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Evaluating the impacts of government policy through the long view of life history

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The research reported in this paper uses life history analyses of Indigenous entrepreneurs to address the following question: How do individuals engaged in entrepreneuring incorporate their experience of government policy into their self-narratives, and what affects are apparent on attitudes towards, and the objectives of, their entrepreneurial activity? Subsequently, the paper makes two contributions to conceptual debates within entrepreneurship and small business studies. Firstly, the paper shows the value of life history methodology narratives in providing insights into entrepreneuring processes *over time*, particularly in understanding how to evaluate the impact of enterprise animation policies. Secondly, the particular focus upon Indigenous entrepreneurs affords some purchase on recent debates relating to the purpose and potential of enterprise policies aimed at those defined as socially and economically excluded [Blackburn, R., and M. Ram. 2006. Fix of fixation? The contributions and limitations of entrepreneurship and small firms to combating social exclusion. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 18, no. 1: 73–89]. The paper's findings show that life history analysis has an important role to play in developing our understanding of entrepreneurship as a process. Moreover, evaluations of enterprise policy should pay more attention to temporally extensive impacts on individuals over their life course, and not limit evaluative efforts to programme specific factors.

Keywords: life history analysis and methodology; enterprise policy evaluation; social and economic exclusion; Indigenous entrepreneurs

Tim – '*The reality is there is . . . there's government all around*'.

1. Introduction

How do the activities of government imprint themselves on our lives? Policies experienced in ones childhood may be long defunct, superseded by policy reflecting new political ideologies and different social and economic exigencies, but their impact continues to shape and influence the behaviour, actions and self-definitions of adults. The successes, mistakes and unintended consequences of government policy, like spent nuclear fuel, have a half-life of influence. Building on this suggestion, the empirical research presented in this paper addresses the following question: How do individuals engaged in entrepreneuring incorporate their

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experience of government policy into their self-narratives, and what affects are apparent on attitudes towards, and the objectives of, their business activity?

For most the half-lives of long forgotten educational and employment schemes are opaque and diffuse. Thus, for the purposes of illustrating the broader conceptual potential of a life history self-narratives approach, the research reported in this paper amplifies the palimpsest of government actions and unintended consequences experienced by Australian Indigenous entrepreneurs. As the life histories discussed below demonstrate, government and policy looms large in the lives of Australian Indigenous peoples. Until the late twentieth century, Indigenous Australians did not have access to normal property, enfranchisement, employment and legal rights. They were the direct responsibility of government. Many books and films poignantly demonstrate the centrality of government action in shaping their historical (*Rabbit Proof Fence* 2002; Kinnane 2003) and contemporary plight (Hooper 2009; *Samson and Delilah* 2009). Academic accounts attempt explanation and remedy in terms of policy and governance (O'Malley 1996; Sutton 2001). And, though successive laws in the past 50 years (Table 1) have normalized their status, their lives continue to be disproportionately attached to and controlled by government decision-making, institutions, policies, programmes and initiatives (Sutton 2001), when compared to, white, mainstream Australians. This now occurs, paradoxically, through attempts to redress past injustice wrought by previous governments, in the form of welfare support and other targeted ameliorative activity, including enterprise support (Dockery and Milsom 2007; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009).

The paper makes two distinct contributions to recent debates. Firstly, the paper shows the value of life history narratives in providing insights into entrepreneuring processes *over time*. It thus responds to calls for more methodological and conceptual innovation to be brought into entrepreneurship which recognize that it as a processual, temporally extensive process (Jones and Wadhwani 2006). The narratives described in the analysis below show how policy shapes and mediates accounts of entrepreneurial behaviour. The effect is to see policy evaluated in an interpretive (Yanow 1996; Patton et al. 2003; Schwandt and Burgon 2006), more historical light; one that offers an alternative to more presentist evaluative frameworks (Greene 2009) that tend to focus on immediate economic growth/job creation criteria, programme additionality, or on internal programme efficiency and compliments economic evaluations which do adopt a historical perspective (Greene, Mole, and Storey 2004; Shane 2009).

Secondly, the particular focus upon Australian Indigenous entrepreneurs affords some purchase on debates relating to the purpose and potential of enterprise policies aimed at those defined as socially and economically excluded, marginal or disadvantaged (Greene, Mole, and Storey 2004; Blackburn and Ram 2006; Kitching 2006). Reflecting broader neo-liberal attitudes to the provision of welfare, many governments have sought to tilt Indigenous development policies towards self-responsibility and enterprise (Schaper 2007). The narratives described and analysed below connect contemporary Indigenous entrepreneurial behaviour to government initiatives designed to ameliorate disadvantage with the broader and temporally extensive half-lives of policy effects. The paper thus responds to calls for greater nuance when thinking about the socially and economically excluded and the potential for enterprise to ameliorate disadvantage (Blackburn and Ram 2006). The analysis shows that there are indeed no quick fixes, and that there are inherent tensions and paradoxes in policies aimed to facilitate greater autonomy and

Table 1. Policy timeline.

Dateline	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
	Control/assimilation/integration era		*Self-determination/passive welfare/community self-management/reconciliation*			*Shared responsibility model*
Broad Indigenous policy regimes/eras[2]	1951 'Assimilation' policy adopted 1962 Aboriginal people became eligible to vote 1965 'Integration' policy adopted 1967 Commonwealth Referendum grants citizenship and federal voting rights to include all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) Australians 1968 Enforcement of equal wages leads to end of pastoral co-existence and migration to towns 1969 laws enabling removal of Aboriginal children under the policy of 'protection' abolished		1972 'White Australia' policy officially abandoned, policy of self-determination and Department of Aboriginal Affairs established 1975 Racial Discrimination Act 1977 National Employment Strategy for Aboriginals introduced, Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme begins. Large rise in state support, social security/unemployment benefits and emergence of welfare dependency, programme proliferation 1984 End of various 'protection acts' which previously saw wages kept by States or employers 1987 Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) launched following 1985 'Miller Report', includes a range of enterprise programmes 1989 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) established 1990 ATSIC establish Commercial Development Corporation (CDC) 1994 *Working Nation* package introduced, programmes contracted to private suppliers, mutual obligation to accept work/training or lose benefits 1997 'Stolen Children' national enquiry report concludes that forcible removal of children was an act of genocide. 1999 Prime Minister John Howard passes a formal motion of reconciliation 1999 Indigenous Employment Policy implemented, replacing AEDP with more explicit emphasis on formal labour market, and incorporating a Indigenous Small Business Fund		2001 CDC renamed Indigenous Business Australia 2004 Shared Responsibility Agreements introduced in relation to particular projects or activities 2004 Shift away from 'self-determinism' and towards economic development and 'practical reconciliation' 2005 ATSIC is dismantled 2008 Australian Parliament apologizes to the Stolen Generations

