# The rich and knotty texture of caring experiences: A study of women's response to bushfire

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> *The contexts of care involves a range of activities which do not gracefully unfold, but contain different components that clash with one another…By identifying these components, we should come to understand the rich and knotty texture of our caring experience*". (Fisher and Tronto, p. 6)

## *Abstract*

This article introduces to the field of hazards research the Fisher and Tronto (1990) theoretical framework of 'care': 'caring about', 'taking care of', 'caregiving' and 'care receiving'. We develop this framework using from an interview study of 17 households following a major fire event, and use it to focus on women's responses to the threat of bushfire as understood through the use of care. We find that caring responses in the face of a fire threat are informed in large part by issues of gender relations. Socialization into more traditionally female roles impacted on women's response capacity and experiences. Barriers to open and inclusive thinking about how to bring about shifts in these patterns could be addressed by increasing representation of women in dialogue about community safety at both the community and organizational level.

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Rhodes (2005) also managed and wrote up a telephone interview survey carried out by Strahan and Associates, for the (Wangary) Coronial Inquiry.

## *Introduction*

An extreme hazard event poses a threat to communities in ways which before the event, may have not been anticipated. It also provides an opportunity to look more closely at community responses for the lessons they can teach us about the complexity embedded in hazard responses. This article examines a subset of data from a previously published study (Goodman et al, 2007) and proposes that a framework of 'care' is a useful lens for further analysis of this data.

The questions which will guide this writing include:

- What are the different ways in which caring manifests in a hazard situation?
- In what ways can the nature of women's caring be hidden from view?
- What are the implications of this for service delivery and hazards research?

## *The Wangary fire event*

Wangary is located on the Lower Eyre Peninsula in South Australia, which is one of the southern states of Australia. The area is largely agricultural, supporting a large number of grain and grazing businesses, with coastal areas supporting a large fishing and tourist population. The landscape contains several smaller inland townships, and also areas of heavily forested National Park.

The fire began on Monday 10th January, 2005 in the Wangary area. On Tuesday ('Black Tuesday') morning the fire broke containment lines and claimed nine lives, two men on a private fire unit and seven women and children, six of whom were caught in cars fleeing the fire. Ninety-three homes were destroyed along with numerous other buildings, vehicles and equipment and over 46,000 stock (Smith 2005).[i] Being January, it was school holiday time, an immediate alert that 'care of children' in the main would be in the hands of women at that time. Rhodes (2005) reported in his analysis of data from a telephone interview study, that "more than two thirds of the respondents

present at their property reported they received less than 30 minutes warning of the fire" (p.50)

## *Research approach*

Researchers from the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre carried out semi structured interviews with 17 households, speaking to a total of 35 residents. These households were selected from 191 residents who participated in Rhodes' (2005) telephone survey, who answered that they would be willing to speak further with researchers. The basis of the selection was to seek households across four relatively distinct areas of the fire ground, which experienced the main force of the fire impact at different times, from 'earliest impact' to 'latest impact'.

Sixteen of the 17 interviews were tape recorded (a total of 19 hours of taped interview), with the remaining interview transcribed from notes and subsequent recollections of the researchers present. The interviews took place in July 2005, some 7 months after the fire. Three interviewers (two females and one male) were present at 15 of the interviews, and two interviewers, both female, conducted the other two interviews.

While this article focussing on aspects of care seeks to examine the data through womens' experiences, we do not argue that 'care', and the capacity to care and the activity of 'caring', is an attribute shown more by women than men. We see it, along with Lloyd (2000), as a 'widespread activity in which we are all implicated' and along with Tronto (1993), that there also can be a dark side of care. We would agree with Chamberlayne and King (2000) who hold that the study of 'care' involves a 'focus on the mystery which lies at the heart of social inquiry, the mutual shaping of individual lives and social structures". Our interpretation of this research data brings to light a range of care activities which are engaged in response to a crisis, it also suggests that there is potential in thinking about care more broadly. Where this can be done, it opens up the idea that, if supported, communities can work through how they can choose to 'care differently', in ways which will further increase community safety. Ideas of care can also be meaningful for the community education function of the fire services and others (particularly those doing community development and education). Staff, volunteers and others in these roles can

use these ideas to consolidate and further their thinking about how they can support those who can find time in their lives to ‘care about’ the threat of fire to them and the communities in which they live.

