

WORKING PAPER SERIES

No. 2026-28

October 2026

Bringing Back Care

Reflections from a reciprocity research project

Laura Simpson Reeves

Sally Wright

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence
for Children and Families over the Life Course

Phone +61 7 3346 7477 Email lcc@uq.edu.au

lifecoursecentre.org.au



Australian Government
Australian Research Council



THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN
AUSTRALIA



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Research Summary

Why was the research done?

Reciprocity in research is widely discussed yet remains difficult to enact in practice. Although the field has shifted from viewing the researcher as an objective, detached observer toward recognising research as a co-constructed process, many researchers still tend to keep their personal lives and experiences at a distance. At the same time, growing expectations of reciprocity within consumer-engaged inquiry have left some researchers feeling uneasy about approaches that seem extractive or one-sided. This paper forms part of a broader project that seeks to explore how researchers who work across consumer-engaged, participatory, and co-design approaches interpret reciprocity, what works well, and where there are opportunities for learning. It reflects on the initial stages of the project, from inception to implementation.

What were the key findings?

Drawing on our critical reflections during this period, we argue that reciprocity is more than paying people for their time. Given the systemic and individual barriers to participation, reciprocal practice requires recognising the shifting dynamics of relationships, the non-linear nature of knowledge production, and equal value of multiple forms of expertise.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

Meaningful consumer-engaged research requires more than good intentions and appropriate payment. While people must be paid appropriately for their time, reducing their value to a dollar figure fails to recognise the importance of relationships in creating rigorous, credible, and ethical evidence. Project and funding timeframes must allow for the non-linear, iterative nature of reciprocal practice, including the time to build relationships, revisit decisions, and respond to the changing circumstances of partners.

Citation

Simpson Reeves, L., & Wright, S. (2026). 'Bringing Back Care: Reflections from a reciprocity research project', Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, 2026-28. Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland.

Please note that both authors are considered joint first author.

The Authors

Dr Laura Simpson Reeves

The University of Queensland

Email: laura.simpsonreeves@uq.edu.au

Sally Wright

Life Course Centre

Email: mimikhor@gmail.com

Acknowledgements/Funding Sources

This research was fully supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (Project ID CE200100025). The authors would like to thank the Capacity Building Portfolio for the Early Career Researcher seed funding grant that supported this research project and the Knowledge Translation Portfolio for funding the masterclass.

DISCLAIMER: The content of this Working Paper does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Life Course Centre. Responsibility for any information and views expressed in this Working Paper lies entirely with the author(s).

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and live across Australia.
We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise their continued connections
to land, sea and community.

Initial musings

The idea for a research project on reciprocity in research emerged from a late evening conversation with other early career researchers over ramen and beer. It was something that had been tapping away in the back of Laura's mind for years, like a background dancer desperately trying to push their way through to the spotlight. The dancer—let's call her Rhonda—was growing increasingly frustrated by claims that researchers chose topics solely based on a 'gap in the literature',^{1,2} with rare acknowledgment of the experiences, passions, and interactions that may have also contributed to seeking out that gap.^{3,4} Rhonda was also exasperated that the discourse around lived/living experience was being coopted as a buzzword and was aching for a more nuanced debate about what this shift meant for research and the people who do it.^{5,6} Slowly inching out of the shadows, Rhonda helped secure a small pot of funds which, with the support of those around her, allowed her to step into the penumbra.ⁱ There she glimpsed another curious form, Sally, who had also been tentatively stepping out of the recesses towards the spotlight. This paper shares some of the thoughts, notes, and reflections that surfaced as these two philomathsⁱⁱ set out to explore new waters.ⁱⁱⁱ

Glimpsing the sea

I caught up today with a group of people who were part of the [a different] project. One of the women shared that she had to go back to work when she was in her 70s after losing all over her savings to bail out her only son.

Sally

We were both born in the 1950s and so had been raised with the belief that one should “work hard, save money, and smell the roses when you retire”. She was that devastated, her health started to spiral, and she had to seek help for her mental state. It took her many years to pick herself up again and asked for her old job back.

I related to her because that's what happened to me.