independence from government (Blackburn and Ram 2006). Thus, whilst the Indigenous entrepreneurs described in this paper are successful, their narratives show a complex mix of legacies. What becomes apparent from analysis of the effects of past policies on the self-definitions in the present is that contemporary government activity will inevitably leave traces in the future too. As a consequence, those that seek to evaluate policy effects should be more willing to see policy recipients as narrative-building individuals who mediate the affect of policies through their biographies, rather than always reducing the experience of policy to a series of aggregated effects.

The paper is organized as follows. A literature review elaborates on the above themes and thereafter details of the research project and life history methodologies are discussed. The life history self-narratives of four Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs are then described and analysed, before concluding with a discussion of the implications for the two areas of debate.

2. Previous research

2.1. *Policy evaluation – Need for the long view*

In recent years, enterprise evaluation methodologies have grown increasingly sophisticated. The different evaluation 'steps' recently summarized by Greene (2009) seem to offer programme designers and enterprise evaluators a comprehensive tool kit. In general terms, a spectrum ranging from soft, mainly qualitative, to hard quantifiable measures, are now available (Greene 2009). Each has advantages and disadvantages, but in general, the evaluation objective is rarely focused beyond specific programmes or policies. Broader temporally extensive or historical assessments are uncommon. However, existing enterprise evaluation research does offer some conceptual insights to how a more historical frame of reference might be considered, particularly if considered within broader contexts of practice-based and interpretively orientated approaches to evaluation (Sanderson 2004; Schwandt and Burgon 2006).

Doubts have been expressed about the value of interpretive, qualitative-based evaluation approaches. Greene (2009) has suggested that such evaluation methods tend to produce more positive assessments of policies and programmes because they are often based on how happy recipients are, and fail to produce precise quantitatively derived measures. The knowledge generated is perceived as softer because the evaluation objective is predominantly focused on value for money in relation to net additionality of a range of economic values such as increased employment, income, venture survival and so on. However, at the soft end, work by Patton et al. (2003, 823) suggests that interpretive analysis and methodologies can bring insights to policy evaluation which 'place more emphasis upon the process by which policy is developed and implemented rather than focusing entirely upon outcomes'. This focus on process is reflected in Greene and Storey's (2004) study of the internal management processes of a UK enterprise support initiative. They imply that there are evaluative advantages to seeing new venture creation as a non-instantaneous and non-sequential process. Though for their purposes, the period of three years delimited the analytical focus. In interpretive enterprise evaluation research emphasis is placed on 'antecedent factors' that affect policy outcomes (Patton et al. 2003, 816). Research by Ram and Trehan (2010, 415) also stresses the benefits of an 'experiential approach to evaluation'. Even in these studies the frame

of reference is still focused on programme specific evaluation objectives. Others who have attempted to look in detail at the impact of initiatives at the local community level have concluded that it is impossible to demonstrate cause–end relationships in such programme evaluations (Hull and Hjern 1987). However, seeing the impact of policy through the framework of a life time, a viewpoint emphasized in this paper, means adopting an alternative understanding of evaluation.

There are of course harder, macro-economic evaluative analyses which take an historical perspective. Indeed, macro-economic measurement provides compelling evidence of the longer term effects of enterprise policy (Greene, Mole, and Storey 2004; van Stel and Storey 2004; Shane 2009). These analyses have shown that in aggregate terms policy to encourage enterprise has decidedly mixed results over the past 30 years or so. From the negative affect on overall business quality of excessive firm formation in some UK regions (Greene, Mole, and Storey 2004), to the negative affect on employment creation, especially in 'unenterprising' areas of the UK (van Stel and Storey 2004, 903), and to the underlying error of supporting entrepreneurial start-up in general rather than at targeted growth-orientation (Shane 2009), long-run economic analysis can illuminate the performance of enterprise policy. However, these analyses pointedly and necessarily reduce human experience of policy to a series of aggregated effects on quantifiable and universally applied human capital factors. They thus remain attached to instrumentally rationalistic and positivist/technicist approaches which necessarily omit more practical and pragmatic rationalities which have been shown to actually shape policy (Ram and Trehan 2010).

This approach to evaluation also means that the micro-sociological identity construction processes by which individuals internalize, make sense of and act in relation to the 'public narratives' (Somers 1994, 619, defines these as 'those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to inter-subjective networks or institutions') of policy over time are not incorporated. As a consequence, the contextual richness offered by an interpretive approach to understanding policy impacts, which sees policy making as 'a process of argumentation that emerges from dialogue, interpretation, experience and prevailing power structures' (Ram and Trehan 2010, 417), is left unexplored.

2.2. *The paradox of enterprise policy and social and economic inclusion*

One thrust of enterprise policy internationally is to encourage the socially and economically excluded and disadvantaged to start businesses and create self-employment opportunities as a means to reduce their dependency on state-supplied income. However, there is a paradox at the heart of this objective. Blackburn and Ram (2006, 77) have questioned 'whether business ownership can contribute significantly to overcoming the structural conditions that contribute to social exclusion'. Broader macro-economic policy aimed at enhancing international competitiveness and increased labour flexibility creates certain dynamic structural processes that influence the extent of under- and unemployment, and overall demand for the self-employed labour or new business entrants. Hence, Blackburn and Ram (2006, 77) argue that the

> competitiveness agenda and the social inclusion agenda are potentially at odds, the former aiming to stimulate enterprise and competitiveness, the latter to maintain social cohesion and encourage participation. Paradoxically, then, we are looking at the system

of regulated capitalism to solve a problem that it has generated. Business ownership and small employers both contribute to social exclusion, as well as inclusion.