## *The scholarship of ‘Care’*

The social phenomenon of care has only begun to receive serious attention from social researchers and the public in recent years. Fine (2004) proposes this is possibly so as care historically has been regarded as the responsibility of the family, or, when ‘intervention’ is called for, the responsibility of the state, leading him to say that as a taken for granted quality, it was either hidden away behind the picket fence of home, or the heavy doors of closed institutions. Like Fine (2004), we hold that care is productively regarded as a social rather than a personal or familial issue. We recognise the scholarship of those who research the place of ‘care’ in the ‘work life’ balance debates (Pocock, 2003), in issues of care as studied in relation to child care (Brennan, 1998), or those who study community care programs around older, ill, or disabled citizens (Newton, 2001). However the ideas presented here invoke a broad framework of ‘care’ which seeks to move away from notions of care as necessarily involving a ‘carer’ and the recipient of that care, that is, one conceptualised as an unevenly weighted dynamic, to one which is broad enough to allow for fluidity, inter dependency, and mutuality between the parties. Those parties can be located within a household, between households and also within and between organizations. The breadth we seek to canvas is captured in Daly’s (2002) theorising of care as a ‘public good’.. An interactive, mutual, complex, and ‘rich and knotty’ idea of care as seen at the household and neighbourhood level materialises in certain ways in the crisis event of a bushfire. The interview data both highlighted that women were prone to adopt certain roles around care, particularly around aspects of household management, including children and pets. Men, who in addition to some of the more usually recognisable roles of handlers of machinery and other forms of property defence, took up the specially burdensome role of providing a form of care, by way of advice, to their partners. In some cases, in the heat of the moment, the offering of this form of care appeared to increase the likelihood of a safer outcome for women, and in other cases, a decrease in the likelihood. We have discussed elsewhere in terms of the burden of care this poses for men (Goodman and Cottrell, publication pending).

Fisher and Tronto (1990) have conceptualized care across the ‘public private’ divide, a divide which requires an increased research and practice attention particularly in this field of community safety policy and practice. This is particularly so because of the principle of ‘shared responsibility’’. This is seen as a foundational principle in community safety, and ‘refers to the need for responsibility to be shared between individuals, fire and other agencies and governments’ (Elsworth et al, 2009). Fisher and Tronto (1990) view caring as follows:

> On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. …. It is the social aspects [of care which] speak ultimately to our survival as a species rather than as isolated individuals (Fisher and Tronto, p. 39 and 40).

Yet conceptualising this data in a framework of care poses some risks. One risk arises from the politics of care. Where ‘care’ is practised as or undertaken as paid work, it is typically low paid and is predominantly carried out by women. There are also attendant risks in the idea of thinking about care in its manifestation in ‘informal’ relationships at the community level. Milroy and Wismer (1994) have noted that community work done by women, as separate from domestic and ‘traded’ work, is underconceptualised, despite the increasing evidence of the roles women play at a community level before, during and after disasters (Neal and Phillips, 1990). The data about caring in this study is more located in this ‘informal’ world, either the more private world of caring between members of a household to each other, or toward their immediate neighbours, and in some cases, caring as manifested in feelings toward the wider ‘environment’ (Fien, 2007). So the territory of care is politically difficult, emotionally fraught, and conceptually complex. The ideas put forward in this study are exploratory, given the paucity of published material in relation to women and bushfires in Australia, and also given the fact that the original piece of research did not specifically set out to explore women’s perspectives.

In keeping with the thrust of thinking about the social aspects of caring efforts, Fisher and Tronto (1990) suggest the following 'intertwining phases' of care – caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving. They also suggest that there are some preconditions of caring activity, which they call 'ability' factors – time, material resources, knowledge and skill.

## *Research Data*

Table 1 below sets out definitional material of four dimensions of care, and maps onto these dimensions research data which illuminate these dimensions, as interpreted from the accounts provided by interviewees prompted by the Wangary fire event.

