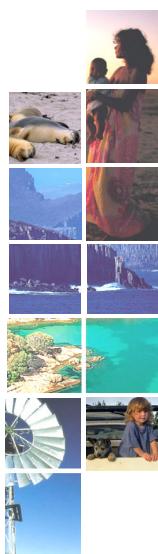


# Applying a grief model to working with pastoralists

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes that many pastoralists are living in a context dominated by the experience of loss. The concept of loss and the resulting grief is not just applicable to those exiting the industry but also applies to those still “hanging on” to their family property. Loss was the primary theme found in this study and included the loss of power, social standing, financial stability, traditions, identities, political influence, family relationships, and the beliefs upon which their identities were based. A secondary theme was that of threat – the threat of foreclosure, further financial demise, social stigma, poorer self-perception and most centrally – loss of control. The participants and literature identified the factors contributing to these experiences of loss as originating from both policy and grass roots levels. Approaches, whether in policy development or direct service delivery, that recognise this context of loss are likely to be more respectful and therefore accessible and appropriate to the needs of pastoralists.



## THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the social marginalisation of pastoralists and how this may impact upon their responses to imposed change. In-depth semi-structured interviews, as defined by Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander (1995), were carried out with ten pastoralist families, with seventeen participants in total. All were involved in either wool and/or beef production. The research was limited to grazing enterprises firstly in an effort to contain the vast array of issues impacting upon the primary producers and secondly because grazing is the main form of primary production in the South West area of Queensland. Participants were selected from across the Murweh, Quilpie, Bulloo, Paroo and Barcoo shires in South West Queensland using a purposive stratified sampling technique. This technique was deemed suitable because statistical generalisation was not required (Neuman, 1997). Naturalistic generalisation as defined by Stake (2000) is possible from case study research such as this.

The interviews were carried out primarily on-property with a mixture of individual, couple and extended family groupings. All participants were in an owner-manager situation, with one couple having recently left their property. Ten males and seven females participated, with ages ranging from forty years to seventy years. Data was collected via audio tape recording and transcribed into text. Participants reviewed their transcripts to ensure accuracy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Contact was made with participants during analysis for the purpose of clarification and concept development



and a final draft of the findings was sent to all participants so they could ensure that the meaning of their words had not been lost or misused.

## BACKGROUND

### The context of loss

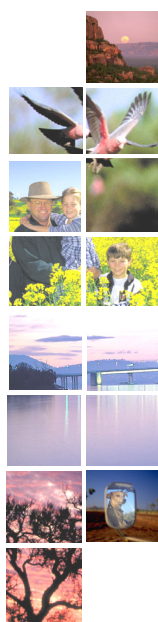
Until the last few decades, pastoralists enjoyed the privileged position of being essential to the nation's economy. Pastoralists and other land-holders held this considerable power due to their "...control of resources; the dependence of the community upon their economic activity; from the status accorded to them; and the strength of the rural ideology" (Alston, 1997, p. 105). The protectionist economic policies of the nation looked after their interests and they were well supported during times of difficulty (Sorensen and Epps, 1993). This changed with the shift to economic rationalism. The choice of governments to pursue an economic policy so damaging to pastoralists has been seen by many of them as a betrayal. Sher and Sher (1994, p. 19) state:

Suddenly, they have to cope with the unprecedented economic hardship, and the psychological pain, that accompanies the realisation that they have been left out in the cold. Mouse plagues, droughts, price collapses, Mabo related scares and unfair foreign competition are only insults compared with the underlying injury of this decoupling [of the fate of the industry from that of the traditional producer].

Economic rationalism is considered by some to be a problem to the rural sector as it discriminates against the traditional family farmer (Lloyd and Malcom, 1997). To prepare for entering the global economy, Australia chose, among other measures, to orchestrate high interest rates in the 1980s. This orchestration of high interest rates is considered by Gray, Lawrence and Dunn (1993) to be the primary contributor to the economic rural crisis.

As environmental beliefs and practices have changed, the land management practices of pastoralists and other farmers have come under closer public scrutiny. Participants reported that the messages accompanying the changes in environmental policy are often devaluing, such as the assumption that pastoralists would intentionally damage their land. Many participants expressed frustration that the previous policies of soldier settlement and closer settlement were not being recognised by the public for their major contribution to environmental degradation. At a time when pastoralists appear to be untrusting of government policies there has been a rush of difficult and sometimes costly required changes in land management. One participant commented that change had chosen them, not the other way round and that this was a frightening experience.