~ * ~

Laura

I met Sally almost a year ago on the lands of the Whadjuk Nyoongar people (Perth). I was attending a two-day workshop for early career researchers with the Life Course Centre, and Sally had joined a panel on community engagement in research as a committee member of the Life Course Centre Community Advisory Committee.^{iv} It was a wonderful discussion that continued over lunch, where Sally shared that she was new to the world of research and was always eager to learn. She generously shared her mobile number with me so that we could continue the conversation.

On the afternoon of the second day, attendees were given the opportunity to 'pitch' a research idea for some seed funding. I had been thinking a lot about what it meant to truly involve 'consumers' in research, and to what extent researchers embraced the impact of their lived experience in their everyday work. I threw this idea out to the group on a whim, seeing this an opportunity to further debate this idea. We were fortunate to be successful in our funding application, creating opportunities to build my capacity in leading a research project, and Sally's capacity in doing research.

~ * ~

I want to be a valuable research assistant and I'm learning as I go along.

Sally

Dipping our toes

Laura

The process of hiring Sally as a research assistant took several months. There were numerous systems to navigate, forms to sign, documentation to provide. This was also a busy work period where I had taken some leave, was travelling internationally, and in the process of wrapping up a few major projects. This small project, despite best intentions, ended up being pushed down the priority list.

~ * ~

To be honest, I was starting to think this was not a good idea. There seemed to be too much pressure. My son and grandson helped me a lot, but I still got stuck.

Sally

~ * ~

Laura

By early May we had finally managed to get Sally on board as a research assistant and was able to start moving forward with the project. I shared some bits and pieces that explained the research process, drawn from materials I had used when teaching as well as excerpts I had found useful when I first started down this path.

~ * ~

Wow that's a lot to read. It's good cos I can pick and choose and take my time to read it. I will definitely jot down what I find that interests me and what I'm unsure of, so I can check.

Sally

Your keen student.

~ * ~

Laura

We chatted about once a fortnight, with Sally sharing her thoughts on what she had read, asking questions, sharing more about her life and experiences. Being on the opposite side of Australia meant that we were unable to catch up face-to-face. The distance cast a long shadow; trust, already a delicate thing to grow, needed to stretch across the map.

~ * ~

Love love love the papers that you sent. They're so easy to read. I'm getting a much better understanding about the research. I'm highlighting and jotting down notes of my own thoughts as I go along. I am finally getting the hang of it!

Sally

~ * ~

Laura

I pulled out some old handouts, lecture notes, and other bits and pieces that I had found helpful when I first stepped into the world of research. I printed these and sent them to Sally via post, so she could highlight and scribble as much as her heart desired.

~ * ~

I like the idea of a semi-structured interview. It starts with key questions, (sometimes) shared with the interviewee, so everyone knows what the subject is. There is prep work on both sides and the rest can flow – once both parties get comfortable, there's trust.

Sally

Share what you can relate to. Give assurances, however, be honest. Respect boundaries.

For trust to grow, there needs to be consistency. Follow up.

Synchronising our swimming

Laura

In mid-2026, the Life Course Centre organised a two-day masterclass on co-design on Gadigal Country (Sydney). Members of the Life Course Centre were invited to submit expressions of interest to attend, and successful applicants were funded to bring a community partner.

Sally accepted the invitation and we spent two days learning together.

~ * ~

Community support is so powerful. It warms the heart and heals the soul.

Sally

That's my belief.

~ * ~

Laura

The masterclass created the conditions for the relationship between me and Sally to settle into one of comfort and trust.

Working alongside each other through that shared experience gave us the space to become familiar with each other. That familiarity has translated into an easy rapport, one where we could be candid with each other. It's a foundation I've come to value, and one that continues to shape how we collaborate.

~ * ~



Photo credit: Heidi Minchin, June 2026

~ * ~

I love the word “care”, because isn’t it what everyone needs at some point in their lives? English is not my first language, so I searched online to see if I could find a specific definition for the term. Google told me that it is a provision for what is needed for health and wellbeing. It’s protection of a person or thing. It’s attention and mental concern. It’s also a noun and a verb.