Evidence for the advisability of promoting enterprise to tackle social and economic exclusion from macro-economic analyses is no less encouraging. Greene and his colleagues (2004, 1223) are clear in their interpretation of UK data and point to 'the difficulties, ineffectiveness and questionable ethics of stimulating "enterprise" amongst the "disadvantaged" and/or in less "entrepreneurial" areas'. A study of the link between firm birth and job creation confirms that there is also a slender relationship between government investment in term of employment outcomes, especially when enterprise 'birth-rate policies' are aimed at ameliorating economic disadvantage in '"unenterprising" areas' (van Stel and Storey 2004, 903). This research is focused geographically on UK regions, but the combined logic of the structural contradictions highlighted by Blackburn and Ram (2006) and the macro-economic analyses of Greene, Storey and colleagues are also pertinent to ethnically defined notions of disadvantage. Thus, according to these analyses it would seem that enterprise support for Indigenous Australians runs the danger of simply leading to a 'cycle of uncreative destruction' (Greene, Mole, and Storey 2004, 1209), with newly subsidized entrants displacing others supported through earlier schemes.

However, other, more micro-sociological research (Reveley and Down 2009) and the empirical analysis discussed below shows that policy effects are paradoxical, nuanced and temporally complex, and can nevertheless serve to ameliorate disadvantage. Focus on the life course through life history analyses and the manner in which individuals construct a coherent and viable identity in the face of structural disadvantage does not negate the overall contradiction at the heart of enterprise policy aimed at alleviating disadvantage. It does however, point to a deeper understanding of how those that have been 'mangled by life's forces' (Tierney 2003, 314) actually deal with the imprint of policy.

3. Method

Life history or life-story analysis (Bertaux and Kohli 1984; Plummer 2001; Bruner 2004) is defined as an 'account of a life based on interviews and observation' (cited in Tierney 2003, 295). The method is sometimes explicitly mentioned in surveys of qualitative methods in entrepreneurship (Hindle 2004, 584), has been used on occasion by entrepreneurship scholars (Kets de Vries 1977; Kupferberg 1998; Mallon and Cohen 2001; McKenzie 2006; Reveley and Down 2009), and sociologists of the petit bourgeoisie (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, 1997). When it is, attachments to specific technical procedures seem to vary, but the biographically oriented interview is a consistent feature.

The approach to life history adopted here is both pragmatic and naturalistic. This reflects in part the serendipitous emergence of the approach as a conceptual focus. The original research objective was to develop an understanding of the identity construction processes by which Indigenous Australians engage in entrepreneurial activity.[1] Respondents were asked to give an account of their lives *as* Indigenous entrepreneurs. In the specific cases discussed below life histories were nevertheless elicited. Similarly, prior to the research, there was no explicit focus on the respondents as recipients of policy measures or their experience with government.

Thus, the policy imprint I describe and analyse was not a specific research objective. Rather it emerged as part of the life narratives, unprompted.

What is meant by 'policy' in this context? Yanow (1996, 22) puts it this way: 'from an interpretive point of view, policies are not seen only as instrumentally rational, goal-oriented statements, but also as expressive statements. [...]'; 'acts which have meaning for individuals'. Accepting this, how does policy 'influence' (Bruner 2004, 694) and imprint itself onto a life narrative, and construct self-identity? The emphasis here, whilst recognizing that policies are part of the structural world which 'presents itself as an already constituted reality' (Jones 1983, 147), is on agents. This is because

> "experience" is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from [...] available social, public, and cultural narratives (Somers 1994, 614).

Thus, policies are not simply implemented to passive recipients, but are 'read' and interpreted (Yanow 1996, 24). The different forms of narrative that transforms meaning into identity may resemble some sort of soup, but they are particular and distinct. Self-narratives are however not reliable records of government activity. The policies experienced and narrated as 'stolen children' (forced removal of Indigenous children from families) were a complex mix of state and federal legitimating powers, even custom and practice (Bretherton and Mellor 2006; Schaper 2007). The interviewees do not necessarily know the names of policies. It is not specific policies that create 'experience', rather, it is the individual crafting of a self from available public narratives. Thus, for the purposes of the analysis below Table 1 illustrates the development of policy over the life course of the interviewees. The historical eras described in Table 1 have been retrospectively identified and recognized by policy and academic commentators (see sources cited in the table), reflecting key policy announcements and legislative changes. Although such periodization simplifies and understates continuities, it is derived from Sutton's (2001) authoritative historical synthesis which describes a gradual shift in Australian Government Indigenous policy from control to self-determination and the more recent emergence of a self-responsibility rhetoric, and a concomitant desire to move away from what Tim, one of the respondents, called the 'mess of the welfare mentality'.

We also need to have a clear idea about the sufficiency of the data. What can the life histories tell us? According to Bruner (2004, 694), it is the very instability of life stories that make them 'highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences. This susceptibility to influence may, in fact, be the reason why [...] interventions in a life may often have such profound effect in changing a person's life narrative'. Clearly policy and government can be counted as such 'interventions'.

If life narratives are 'unstable', in that the stories might not be deep or 'cover' (Bruner 2004, 693) the life in enough detail, how then can we be sure that a person's account is true and reliable. Objective veracity is not the issue here. As Jones (1983, 152, emphasis added) has it: 'when the research problem involves an investigation of the ways in which individuals *account for their actions*, the life history methodology offers itself as an appropriate technique'. The objective here is to historicize our view of the world. To this end, just four life history narratives are treated in some depth,

from the 14 originally interviewed for the project. These were selected because they are the most in-depth, open and lengthy accounts. Table 2 characterizes the interviewees. The four have also been selected because of their similar age (all in their late 30 s or 40 s) and experience of policy, to better illustrate the analytical power of the approach.