Participants recognised that their established image based on previous wealth and extravagance, and perceived environmental exploitation, was not one that engendered public support for their plight. This perceived lack of public support and understanding contributes to a feeling of not being valued and of isolation. The decline in political influence that resulted from reduced numbers, economic contribution, social status (Daniel, 1983), public support and financial capacity to participate in the community is experienced as further evidence of devaluation.



## Applying theories of grief

The experience of loss involved in leaving the farm has been recognised elsewhere (Ginnivan and Lees, 1993; Read, 1996). It is the losses involved in staying that seem to have been overlooked. An inventory of the losses being experienced could include, but is not limited to: loss of social networks, social standing, traditions (such as handing down the family farm), political influence, self-image, hopes, dreams and aspirations, lifestyle, economic power, business stability, preferred family structure and functioning, relationships and a sense of control. Of equal importance is threat of loss. Loss of property, home, income, identity and a further diminishing of all of the above.

A forty year old male participant remarked:

...they're relying on the weather and markets to start decreasing the debt and if that doesn't happen your self-esteem must go to the pack and I'll be honest if you listen to the ABC all day everyday – the country hour and all that – you'd go outside and shoot yourself. It's so depressing. Especially with the wool market and that sort of thing. I see it in my mother sometimes. She sits there and sews and listens to the radio... basically that's all they've got to live for – their cattle and wool

Another participant spoke of the loss of dreams, traditions:

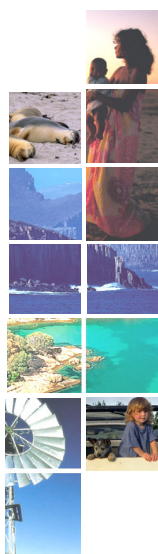
The idea was that the two boys would live here together. We bought another place further west and we thought with the two of them, cattle and wool, we thought it would be a living for our two and that one would live here in this house. But I don't think that'll ever happen now, and so I think to myself when I'm sweeping out each day, what am I doing this for – it'll probably just fall to pieces when I go.

Grief theory can be applied to any experience of loss, not just death (Raphael, 1983). Grainger states, "...that every experience of radical change involves a symbolic kind of dying..." (1998, p. 13). As one participant noted, we have seen the death of the wool industry, as we knew it. Raphael (1993) has commented upon the importance of work as a source of self-esteem and identity.

Probably the most commonly known grief theory is that of Kubler-Ross (1969). This theory has been criticised for its rigidity and potential for the pathologising of those who do not neatly fit the staged process (Sprang and McNeil, 1995). Kubler-Ross' theory was developed around anticipated grief and then later expanded to grief in general. When looking at the anticipated losses of pastoralists, that is the threats, the concepts of anger, betrayal, denial, bargaining and acceptance have some use. One participant in the study stated: "It's almost grief... well it is grief. That's what we're going through. It's always 'why me' and there's anger, so much anger." Another participant, who had had their property on the market for several years, expanded upon this concept:

...And you know we've all done the "why me" and the anger and basically the whole five processes of grief. So now we're finally at OK – acceptance. We've got to get up and get on... But it's not because of confidence, I think it's because they've been through the grieving process... There are people, where for instance your suicide factor comes in, that in the middle of "why me" and anger, depression hits. And that's where people fall off. But if they could just get right out of "why me" and into anger at least they're fighting...

It is not the purpose of this paper to debate the strengths and weaknesses of the various models, but to propose that any of the models of grief help to provide a framework for understanding the situation facing many pastoral families. Raphael



(1983) provides a useful description of emotional states. Shock, numbness and disbelief are often earlier emotions in the experience of loss. The constant intrusion of reality forces the loss to be acknowledged. Intense yearning and physical arousal with anxiety and feelings of helplessness are also common earlier in the process. Anger and aggression can be displaced onto others. There is movement back and forth between a state of disorganisation and one of reinvestment in life. People can be pre-occupied and distressed. Participants described a range of these emotional states.

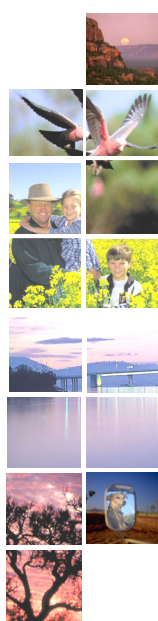
Raphael (1983) also notes that a loss can challenge dearly held family beliefs or myths. "The family view of itself, the family myth, may be impossible to maintain, and all that is avoided may have to be confronted" (Raphael, 1983, p. 54). The loss of quality of life, social standing, political influence and self-perception could potentially challenge the family myths held by some pastoralists. Family and community beliefs of how one grieves and what one grieves affects the grieving process (Neimeyer 2000). Individual styles of grieving can also cause conflict in a family as the differences can be hard to accommodate (Murray 2000).

