionally sends me mildly abusive text messages. In the first case, the role of the family member was crucial in advising me how to act responsibly; in the case of a seriously isolated person looking after myself has had to take precedent over any effort to repair the relationship.

The responsibilities touched on above are of course not the only ones, and are all easily acquitted. An entirely different set of enduring dilemmas present themselves in the writing. How not to subordinate lived lives to theory; how to withhold details that might result in pain or shame, engaging in my own settler politics of refusal? I have already highlighted my acute sense of responsibility to write in an accessible genre and outlet. But a larger question haunts the more scholarly publishing: should I proceed to tell other people’s stories? In Australia, acclaimed novelist Alexis Wright (2016) has powerfully outlined the disintegrative effects of a negative national narrative about Aboriginal community life:

We do not get much of a chance to say what is right or wrong about the stories told on our behalf – which stories are told or how they are told. It just happens, and we try to deal with the fallout.

Scholar and fiction writer Tony Birch elaborates, noting that Wright’s essay has been frequently misinterpreted as censorious. Birch argues both that Aboriginal ‘stories need to be told – by those of us who live them’ (Birch 2019: 32) and that, following Wright, ‘we give deeper consideration to the act of telling stories and take greater responsibility for the decisions we make as writers’ (Birch 2019: 26).

This essay is a tentative step towards wrestling with the nature of those responsibilities. In opening, I suggested that settler anthropologists elicit, listen to, collect and then disseminate stories ‘gifted’ to them by Indigenous interviewees. Why ‘gifted’ and not simply given? It might sound overblown, but I mean here to acknowledge that in some cases – by no means all – when a research participant narrates, and the researcher reciprocates with their interest and

attention, then this exchange propels the relationship into the future.<sup>13</sup> As I revise this essay, I find myself busy once again extricating myself from my responsibilities to my children and partner, and not quite able to explain why I am travelling to Ceduna yet again, even though I had led my family to believe I had ‘finished’ this field research. The relationships are of course never finished: simply showing up again, being around, and staying interested returns the gift. I hope then to remain accountable to the communities with which I work, a commitment of course shared by other anthropologists. My interpretation of what this means has been deeply influenced by Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s work (1999). However, to overstate the transformative potential of research of this kind, branding it as ‘decolonial’, would constitute a simplistic and premature settler ‘move to innocence’ (see Tuck and Yang 2012).

### Happy endings?

Some inclusion of personal reflections on the fieldwork process is now regarded as *de rigueur*. This sustained reflection might be pushing it. However, as Lily George writes:

If we wish to decolonise or reclaim anthropology where we hold respect for the place between us [anthropologists and Indigenous people] as a space for negotiation of relationships, of creation and innovation, then we must have some difficult conversations or at the least, converse! We must be honest about the history that lies between us (2018: 111).

I take up George’s challenge to write with honesty not just about anthropology’s past but about present practice. The point of this essay is not to exculpate anthropology in the midst of urgent calls for its decolonisation. Neither is the objective to self-castigate, which would in many ways be easier than offering this partial but I hope honest exploration of the nagging and unfinished dilemmas that were my companions in the field as I undertook recent research.

‘Enumeration,’ summarises Gupta, is ‘deeply entrenched as a technique of statecraft’ (2012: 159): the mutually constitutive relationship between governmental power and numbers, be they statistics or algorithms, is well established. Recent theorising points to the crucial role that narrative too plays in political processes. Alert to this critique, I nonetheless defend here the overarching value of listening to people’s stories of life on the cashless debit card. My specific research focus on the card saw me record both distressing stories and also elicit ‘good citizen’ narratives that told of my interviewees’ innocence. The latter current, which ran through many interviews, highlighted the ways in which I was sometimes received as a proxy for the state. Another related but slightly different response to my presence was to ask me questions about a policy arena that was fast-shifting and confusing: I was perceived to have greater access to an understanding of what was really going on. Finally, and crucially, I was entrusted with messages to take back to ‘government.’

The last time I visited Yalata, Norma approached me waving, ‘Got any good news for us, Eve?’ I told Norma about my failed efforts before the Senate



committee, outlined earlier. She then invited me and my travelling companion to ‘keep her company’ by a smoky fire in the scrub, where she was busily meeting with some linguists. I read the *Inside Story* piece aloud to another friend in the Lutheran Church that evening. His mother accompanied us, keenly showing me the decorative wire designs she had burned into the altar. And as committed as people were in following up the status of the card research, and dispirited and unsurprised with my news, they were far more interested in looking over a little book I had been working on as a side project, which documents one woman’s life story.

The genre of the academic journal article does not involve happy endings as a rule. But the genre is tired, and this final story is at once profoundly sad and a good note on which to end.