The data has been analysed in a naturalistic manner (Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 19), without the props of backdoor positivism that attempts to neutralize and objectivise, thereby misunderstanding the underlying humanism of interpretive enquiry. The interview data was re-read following its use for previous work (Reveley and Down 2009) and thematically re-coded, highlighting conversations and comments regarding the intersection of their life with government activity, past and present. Both views on, and experiences of government activity and policies were noted. Care has been taken to contextualize the accounts, and the themes emerge as important, not by tricks of numerical frequency or through arcane manipulation of texts, but because the individuals themselves highlight the events and episodes. They themselves have selectively appropriated the events and episodes of their experiences and emploted them into an ontological narrative (Somers 1994). In turn, reflecting what all scientific analysis must do, I have selectively appropriated their narratives to create a 'conceptual narrative' (Somers 1994, 620). Thus I do not attempt to deny, but rather, I explicitly embrace the influencing role of the researcher on the nature of the self-narratives. Self-narratives are not atomized accounts, to be analysed as if set in some neutralized and sterile aspic, but relational and co-produced accounts: interviewing is 'less a method for ascertaining the truth than a vehicle for producing it' (Down 2006, 123). It is the 'conceptual narrative' – 'the concepts and explanations that we construct as social researchers' (Somers 1994, 620) – that drives this paper's interest in the intersection between life history and policy.

This acknowledgement does not imply that life history analyses can only be used to illustrate strong conceptual narratives. There are other types of contributions such data might make: illuminating subjective features of empirically novel or less well-known phenomenon; exploring the subjective antecedent factors of, say, entrepreneurial intentions and uncovering subjective understandings of historical contexts, which might challenge received wisdom, are just a few of the possibilities. Neither is the conceptual strategy adopted here without its limitations: there is always the possibility of that the policy effect I describe might only be discernable in such extreme cases, a point I return to in the conclusion.

4. Empirical findings

The following analysis has been split into two sections. The first concentrates on the past. Specifically, this features Tim and Robert's childhood experience of having been taken into care. The second section draws upon the respondents' experiences of employment, most of which has been with public sector agencies, and how their current entrepreneurial activity intersects with government. The purpose is to address the question I posed earlier: How do individuals engaged in entrepreneuring incorporate their experience of government policy into their self-narratives, and what affects are apparent on attitudes towards, and the objectives of, their business activity?

Table 2. Interview sample and method details.

Interviewee	Age	Early years	Education/sport/ Indigenous activism	Work history	Type of business	Government support?	Where located	Form of interview
John	37	Indigenous family, including extended family	To degree level High-achiever in sport at school/young adult	Manual automotive/ building, food retail Training officer disability support organization. Public speaker, consultant	Employment education training, programme design/ workshops, Indigenous tour operator	Government contracts, consultation fees Some private	NSW region	Two separate long, in-depth and open. Project gatekeeper/ intermediary
Robert	43	'Stolen' child, place in care, family disrupted	To masters degree level (business), as mature student, first degree supported by Indigenous scholarship from government 'Excelled' at sport at school/young adult Aboriginal activist	Soil Conservation Service, clerical officer government employment and education services, community development. Aboriginal HR officer (senior) in state run transportation business, trainer	Training consultant/lecturing, cultural awareness training and web services company	Contracts to government agencies, education, IT, training and management consultant	NSW, Sydney	Long, in-depth and open
Tim	42	'Stolen' child, place in care, family disrupted	To degree level, as mature student Aboriginal activist	Department of Defence procurement Aboriginal cultural organization – publicist/ artist/web designer Periods of unemployment	National indigenous telecommunications – infrastructure, products and service to business IT and web-development – now defunct	Private – early stage, private investment. Corporate orientation	NSW region	Long, in-depth and open
Bruce	49	Family upbringing, 'Fringe dwellers', non-traditional	To degree level (business). Professional sport rugby league. Was volunteer board member/treasurer of Indigenous organizations	Automotive, butchers assistant, conservation. Public service/ Indigenous affairs/ child protection, employment and training, CDEP/business support	Nursery business, now sold on. Tourism operator, bus tours/ hire, hotel lobby shop selling retail Indigenous products/ art and crafts	None, fully private – no 'black money', from government departments	NSW region	Long, in-depth and open

4.1. *My 'stolen' life*

The intensely felt legacy of policy depicted in the narratives of the interviewees is most starkly illustrated by the reported effects of being a 'stolen child'. Two of the respondents, Robert and Tim, both in their early 40 s, wove this traumatic experience into their life histories, using it as a foundation story. Tragic and destabilizing, creating a fundamental loss of identity, this aspect of their life narratives is, as we shall see, mitigated through their emergence as self-sufficient, community-oriented entrepreneurs.

Tim is an ambitious and politically motivated entrepreneur: his is very definitely a business with emancipatory and community aims. After a number of false starts in different careers, including a spell working for a government defence procurement agency, and some small success with other ventures, including running his own internet design businesses, he had recently begun what he hopes will be 'Australia's first corporate Aboriginal company [. . .], providing telephone infrastructure, plus products and services to business'. From the start of the interview Tim was keen to put himself in context and offer a 'brief history of where I come from'. And, this, his story, emphatically and dramatically starts with his being 'part of the stolen generation. Which means I was taken away from my family [. . .]. I didn't get to meet them until I was about 27'. His early life as a ward of the state was all but enveloped by government agencies, living in a succession of foster, children's and boys' homes. He was precise about its affect: 'If you're part of the stolen generation it means, well, you're actually removed from the only identity that you possibly could have. So where do you fit?'

Robert grew up on a mission [Indigenous public housing] living what he describes as a 'semi traditional lifestyle', where he 'learned all about bush tucker [food]', subsisting with 'no essential services. We had no sewerage, no electricity, no water and so it was really surviving on the land in my very early years'. He too was removed from his family: 'my life was interrupted when I was about five and a half, we were living on [the] mission, [. . .] dad was out shearing and the Welfare came and took us away, so I'm a stolen generation'. A series of foster and boy's homes followed his 'vividly' remembered first four nights 'staying in the police cell' with the other 14 children taken that day. 'I didn't see my mother again 'til I was about 13 or 14 and it just had a whole impact on the whole family, but I always say I'm one of the lucky ones. Dad actually – that broke my mum and dad's marriage up and so I was a state ward then 'til I was 18 – but dad actually got us out of the home several years later [after Robert's abduction]'. His father was only able to take Robert back because he had remarried and was able to 'demonstrate [to the authorities] he was able to look after the kids'. His father died when he was 14 and Robert stayed in the house and 'looked after myself' with help from his friends and extended family. His older and younger baby brothers were also taken into care: he did not see his baby brother 'til he was 18 and he was totally screwed up, totally screwed up by the whole system. So he – he sort of disconnected himself from the family'.