Sally

~ * ~

Laura

Upon returning to our respective homes, we began to work on the research project itself. An initial search identified numerous guidelines to support researchers who were wanting to engage those with lived/living experience in their research, as well as tools for those with lived/living experience who want to become involved in research.

What seemed to be missing was guidance for those researchers who were undertaking research in the areas in which they themselves have lived/living experience.

We found six examples of guidelines and tools that focused on supported lived/living experience researchers, although more targeted towards those with /lived/lived experiences wishing to become more involved in research.⁷⁻¹²

Sally spent some time reviewing these to pull out any parts she found useful as someone with lived experience moving into research, or if there were parts that are totally inaccessible to her.

~ * ~

What I like about what I have read is the fact that it is simple to understand, easy to follow and relate to. The examples from other people's experiences are brilliant because it tells me that I am not alone in all this and that it is ok to talk about it.

Sally

Pictures and photos are equally important as they show truth in what is written.^v

There's also a lot of validity in the requirements for the job function. I feel much more at ease after reading about it. Sometimes when one's self esteem is low, one can be the worse critic. Reading about how normal it is to feel unsure brings such relief.

Navigating rough seas

Laura

I received a message from Sally late one afternoon, asking if she could please give me a call. She had received a letter from Centrelink about mandatory reporting of income. Jumping back into the workforce after being retired for more than a decade had created complications around her pension and other benefits.

She shared with me that she had felt increased stress around this and tasks relating to the project. We discussed it and agreed that her health and wellbeing was much more important than the research, and she could take a step back for as long as she wanted.

~ * ~

Years ago, I was told there's a difference between 'Care For' and 'Care About'. My own experiences at that time made me feel like I was always caring for my family and meeting their demands, feeling guilty if I don't fulfil them, even though it was draining me empty.

I had to learn the difference and switch to Caring About, showing care without having to fix their problems or feel guilty for not doing so. It took numerous attempts before it became effective and I was finally able to find balance. Ultimately, showing care bridges the gap.

Sally

~ * ~

Laura

The following week, I received a message from Sally asking me to call when I had a minute. "I've got news and I'm excited to let you know", she wrote.

When I returned her call, I was thrilled to hear that she had been thinking it over and decided she would still like to be involved in the project. We discussed how this should be enjoyable rather than distressing, and we agreed to proceed with care.

~ * ~

But how do we bring care into the system? How do we educate, unite and mobilise a disengaged but caring community? How do you bring about a compassionate government?

Sally

When the leaders start to show care, act on it, the people will coattail. We all want a caring economy. We want a society to celebrate values, one that is strong and civil.

Kind acts can be practiced. It's giving one's time, one's willingness to do good, and it's a win/win situation.

Connection matters. Community connection can be small at first.

Seeing the manatees

Laura

Manatees¹³ drift through warm shallow water with a kind of unhurried grace. They move slowly, never rushing, never grasping; gentle giants who seem to take up space without ever crowding anything out. Despite their bulk, they are famously docile, nuzzling up to others with what looks like genuine affection. Perhaps this is how they became a quiet symbol of kindness: creatures who are enormous but never intimidating, powerful but never aggressive, content simply to float, graze, and be gentle with the world around them.

~ * ~



Photo credit: Robin Teng via Unsplash

~ * ~

Story telling belongs to humanity. To be human is to have a story. To be human is to be a story.

Sally

We all have stories to tell and they are our stories; we are the owner of our stories. It's our truth and, most of the time, emotions can sneak up on us. There is risk taking, vulnerability, reflecting, transformation, discomfort, the fear of being judge, and the desire to be heard.

We tell stories of ourselves, and of others. We tell stories of our past, our struggles, our pains, and our victories. Some of it we tell over and over again, and others we prefer to forget. Our lives change, and the way we arrange the elements of our stories change.

~ * ~

Laura

I feel pressure often. Pressure to succeed. Pressure to support. Pressure to strive. Pressure to survive. Pressure to prove I belong. Pressure to play the (academic) game.¹⁴ Rarely do I feel pressure to practice all that I preach. I am learning to embody what I advocate for others to do. I am learning to taking the time for rest, for reflection, for recovery. I am learning to acknowledge all that came before, and not fear how it shapes what is to come.