## "Caring about".

The idea of who 'cares' about what, or who holds a particular 'disposition' to 'care about' something, can be seen as having its origins on a number of different levels. One level is as a culturally embedded phenomenon. In setting up the interviews, for example, it was not uncommon to experience the more subtle cultural influences becoming evident in relation to who, for example, is seen to 'mostly care' about 'fire' within the household. Some women initially advised researchers that if it was 'fire' we needed to talk about, that we would need to speak to 'the 'man' in the house. The topic of 'fire' was, by and large, seen to be the domain of men.

There is often a division of labour around certain things which seems to reflect an underlying view of what one's role was in relation to what was to be 'cared about'. As Fisher and Tronto (1990) observe, there is a set of 'ability factors' which goes with the practice of care. They cite time, material resources, knowledge and skill as such factors (p.41). Amongst the research participants, it was typically men who had more ability in relation to bushfire defence, and as some of the women noted, women have taken up the role of support, in relation to fire events in general. This was summed up by one woman:

> [Usually] the women get to do the food to feed the fella's and you keep abreast of where they are, and the fella's go off and fight it. They come home in 24 hours and it's all out, but that wasn't the case with this one.

**Table 1 Dimensions of Care (adapted from Fisher and Tronto, 1990)**

| Dimensions of care | Boundaries of dimension | Exemplars from the data: predisposing roles pre crisis; roles taken up at the time of crisis |
|---|---|---|
| Caring about | A mental disposition, an emotional engagement; a concern for the well being of others. This is seen as an 'orientation' rather than a 'motivation', and therefore requires some selection. | 'Men hold the skill and knowledge about fire';<br>Women who constantly worried about the threat of fire in the environment;<br>Women expressing concern they could not warn enough neighbours of the impending threat due to lack of current neighbours' contact details; |
| Taking care of | A response to the above mental disposition; can be seen as taking responsibility for activities that support one's view of our world | Women who enacted the role of key carers of children, other dependents and pets;<br>Women who saw that they were responsible for family memorabilia;<br>Women who were instructed to manage tenants. |
| Caregiving | The 'hands on' work of maintenance and repair | Women who actually did the hands on care of children;<br>Those who took up a role of caring for a male partner while he managed the wider fire event;<br>Those women who were asked to care for a family member away from the property at the time of the fire event. |
| Care receiving | This includes the responses of those to the 'care giving', | Those women who were recipients of care from their spouses, which resulted in two different outcomes – one where the nature of the care provided led to their inclusion in active roles in life and property defence, and those for whom the care response from husbands resulted in them leaving the property |

While this stereotype is breaking down, there is still some residual validity in the image painted by this interviewee. McLennan et al (2007) summarise research findings of factors impacting on Australia's women volunteer fighters, as well as findings in relation to perceptions of women about the idea of volunteering for fire fighting. They cite some of the structural, attitudinal and practical underlying barriers for women to be able to respond to, or 'care about' the incidence of fire in the environment.

In a broad sense, we think that those women who talked of being more chronically anxious about the possible threat of fire, could be seen to be 'caring about' the wider issue of the threat of fire in the landscape, despite this representation of care could be seen as more of an individualistic or personal fear. We would tend to view such concerns on a more 'social' rather than an 'individual' plane. In this more social light, such anxieties could be seen as a potential strength. A strengths based approach would provide a perspective through which these concerns could be reframed, thus taking them from the private to the public arena. In this light, their expressed anxiety could be taken as a form of heightened awareness. This would require a shift in thinking at the household and neighbourhood level, particularly in those households, communities or organizations where heightened awareness is labelled by those in authority or dominant positions, as neurotic.

The elderly woman who was tenacious in her property defence, added a dimension to the notion of 'caring about', in her account of her response to the fire, when she said that that she was not going to turn her back on everything they had worked for. She was speaking here of a 'lifetime' of care. This suggested a dimension of 'care' which exceeded the immediate boundary of the property representing her son's current farming interests, to one which represented a lifetime's farming work which she and her husband (now deceased) had started and which her son was carrying on. Despite her current residence being away from the farm, we saw her orientation as a 'generational' perspective. In subsequent contact with this woman, exemplifies a further broadening of her 'caring about'. She pays particular attention to caring about the fire proneness of the small seaside town in which she now resides, and participates in community safety activities in ways that enact that care.