Despite what Tim sees as a deeply 'traumatic time' – which through to his early 30 s included a period of drug and alcohol abuse – he is nevertheless aware of the paradox at the heart of the policies of assimilation he was subjected to: describing his early teenage years in various homes, he reflects that 'funnily enough, strangely enough, out of all that, I did my HSC [university entrance exam]'. Being 'stolen', being educated. Both were intentions of government policy, and are temporally

extensive; Tim carries them with him, narrative resources with which to build an identity. Robert too, is well aware of the double-edged nature of his sequestration from family. He's one of the 'lucky ones'; lucky in the sense of being one of the very few that was 'able to stay on and finish my school certificate, and the only thing that kept me at school was that I excelled in sports'. A succession of government agency jobs followed. First, in rural New South Wales working for a national government science agency, and then moving to Sydney, which he found quite daunting as a 'little black fella from the bush', initially living in a 'working man's hostel' with other young indigent Indigenous men. He began a traineeship with the Commonwealth Public Service, starting as a clerk before eventually becoming a vocational officer for the Employment Service helping other Indigenous people find work. Robert speaks warmly about his career, progressing 'through the ranks' as a public servant, and of the 'non Aboriginal people, who I still see as my mentors', and the 'wonderful people who I worked with [...]. I owe it all to those people today, of where I am today'. Both Robert and Tim, in different ways, recognize that the very policies that destroyed their families, and for Tim, his sense of Aboriginal identity, and much else besides, also provided an education and values that have provided employment and skills which facilitate their entrepreneuring.

It is hardly surprising that such profoundly disruptive government activity would have tentacle-like resonances for their self-definitions and motivations over their life course. Unsurprising then that both connect their experience of being stolen to their motivations to form and run businesses. The connection is not direct as in 'if I hadn't been stolen generation...'. Rather, perhaps, the event might be seen as analogous to the affect on entrepreneurship that some ascribe to an absent parent (Kets de Vries 1977). Robert and Tim's current narratives as entrepreneurs would be incomplete without their having been 'stolen generation'. But at the same time this experience has made them fundamentally incomplete. And, in some way their various endeavours – school, work, university, Indigenous activism, community work, entrepreneurship – might be interpreted as a search for completeness; narrative consolidation (Down 2006) or integration (Somers 1994).

For Tim, his experience of being stolen represents a 'loss of culture, it's the loss of community. And to understand that it's like – loss of community..., I identify as Aboriginal, but what does that really mean? [...] You're not in the white and you're not in the black: Somewhere in between'. During his twenties, Tim did a BA in Aboriginal Affairs at university, but felt the irony, saying 'I think it's sad you have to go to uni learn about your own culture'. It was not only him that was searching for something: 'Aboriginal people I met who went to uni [...], they were invariably there because they'd lost their identity'. He became involved in Indigenous activism, working variously as a publicist/artist/web designer for Indigenous cultural organizations. This connection to his culture comes right through to his current entrepreneuring: later we will see that Tim's business model explicitly links to an emancipatory and political logic that 'cut[s] government right out'. Tim's 'idea of the entrepreneur is very much community related', and his objective for his business is to rebuild his own sense of community, re-building the community itself: it is not simply his loss that he wants to repair, but all the stolen generation.

Unlike Tim, despite his separation from his parents, Robert 'got a very strong cultural education, from both my mother's and father's side, tribe. So I remember as a young, very young kid, my grandparents taught me to speak the tribal languages'.

He sees 'Aboriginal culture' as 'the kinship obligations of respect and obligations to family and which is really in total contrast to the idea of being in business [. . .]; your interests come last and the interests of your community and people come first'. His sense of loss is then less acute, yet his desire to redress disadvantage and build economic development for his people is still profound:

> we need Aboriginal business people out there, advising Indigenous people and government, teaching people and showing them how to do it [run businesses], you know, and that was probably a bit of a driving force you know to set out in my own business [. . .]. I'm really a social entrepreneur but I run my business, but in terms of giving back to the community.

4.2. *My entrepreneurial life; getting away from 'government' through enterprise*

Many Indigenous people now in their 40s and 50s were recipients of policies aimed at providing access to education and the labour market (see Table 1 for timeline). The individuals discussed here were also beneficiaries, but they express their experience of government-supported education and employment and its influence on their entrepreneurial activity in different ways, reflecting ambivalence about its affects. Government in this sense refers to the broad sweep of past education, employment and welfare policies, but also more recent enterprise support policies. How are these experiences incorporated into their narratives? And, with what affect on their entrepreneuring?

Tim is the most radical describing his early work career: 'We were tokenistic'. He sees himself as part of 'that generation of Aboriginal people who came through and was just employed for many years with government', and explains that there was 'a comfortability in knowing at least you have a job for so long, you couldn't be sacked'. The effect of increasing political awareness and identification with Aboriginality and increasing dissatisfaction with the succession of 'tokenistic' jobs was such that Tim faced a crisis that eventually led to his wanting to work for himself:

> it was just really a transition for me from "let's get a job" to all of a sudden an uncomfortability in not having control over the direction of my life and my career. And that was the big issue, and that – on top of life style issues – created a whole set of circumstances which were beyond my control which was really about not understanding the society that we live in. [. . .] I didn't know my worth. That was the most important thing I think as well, and that I could possibly, maybe . . . [the] concept of working for yourself [was] so foreign.

The imperative of escaping from government was a persistent theme throughout Tim's interview; for himself, his people and his business. Responding to a question about the point at which Tim felt that he had become an entrepreneur, he answered,

> When I gave up the dole. [. . .] if I want to own a business, well I can't continue getting the dole. [. . .] I actually got first cheque come through from a web site I built, and I then notified Department of Social Security that I – cut me off the dole. [. . .] it was the stupidest thing I ever done [both laugh]. I shouldn't have done it because I didn't have any work. It was just on this wonderful sheer gut feeling and wonderful – yeah it was just a wonderful feeling. Wow, I did something which wasn't related to government, which was from my own effort.