I met Elsie through some volunteering I was doing in Ceduna. She was aware of my interest in the card but proposed we talk instead about something more interesting: her life. Elsie figured if I was interested in recording stories then I might also want to record—and publish—the story of her life, something she had long aspired to do. Hours of recorded material, conversations about the book, and searching through digitised archives together resulted in the publication of *Elsie Numitja Illi’s Tjukurpa: Elsie’s Story* (Illi 2019). The opening passages make clear Elsie’s own sense of the significance of her story, and her determination for her narrative to circulate on her own terms. I will close by turning to her words.

‘I want a little book about my life,’ Elsie begins. ‘Cause I can share a lot of things I’ve done, you know? Many positive things, you know? Real stories. ... I want my story to be happy right through.’ Elsie’s stories also involve so much trauma: her book deals with the loss of two beloved brothers, a husband and two children in a single accident, and a recent partner. In the opening passage we felt it necessary to include a recorded clarification, placing my question in brackets, ‘The sad things are included too?’ I ask. Elsie responds: ‘Of course, it’s part of my life. I’ve been through that.’

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## Notes

1. Social Security Legislation Amendment (Debit Card Trial) Bill 2015.
2. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, there were 752 people participating in the Ceduna trial, 565 of whom were Indigenous, as of September 2016 (Australian Human Rights Commission 2016: 91). According to the

Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Local Government Area of Ceduna had a population of 3, 549 in 2017. At the time of the 2016 Census, conducted in August 2016 (around 5 months after the commencement of the trial) 21.8% of people identified as Indigenous in the 2016 Census. The Local Government Area of Ceduna is distinct from the cashless debit card trial site, however, and does not include the remote Aboriginal community of Yalata, whose residents are included in the trial. According to the 2016 Census, Yalata had a population of 248 people, 87% of whom are Indigenous (ABS 2016).

3. The terms Aboriginal and Indigenous are used interchangeably in this setting: I follow local usage here.

4. Sharkie went on to support an amended bill, which extended the existing Ceduna and East Kimberley trials until mid-2019, and expanded the card to one more trial site, in the Kalgoorlie-Boulder region of Western Australia.

5. This literature on the extended reach of quantification and audit culture points to the dominance of the ‘Big 4’ companies – Deloitte, KPMG, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Ernst and Young – that expanded on the basis of deregulated private and public sectors and the mandating of evaluation (Shore and Wright 2015: 25). Of these, Deloitte has successfully tendered for a series of evaluations of an Australian income management program called Place Based Income Management (see Bray 2016).

6. Painful porosity is a term adopted from poet and psychotherapist Alison Clark’s (2017) exploration of why therapists and writers choose to do what they do. Her analysis might also be productively applied to the vocation of anthropology.

7. In Ceduna, the cashless debit card, which is lead pencil grey with a metallic sheen, is mostly referred to as the ‘grey card’ or the Indue Card, after the private company contracted by the Department of Human services to issue and effectively administer the cards’ operation: the card costs around \$10,000 per person, per year to administer. In the East Kimberley, the card is referred to as ‘the white card’ (Klein and Razi 2017: 13), so tagged because it was imposed by white people.

8. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the marketisation of the higher education sector in Australia, and the concomitant emphasis on private sources of income in an era of dwindling public funds (see Connell 2019).

9. Consultation has been a presence in Aboriginal settings since the self-determination policy era, beginning in the 1970s, and its purpose and legacy needs to be appreciated (see Peters-Little 1999). Self-determination saw ‘consultation’ integrated into Aboriginal policy-making processes, a key instrument that served to underline the distinction between an optimistic time oriented to Aboriginal autonomy and the previous assimilationist policy era which involved coercion, imposition and absorption. However, Gillian Cowlishaw (1998), among others, shows how Aboriginal people’s visions for a good life could be smothered under a raft of consultants, who imputed the state’s desires into community articulations. While self-determination might be understood to have been supplanted by an era of more explicitly interventionist policy making (Hinkson and Vincent 2018) this emphasis on consultation sometimes lives on.

10. One such proposal was short-lived. A short news article in May 2018 suggested that members of the government were promoting the idea that ‘families who have benefited from the cashless [debit] card should be enlisted to help sell the policy’. The plan went unrealised, as far as I am aware. See: [sbs.com.au/news/families-could-promote-cashless-welfare](http://sbs.com.au/news/families-could-promote-cashless-welfare)

11. Scott Morrison, then Coalition treasurer, first canvassed this plan as part of the May 2017 budget announcement. The proposal has not progressed further at the time of writing.

12. All my interviews were first professionally transcribed, a service for which I pay \$1USD per minute of recorded material, and then corrected by me. Correcting particularly partial transcripts I was acutely conscious of a strange three-way disembodied exchange unfolding between me, my interlocutor and a precarious worker somewhere, who puzzled their way through accounts made less intelligible by speech affected by strokes, interjections from kin, the use of Aboriginal English, Pitjantjatjara and Australian colloquialisms. The recording and returning of stories was thus a process enmeshed in an exploitative global economy, however much I reject any analysis of the researcher-researched relation framed only in terms of exploitation.

13. These notions of gift exchange, reciprocity, and the reproduction of relationships are of course foundational to the discipline (Mauss 2002 [1950]).

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