We also caught glimpses from a few women that they had too had taken on a role of caring about the local neighbourhood. One particular woman, well connected to the formal and informal network connected to the fire service, was able to warn some neighbours of the impending disaster, but she voiced her distress that due to not keeping up to date with the changes in tenants on properties near them, meant she could not establish telephone contact with them. When asked what she wished she could have done more of as the fire was threatening, she said “phone more people”. There was a stronger sense of ‘relatedness’ to (or in our adapted Tronto framework, ‘caring about’) neighbours from those women who were from a farming background, than there was from some of the younger women who were newcomers to the area. This points to the obvious conclusion that to ‘care about’ one must somehow ‘know about’.

There are barriers for some women to ‘care about’ certain matters. One woman from a knowledgeable and fire competent male-led farming family voiced her desire to learn more about protective clothing and garden maintenance. In the presence of researchers, her husband told her that these were not matters requiring her follow-up as they already had information or resources relevant to her question. Another woman who was advised by her husband to leave, crashed into a tree in the smoke and narrowly avoided the fire front, told researchers she would rather stay inside the home in a future bushfire event. Her husband, while deeply regretting his advice to her to leave, held (very strongly) an alternative view, which was that in a future fire event, she should stay in the car outside the home on a clear patch of ground. This gave researchers a glimpse of the difficulty for some women to be able to ‘know’, or ‘know differently’. There is a lot at stake here for some women, who may not question the care which was offered to them, in the form of advice from husbands.

## “Taking care of”.

The four categories of ‘care’ mutually inform each other. For example, in reporting on the woman who noted that women take care of the men by taking care of the food, this is not to suggest that this form of ‘care taking’ or ‘taking care’ should in any way be minimised. Indeed, it is a critical role and any salaried member of staff in the fire services who has had to grapple with the

dilemma of the making and delivering food provisions for fire fighters will attest to it being a very ‘hot’ issue. It is ‘hot’ in large part because it strikes at the identity of those who have taken it upon themselves to care in this way. At least in the recent past, community organising around food provision has been one clear and defined role community members, particularly women, can take up and deliver, competently, intelligently and lovingly.

Some women reported acts of ‘keeping an eye on’ the men, while they carried out more discrete and concrete tasks and one’s closer to the fire. One woman stood at the front door, quickly opening and closing it, and tended to her husband’s eyes and other general care, while he took a brief respite and readied himself to go back out again to deal with spot fires which were impacting directly on the house. He reported being grateful for his wife taking this role. He indicated he felt ‘cared for’,or ‘watched over’, and that she would know that his failure to return would signal he was in trouble. This form of ‘taking care of’ can and does extend to the post fire environment. In a discussion with one of the research participants some months after these interviews were carried out, one of the women talked of the ‘men suffering silently”. Many women take care of family life in both explicit and subtle ways

Women’s lead role in ‘taking care of’ children was evident in the data. Again, the ‘perceived or self inscribed role’ (‘taking care of’) and the actual acting on that role (‘care giving’) are closely related, and this is elaborated on in the next section.

There was an extension of this idea of caring for children, to caring for pets. One woman recounted that one major reason she took time to pile the pets in the car while the paddocks through which she intended to and did drive were already catching alight, was to reduce the likelihood that she would have to report to her children that their pets had died. Her children were not at the property at the time. Women who took up the role of managing family memorabilia in relation to the threat of fire, tied in with a wider role of ‘taking care of’ family in general

The researchers speculated whether women in subservient work roles may not be able to exercise full control over their capacity to ‘take care of’ others. One interviewee was a sole employee in a retail business the day of the fire. She

noted that she would not have hesitated to close the shop if it had been her own business, leaving open the possible inference that the fact that the business was not her own, may have played a role in what turned out to be her late departure from the shop to travel into a riskier situation given the direction the fire, and this woman, was then travelling in. These sorts of concerns can be seen as another aspect of the idea of 'taking care of'. How each woman interprets how, and what, she should 'take care of'. will come down to a complex mix of issues and circumstances. ' Some women, particularly those in low paid work, may feel they have a limited sense of control over their circumstances, which would further erode their sense of personal agency. They may face conflicting role demands which would further influence what they can 'take care of'. A consortium of rights based organizations highlight in a report on a San Diego firestorm, concerns faced by men for their jobs in low paid work and how these influenced their fire response decisions. (Firestorm, 2007). There are clearly not only gender, but class, race, and ability issues which intersect with how free to 'take care of' matters people deem most important to them.