This antipathy also extends to the model for his business, which intends to provide business and IT services to Australian corporations

> because my fundamental belief [is] that Australian Aboriginal people need their own economy. The only way that that's going to be established is through small business. [. . .] you've got to just cut government right out. [. . .] the thing is I'm not working for government. I'm getting an income from service delivery. I'm developing a corporate company. [. . .]. It comes back to Aboriginal people and communities. [. . .] We need to develop. We need to establish a national Aboriginal economy. [We] need to manage this before the corporates or government steps in and says this is how it will be dealt with in "Aboriginal Australia". [. . .] we won't be told how to, [pause], we'll dictate how it will be.

Excelling in sports at school, Robert was given opportunities that others did not receive (Bruce, also benefited in this way, eventually playing professional rugby league): 'if you were good at sports you got that attention'. In his case, this favouritism led directly to a career with the public service and later a sponsored degree at university, from which he became the 'first Aboriginal person to graduate with a Bachelor of Business'. Despite finding university a 'different culture, and I found it daunting as well, particularly the language. I literally carried a dictionary with me in my pocket. I didn't know all these standard Australian English words', he eventually went on to get a Masters Degree in Industrial Relations, and became a manager of Aboriginal employment and later the equal opportunity manager for a NSW State agency.

Less commercially or politically ambitious than Tim, Robert's nevertheless solid and established businesses are also built around his Aboriginality and community activism, and combines culture-oriented consultancy, training, lecturing and the provision of education services to predominantly public sector clients, together with a web-based directory business. Robert is more ambivalent in his relationship with government, unsurprising given that the most of his contracts come from state or quasi-state agencies. Reflecting on why he moved out of public sector employment, he explained that it was a relatively simple shift as he was doing very similar things when he 'set up an Indigenous management consulting company to still do what I was doing: So all that Indigenous economic community stuff. But I was [previously] doing it as a public servant, but I'll still do that in my own private business and make a few dollars. You know, it really comes from that social entrepreneur point of view, working for my people'. Unlike Tim, he did not feel a great need to get away from government as such, but he did see a need to try to help his community in different ways and 'wasn't too happy with our economic development [and what] was happening for Aboriginal people broadly. [. . .] I thought well, gee you know, we need to change that and we need Aboriginal business people out there advising Indigenous people and government, teaching people and showing them how to do it, you know, and that was probably a bit of a driving force you know to set out in my own business'.

Bruce, who runs a modest, but successful Indigenous-themed bus tour/hire firm from the lobby of a large corporate hotel, also selling Aboriginal arts and craft, is more like Tim in his antipathy towards government. He grew up together with both parents and siblings in a non-traditional upbringing, describing his family as 'fringe dwellers. Basically we never really lived within the Aboriginal community. We lived on the edge of town, you know, within the white community'. His parents strove to maintain some distance from mission Indigenous communities: 'back then you sort

of..., you were sort of embarrassed to be a Koori [a traditional Indigenous ''people'' or ''country'']'. Bruce did well at school, and like Robert was encouraged and favoured because of his being good at sport. He did a number of jobs for a few years whilst playing professional rugby league before becoming a district officer with the child protection agency, and worked in other public sector agencies for 16 years.

Through his various experiences of working with Indigenous people (in state departments and in community organizations), most latterly in business start-up programmes, he gradually became disaffected, and has, as a result, distanced himself from his own Aboriginality and his community affiliations. Running his business has been a means to create autonomy and independence from both 'worlds'. He 'decided I'd never work for a community-based organization again. [...] I felt I wasn't going to run a programme for the sake of running a programme'. Speaking about his motivation to go into business and his cynicism about the efficacy of Indigenous business support, he said

> It just seemed to be a logical step for me, yeah, because I was getting – I become brain dead in the public sector. Sitting in an office, doing up programmes that were really – the money they were spending wasn't [...] going into the community. It was going in, within the infrastructure of the organization [...] their operational costs [...] that was eating up the bulk of the grant'. He joked: 'We've had that many pilot programmes run for Aboriginals. I think every Aboriginal in Australia should be a 767 pilot because they've had that much training in pilot programmes.

With his success in school, and on the sports field, for some Bruce felt that he had become an 'Uptown nigger. You're white. [...] but in saying that because you're achieving, a lot of people saw you, you know, as a bit of a role model. [...] I have a lot of respect within the community because of what I did with [rugby] football and those sorts of things and what I did with myself'. Robert too experienced this antipathy and ambivalence, such that when he lectures and trains people he can occasionally 'have a real hard time, not so much from the whites, [but] from their own community giving them a hard time. Because you're seen as a black, flash black fella, you know, [...] so we have to try and operate in two sorts of worlds'. John felt the same and said the best way to help Aboriginal communities was to be 'able to switch between the two cultures'. But it was getting harder: 'I'm losing the ability to communicate with them as effectively. [...] Because I'm no longer speaking their language if you like'. John was seen, despite his being a role model for many, as a 'bit of a snob' down on the 'mission'.

This being between two worlds illustrates the paradoxical nature of seeing enterprise as a route to ameliorate social and economic exclusion and disadvantage. The descriptions of their lives, work and entrepreneuring places them at the boundary of a contradiction. Derided by some in their Indigenous community and seen as role models by others, the actions and outlooks of these four entrepreneurs reflect political divisions in how best to ameliorate disadvantage, and shows that their success as individuals brings with it a potential for a different form of exclusion and marginalization (Blackburn and Ram 2006, 76). They are, as Tim said, 'somewhere in between'. This observation supports Blackburn and Ram's claim that the enterprise support as inclusion agenda serves 'to best affect those individuals who are on the cusp of social marginality rather than the most disadvantaged' (Blackburn and Ram 2006, 86). As Robert said they are the 'lucky ones'. 'Lucky', because compared to others – those left on the 'missions', those without natural educational

and sporting endowments, those without the government support – they have succeeded in leaving their disadvantage behind.