Neimeyer (2000) also provides a useful description of some of the emotional responses to grief and their specific roles in coping. Denial is seen as an attempt to suspend the event that cannot be assimilated. Depression aims to bring the world under more control by reducing the focus to a minimal level. The lack of control and predictability leads to anxiety. When one sees oneself as behaving in a way contrary to central beliefs, guilt can result. The guilt over poor economic performance and resulting threats of foreclosure provides an example of this. The anger and hostility at government actions, past and present, could be seen as fitting with the hostility that can result from a person trying force their experience of loss to fit their previous assumptive beliefs. Threat is seen as associated with impending comprehensive change – such as has occurred so far in the pastoral industry and continues to occur with issues such as land management and ownership.

Neimeyer's (2000) approach to grief looks at how we make meaning of the world – the assumptive beliefs we have that help us make sense of things. Loss can challenge or confirm these assumptive beliefs. The loss can be an experience that we have no pre-existing way of making sense of. If we cannot make sense of the loss then grief can become complicated. Neimeyer (2000) suggests that our identities are based upon our assumptive beliefs. Our sense of self is challenged when our assumptive beliefs are challenged. Grief requires us to either assimilate the meaning of the loss into our previous beliefs or accommodate a new reality.

## DISCUSSION

Many pastoralists really are in dire financial difficulty (Elliot, 1997). The reliance on off-farm income has steadily increased over recent decades (Stayner, 1997; Gray, Lawrence and Dunn, 1993). The "belt-tightening" response to financial difficulty has left many families trapped in poverty (Gray, Lawrence and Dunn, 1993). Alston (1997, p. 114) notes that the needs of the farm business always tend to come first "as families exploit themselves in a desperate attempt to preserve their ownership of the farm." The social costs of farm adjustment (the term for adjusting to the myriad of changes) are often hidden and difficult to measure – there is a denial of the personal and family costs directly resulting from ongoing farm stress (Gray, Lawrence and Dunn, 1993).



The constant fight to survive was referred to again and again by participants. Demoralisation and exhaustion were ongoing themes in participants' responses. The difficulty in keeping up with all of the changes being imposed upon the industry was cited as a major stressor. Sorensen and Epps (1993) have also noted the rapid rate of change in policies impacting upon the rural sector and the lack of time to respond appropriately. Increased technological, financial and managerial knowledge is a never-ending necessity (Stayner, 1997). Unfortunately, regardless of how people strive to keep up, so much of the outcomes of production are beyond their control (Wright and Kaine, 1997). Participants discussed their belief that there is only so long that people can keep up the required pace before something has to give – their health, their relationships, something.

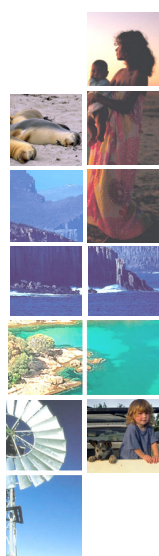
Participants recognised that social isolation was a major trap that many fall into as they cannot afford to travel to socialise and they eventually lose their confidence. There is then no one to talk to and the experiences are not shared. In addition, the culture encourages stoicism, not the sharing of problems and concerns. Suicide was seen as one end of the continuum of demoralisation – where the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness take over.

Applying Neimeyer's (2000) model it can be seen that the changes in the pastoral industry and the resulting losses have challenged the assumptive beliefs of many pastoral families. The way they interpret and make sense of the world, what they have based their identities upon, has been challenged over and over again. The choice of economic rationalism invalidates the belief that pastoralist families are important to the nation's economy. "Country mindedness" – the set of beliefs that are common amongst primary producers and relate to the necessity and standing of farming as an enterprise (Sorensen and Epps, 1993; Lees, 1997) – is challenged at every level.

If the loss does not fit the assumptive belief then it challenges the sense of self – the identity. Loss of power and social standing is not congruent with the longstanding image of the "pastoralist" or "grazier". Definitions of a "good manager" do not include being under threat of losing the property or being accused of deliberate environmental damage. The re-establishment of a new identity for those not forced off the property is hampered by the fact that by definition they are still "graziers" or "pastoralists". The non-stop nature of the challenges also adds difficulty to reconstruction as the space to take stock, reflect, acknowledge and begin to reconstruct the beliefs, rarely presents itself. Some people can be seen to be still trying to operate from beliefs that are no longer held by other people.