~ * ~

As I grow older, I start to notice things that have happened to me, where previously I didn't think much of them. The things that I used to place as important seem to be the least in my mind. Each of us has our own story, uniquely profound. Collectively, our stories can form a mighty river that flows with a progressive force for social change which will be unstoppable.

Sally

Sharing stories is sharing me. I'm wanting to make connection, and to make a difference. But stories told from our lived experience are not a competition. We tell our stories to heal, not to fix.

Concluding reflections

Rhonda is still dancing away, more ballet than tap these days. The gentle patter reminds Laura to pause and reflect. Research approaches that appear extractive or one-sided are no longer acceptable.^{15,16} Knowledge production is not timebound. It is not linear. Rather, it is a dynamic process.¹⁷ It requires researchers to sit with the silence, with the discomfort, with the imponderabilia^{vi}. Reciprocity in research requires the same.

Notes

ⁱ A *penumbra* is the partially shaded outer region of a shadow, where the light source is only partly blocked. It sits between the umbra (the fully dark, central part of the shadow) and the fully lit area.

ⁱⁱ A *philomath* is someone who loves learning.

ⁱⁱⁱ These reflections are not in chronological order. They have been shifted and sliced to (hopefully) present the journey and process that we have gone through over the past year.

^{iv} The Life Course Centre established a national Community Advisory Committee in 2023 to provide strategic level advice and ensure community perspectives were present in Centre research activities.

^v This reflection is the primary reason we chose to include an image in this manuscript.

^{vi} *Imponderabilia* refers to the parts of everyday life that are difficult to define, intangible and immeasurable, yet have significant influence.

References

1. Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., Williams, J. M., Bizup, J. & FitzGerald, W. T. *The Craft of Research*. (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2024).
2. Wald, N., Harland, T. & Daskon, C. The gap statement and justification in higher education research: an analysis of published articles. *Eur. J. High. Educ.* 14, 308–323 (2024).
3. Dickson-Swift, V., James, E. L., Kippen, S. & Liamputtong, P. Researching sensitive topics: qualitative research as emotion work. *Qual. Res.* 9, 61–79 (2009).
4. Sperling, D. “Could You Help Me Die?”: On the Ethics of Researcher-Participant Relationship and the Limitations of Qualitative Research. *Int. J. Qual. Methods* 21, 16094069221105076 (2022).
5. Casey, P. J. Lived experience: defined and critiqued. *Crit. Horiz.* 24, 282–297 (2023).
6. Penney, D. & Prescott, L. The co-optation of survivor knowledge: the danger of substituted values and voice. in *Searching for a Rose Garden: Challenging Psychiatry, Fostering Mad Studies* (eds Russo, J. & Sweeney, A.) 35–45 (PCCS Books, 2016).
7. Lived Experience Australia & Community Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol Research Network. *Safe research partnership with people with lived experience – a reflective guide*.
8. Dementia Centre for Research Collaboration. *Becoming involved in research: a guide for people living with dementia, their care partners and family members*.
9. Dementia Centre for Research Collaboration. *A guide to reviewing research grant applications*.
10. SUCCEED Peer Researchers. *A basic guide for people with lived experience to get involved in research*. (2024).
11. NSW Regional Health Partners. *Questions for consumers, carers and communities to decide whether and how to take part in research*. (2024).
12. Webb, M. et al. Guidelines for involving young people with lived and living experience of suicide in suicide research. (2023).
13. Waldman, A. *Manatee/Humanity*. (Penguin Books, New York, 2009).
14. Barrington, D. Playing the academic game. *The Research Whisperer* <https://researchwhisperer.org/2017/05/16/playing-the-academic-game/> (2017).
15. Bell, K. The ‘problem’ of undesigned relationality: Ethnographic fieldwork, dual roles and research ethics. *Ethnography* 20, 8–26 (2019).
16. Oliver, K., Kothari, A. & Mays, N. The dark side of coproduction: do the costs outweigh the benefits for health research? *Health Res. Policy Syst.* 17, 33 (2019).
17. Gibbons, M. et al. *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*. (SAGE Publications, 1994).