John, at 37, is the youngest and most empathically enterprise-oriented of the four. He was brought up on a mixed mainstream 'housing commission' estate (council/public housing): 'there was a two bedroom house which between six and ten of us lived in at any one time'. Like Bruce, he was detached from mission life and cobbled his Indigenous identity together from his childhood experiences of visiting his 'darker-skinned relos [relatives]' at the mission at weekends with his parents, and learning about his culture as an adult. Dropping out of school early, he eventually tired of manual work feeling that he 'could be using my brains here rather than be physically exerting myself': 'education was going to be the key' to his future. In between a succession of 'many jobs', starting university, giving up, then trying again, he eventually graduated with a degree in business studies, all the while helping support his family. Eventually, he found work with an organization which involved him speaking at Rotary Clubs about employing people with disabilities (his older brother is disabled). Slowly he built up a range of different sources of income from training, speaking and consulting on Indigenous and disability-related contracts with a range of public and some private clients.

Thus, of the four, his life history is not enveloped by government in the way Robert or Tim's has been: neither stolen generation nor a public servant. He stresses values that are 'common to all': 'Business will not discriminate. [...] Indigenous people have largely forgotten how to take responsibility for their actions due to government legislation over the past'. Yet John's career, like Robert's, and business is predominantly based on employment and enterprise training contracts, designing programmes and workshops for Indigenous people, through government and quasi-government agencies. Explaining his motivation to run his own business: 'I wanted to get out there by myself. I just wanted to do something on my own. I got tired for working for other people'. He wanted to prove that the 'successful Aboriginal people out there' were not just those who get 'government assistance', and 'Aboriginal people can do it for themselves as well'. He was also clear from the outset that he 'didn't want to work in the public service', and explained that 'the thing about government departments: I don't think you can be as creative as what you can – well you definitely can't be as creative as what you can be in your own business'.

John strives to define himself, like Tim, against government. The particular arc of his career has meant he can claim to be enterprising despite the government funding underpinning the dominant component of his multiple ventures. This reflects the 'radical shift' in 1998 'when the government moved to contract-out practically all employment services through a competitive contracting model' (Dockery and Milsom 2007, 17). John is able even to define regular employment as a form of business: At the time of the interview, John was about to start a new job as the 'executive director of a vocational college', which is independent but funded predominantly through public funds. I asked what this meant for his entrepreneurial outlook: 'to me it's just another business [...] and that's the way I'm approaching it, you know, something else that I've got to focus on as a business activity and developing it. So it's not a job'. Here, John's enterprising narrative extends so far it obliterates the reality of government involvement entirely.

We see then that Tim, Robert, Bruce and John each experience government in different ways and adopt different narrative strategies in relation to explaining their

entrepreneuring. All four have escaped from government, and have created private enterprises as vehicles to achieve this (in the case of Tim and Bruce), or in some way downplay continuing connections to government through embracing an extreme form of enterprise rhetoric (John). All remain committed to using their business success to help the Indigenous community, but differ in the extent to which this forms an objective of their business. Tim's business is the most politically driven in this sense, and Bruce's the most alienated, but even he recognizes and values his role model status. All told however, the imprint of government and policies are apparent in their entrepreneurial narratives, and affect the attitudes towards, and the objectives of, their business behaviour in the ways described.

5. Concluding discussion

I have shown how these individuals draw past events and episodes connected to government activity into their narratives, and shown some of the affects they have on their entrepreneuring. How, and for what, is this knowledge useful?

As set out in Section 1, there are two areas of debate that this analysis helps us with. The first elaborates a historically sensitive methodology to evaluating the broad sweep of governmental activity, as seen through 'expressions of social being and identity' (Somers 1994, 614): a form of micro-sociological and life-historical meta-analyses of governmental public narratives. The second uses this method to illustrate the 'complex nature of social exclusion' (Blackburn and Ram 2006, 85) and its relationship to enterprise.

5.1. *Life history analysis as evaluation*

Blackburn and Ram (2006, 81, emphasis added) argue that to achieve 'more precision in the effects of business ownership' on disadvantage and exclusion (*ibid.*) we need to think differently about what we measure: 'it is the *process* of running a business and the effects on individuals' aspirations and identifications which should be measured rather than the business outcome'. This is an inherently temporally extensive framing, and the analysis here has shown the affects of running businesses on the respondents' 'aspirations and identifications'. It is not only the business and material success that is important to Bruce, Robert and the others. For them, success is also having an independent identity, separate from government. Their entrepreneuring provides this. Life history analysis can provide a means by which to demonstrate these more intangible, contextualized, but not insignificant benefits in ameliorating disadvantage.

Again we should ask: what is this government and policy that the respondents speak of? Rather than dismissing their vague narratives because the policy initiatives are not specified and measurable, we should understand what is being done in terms of their 'identifications'. Government is being used as a thematic framing device. According to Somers (1994), ontological narratives are emploted through the selective appropriation of events and experiences into episodes. John, Tim and the others select stories to create their narratives, but it is done over time to some organized and thematic purpose. This thematic ordering is done within the context of 'an evaluative framework' shaped by a 'set of fundamental principles and values' (Somers 1994, 617). For the respondents in this study, these values and principles are

set in part *against* public narratives of government: in this way they construct a positive and sustaining self. The point here is to see life history, and the manner in which individuals build self-narratives over time, as a means by which to access the affects of structural activity embodied in government policy on individuals. Fundamentally, this is the case because 'Narrativity demands that we discern the meaning of any single event only in temporal and spatial relationship to other events' (Somers 1994, 616). That is, to fully appreciate the impact of policy we need to place individual events and experience within *emploted* narrative contexts, not simply, as much other policy evaluation research does, by addressing single event/experience responses to categories such as business outcome, job creation and so forth. In so doing, we gain access to an alternative means by which to understand and evaluate the impact of policy.