The process of assimilating or accommodating the losses is complicated by the lack of positive images to be found in this process. To have once had an image of influential social standing, wealth (even if periodic) and power and then to have to adjust it positively is a challenge. Acknowledging the loss of power and the reality of the economic situation leads to some helpless images – a pawn of global economics; a unit of production (Cheers, 1994); the only viable farm business because you're willing to live in poverty (Wright and Kaine, 1997).

It can also be argued that many of the losses being grieved by pastoralists are disenfranchised losses. Disenfranchised grief is when an individual "...experiences a sense of loss but does not have a socially recognised right, role or capacity to grieve" (Doka, cited in Sprang and McNeil, 1995, p. 161). The slow social marginalisation of pastoralists and its resulting loss of power and damage to sense of self have not been



sanctioned as real losses. Grieving the loss of power is unlikely to be sanctioned when so many have never had it. Even if grief is socially sanctioned, a person's own beliefs can disenfranchise their grief. The shame over an event for which a person feels responsible, or a personal belief system that does not allow grief to be recognised, are examples of this form of disenfranchisement.

It is not only the social and economic policy issues that contribute to pastoralists' sense of loss of value but the everyday actions of planners and practitioners. The language used by academically trained workers was identified as both a barrier to good communication and a tool to belittle – deliberately or inadvertently. Students are trained at university to value academic language, professional values and norms. This is in marked contrast to the culture of small communities, where plain talking and practical experiences are highly valued. Anti-provincial ideals are developed in the academic setting – and then people go and work in provincial areas (Martinez-Brawley, 1990). Martinez-Brawley notes:

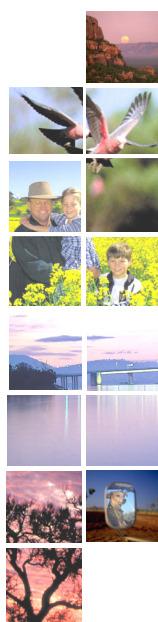
...the practitioner may have difficulty searching for and identifying local strengths and enjoying contact and meaningful dialogue with local people. Although the professional and somewhat ironic antiprovincialism of academic language may have served younger workers well during years of formal schooling, it is often ill suited to the work demands in small communities...(1990, p 84).

If professionals do not value the communities in which they work, they cannot work with community members in a way that is genuinely respectful and valuing of them. Collier (1993) argues that urban professionals need to have an understanding of the history of agricultural societies before they begin to work in them. Culturally appropriate practice is required.

## CONCLUSION

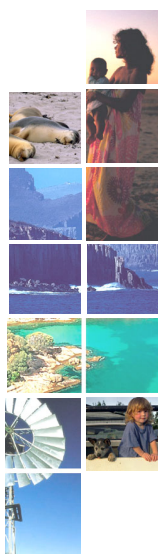
It is proposed that it is crucial for service providers to consider the context of pastoralists when planning and delivering services. This needs to include an understanding of their daily lives – the distance they have to travel to services, the condition of the road and their access to information and technology – as well as the broader socio-economic situation. Pastoralists are trying to make sense of a world that now runs under different rules. The beliefs that have operated for generations are no longer relevant and they are required to develop a new belief system that acknowledges their reality whilst maintaining a positive self image. The degree of sense of loss and ability to accommodate or assimilate it will depend upon how greatly the losses challenge their assumptive beliefs. The disenfranchised nature of many of these losses will potentially further complicate the process. Viewing pastoralists' experiences from a grief and loss framework allows us to increase our understanding of the issues potentially influencing their perceptions, actions and health. We need to examine our actions to see if and how our practices are reinforcing this sense of loss.

We need to be aware of our own beliefs about the value of rural communities and primary producers. If we carry negative beliefs then this is going to be reflected in our practice. Our language needs to be inclusive and respectful. We need to respect local knowledge and openly value it, particularly in the planning processes that we use such as consultations. The issues facing pastoralists are complex and long term and



planners need to recognise this in service design. Piecemeal funding of services is not useful. Putting short term services into communities in response to increased suicide rates is reactive and unhelpful in the long term. The service funded during a drought that gains the trust of families, then winds up when the drought breaks ignores the fact that drought is merely one of the many stressors upon pastoralists. Participants saw this “flavour of the month” funding as very unhelpful. They need support that is going to be in for the long haul. Services that are dependent upon communities “fighting” for them will not last – the energy cannot be sustained. The participants in this research saw that helpful services were those that were funded for the long term and where the approach of workers was respectful and inclusive.

When working with clients, whether individuals or families, it is helpful to consider the contribution of their entire context to the presenting problem. Looking at individual or family system levels alone will not allow for the whole picture to become clear. By having an understanding of the broader issues and asking the right questions, presentations of depression, anxiety, or family breakdown may suddenly make sense.



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