5.2. *Enterprise policy and social inclusion*

At first sight, the evidence presented here would seem to go against Blackburn and Ram's (2006, 85) scepticism of enterprise as a means of 'salvation'. However, the main thrust of their work was to call for more nuance and sophistication. The evidence here fully supports this need by showing the devil in the detail of the respondents' success. Yes, Tim, Robert, Bruce and John are being successful, and are indeed role models in their communities, demonstrating the potential of enterprise to ameliorate disadvantage. However, the evidence also shows the individual and community tensions that success has brought, and the complex range of government activity that has contributed to producing such individual outcomes. The implication is that the human and social capital endowments required for success are not created overnight. Beyond luck, talent and personal perseverance, the individuals have these endowments because of a complex mélange of 'antecedent factors' (Patton et al. 2003, 816), including policy measures and instruments that stretch over four decades.

To achieve their success, they skilfully bridged and operated within two worlds. These worlds are not static, and different public narratives have emerged and then dissipated, playing a role in shaping their lives. Governmental public narratives have shifted away from statism and corporatism towards privatization and devolved control. And, within the sphere of Indigenous policy there has been an analogous shift from a public narrative of self-determination and welfarism, to one of self-responsibility and enterprise-based economic development within mainstream society. Thus, Tim and the others' narratives reflect these changing public narratives as well as the more tangible opportunities provided by privatization and sub-contracting out of government-funded education and employment services. Future changes in governmental public narratives, and actual policies, might see them having to build other events and episodes into their life histories.

There are of course limitations to the analysis presented here. Firstly, there might be difficulties in surfacing such influences where individual entrepreneurs have not suffered such profoundly destabilizing government activity. But this is an empirical and methodological challenge, not something that undermines the logic or utility of the approach. Secondly, life histories are told from a particular point in time. Despite the tendency for personal narratives to be framed by consistent 'fundamental principles and values' (Somers 1994, 617), there is plasticity in how individuals respond to events and emplot their narratives. Thus, successive life history interviews

over the life course would be needed to go beyond the palimpsest-like retrospectives provided here. This would not imply any greater access to any essential true self; however, only a better grasp of how individuals' twist and turn their narratives of aspiration and identification in response to social and economic change. We would only be able to see if John played down his identification as an entrepreneur or softened his anti-government rhetoric, following his recent employment as a director of a college, if we were to get another life history account. Thirdly, because life history analysis focuses on the accounts people give (the meaning they ascribe to interactions with things and others) rather than actual behaviour, there are limitations to how conclusions can be drawn. Situating the analysis in the interpretivist and social constructionist paradigm means that issues of cause and effect are the wrong sort of relationships to look for. I have suggested that it is the meaning that these individuals ascribe to government activity that affects their actions. This is not the same as the policy causing an effect; changed behaviour. This limits the power of life history analysis in a world where crude but certain generalities are favoured in terms of policy making and evaluation. I have shown however that analyses that take the interpretations of individuals seriously should have a place.

In what way is the knowledge generated through this analysis useful? Too often government activity is analysed and evaluated as if it were discrete and hermetic, set apart from the messy reality of everyday life. We get wrapped up in the rationalistic illusion of tidiness and purity that positivist methods create and forget that competing interests, contradictory philosophical starting points, incongruous operational expectations and the helter-skelter of politics itself cannot but create imperfect, contradictory and messy policies. Add to this the temporally extensive nature of governmental activity with its Go, let-all-move-in-this-direction-for-a-while, Stop, now-this, character, it is no surprise that Blackburn and Ram recognized the deeply oxymoronic nature of policies seeking to use enterprise as a means to dissipate social and economic exclusion. A life history approach changes our viewpoint and directs a telescope to access the dim and long-travelled light of the past, rather than a microscope on the bright, forensically examined present. Both tools are useful, we currently use the latter much more than the former.

What are the broader implications of this way of looking? As my application of Blackburn and Ram's general discussion of social and economic exclusion and disadvantage suggests, one application of life history analysis is in developing greater understanding of other spheres of disadvantage. In entrepreneurship research more generally too, life history analyses and process-based theory can provide access to less essentialist, more fluid understanding of entrepreneuring: something that someone *does*, as opposed to something that a person *is*. If Hindle (2004, 577) is correct, and more quality qualitative research is needed, then surely life history analyses needs to be part of the suite of techniques. Indeed, if one accepts the need for a process-based understanding of entrepreneuring, with its attendant focus on ontological dynamism and temporality, then it is difficult to avoid empirical and methodological strategies that do not address the life course. More practically too, policy-makers and the researchers and consultants they employ should take the full range of antecedent factors seriously, and include broader notions of efficacy over a time period that really matters – a life time.

This exhortation is of course part of a ongoing scholarly process within the study of entrepreneurship as an applied policy-relevant discipline, which still needs 'new

conceptual, empirical and practical elaborations' (Steyaert and Katz 2004, 193). Our research needs to do more to capture and dramatize the human costs and benefits of government activity. This should be a critically oriented exercise, but need not be exclusively the province of practically removed academic rumination. Government officials and ministers who literally give voice to public narratives need expressive stories about ordinary success and failure. This paper has shown that 'stories guide action' (Somers 1994, 614), and at a time when society is troubled, political narratives that expressively connect to the experience, emotion and feelings of individuals who have lived lives, will be those stories that mobilize and energize. Because policy narratives which rely on static evaluations of policy frame the impact to fit what is measurable, not what is impacted, the resulting policy story does not always connect.

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Notes

1. The research was funded in 2003 with a grant from the University of Wollongong, Australia, and was approved by its ethics committee. There are, of course, important sensitivities to consider when researching Indigenous people (Smith 1999; Schaper 2007; Reveley and Down 2009). Hence, the research was organized through a local intermediary in the NSW urban region (who was also an interviewee, and one of the four discussed in detail below) and through a well-respected non-Indigenous manager of an enterprise agency specifically aimed at supporting Indigenous entrepreneurship, based in Brisbane, Queensland.
2. These details have been taken from Sutton (2001), Dockery and Milsom (2007), Altman and Sanders (1995), and the following websites: http://pals.dia.wa.gov.au/en/Resources/Timeline/, http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/aboriginal-history-timeline-late-20th.html, http://www.aboriginaleducation.sa.edu.au/files/links/Timeline_of_legislation_af.pdf.

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