"Caregiving"

Among the 17 households, five households had young children, but none of the children was present at the time the fire impacted. However, it is the 'child care patterns' in ordinary life which need highlighting, for it is these patterns which emphasise the extent to which women are involved as caregivers, and it is these patterns which when attached to the care giving role, heighten the vulnerability of women. This is because a common fire response is for the women and children to 'leave', and as this is often carried out 'late', there is an increase in the likelihood that women and children will be on the road in the most dangerous times. In two of the five households which usually comprised children, at the time of the fire, two of the children were in the care of a parent away from the property, and in the other three, two sets of children were with their grandmother and one other child was being cared for by his mother's sister. Caring for children in this sample matched the wider community pattern of child care being a gendered activity. However, while the responses from the women in these households reflected the view that to flee late was dangerous, all but one would wish for the children to be away from the property at the time of fire. The high proportion of women and children in the deaths in the Wangary fire tragically point to the importance of the role of women as child carers,

where the two family group deaths comprised a mother and two children in one group, and a grandmother and two children in another group. The only woman (and she was a young woman) in this sample group who was adamant that the children should be with her at the property in a future fire event, was also a woman who disagreed with the idea of using the home as a refuge.

## "Care receiving"

The women in our research as well as being seen and seeing themselves as having particular family (caring) responsibilities, were also recipients of care from male members of their households. We have documented in other research (see Goodman and Cottrell, 2009) examples of when that relationship worked well for women – those cases where the women were able to take advantage of the abilities of the men, where those abilities were part of the profile of the men being the main 'carer about' fires. In those circumstances which seemed to work well, the women were able to take up a 'follower' role during the fire event, and work alongside their partners or other males present, doing what was required. One could conceptualise these women as being initially 'care receivers'. This 'care receiving' categorization is one which in certain circumstances, merges with the 'care giving' one above'. One example would be when a recipient of care, becomes, through that care, enabled to 'care for' other members of the household, and, in some instances in this study, to care for tenants.

Some women who were the recipients of care in the form of advice to 'leave', did so, and even though the advice was given with the best intentions, their departures closely coincided with the arrival of the fire front. Some men expressed regret about this advice, suggesting they experienced some sort of 'role failure'.

Even the two women who acted 'on their own decision', were not immune from expressions of regret, either their own expressions, or those made by their husbands. One husband, while his preference would have been for his wife to stay at the property, expressed regret that when she did leave, that he didn't advise her to take the opposite direction than the one she took. Another woman who left of her own accord, appeared to still be struggling at the time of the interview, to come to grips with fact that when she did return back home many

hours later, after several life threatening events in the space of a few hours, that her husband and brother, who had remained at the property, did not inquire about where she had been. There was a sense that she was still 'short' of the care she might have expected or needed to receive. She added that it was also possible that they were shell shocked themselves, suggesting they may have been 'unable to care' at that time.

## *Discussion*

### Connecting the 'care' literature to that of gender and disasters

Taking the broad lens of 'care' as seen in its various forms in this research data, opens the way to thinking more explicitly about care at the household and community level, and conversely, throws some light on aspects of responsiveness to hazards which are often hidden from view.

We would concur with those scholars who argue that care can be seen as a positive ethical disposition, concerned as it is toward the importance of relationships, and that with this emphasis on relationships, it can be seen, on balance, to be gendered toward women. It is sometimes contrasted with the ethic of the way 'business is usually done', where these accounts highlight what some see as the more masculine values of competitiveness, and individualistically oriented achievement (Mulilis, 1998). These competitive and individualistically oriented values are sometimes seen to diminish the quality of relationships. When relationships are undervalued or diminished, the more feminine qualities with which they are sometimes associated, as Fletcher (1997) argues, disappear, or fall from view.

However, there are some powerful forces which push 'care' as a useful construct in thinking about gender and disasters, away from the dominant frame of thought. One such force is the tight link, particularly in rural areas, between fire response being about 'property response'. That the term 'farmer' has been a gendered one, and aligned with men, has been long the case, although this too is changing, but in some areas, the change is slow (Hamilton, 2007; Brandth, 2003; Alston, 1998). In rural (farming) areas, it has been the norm that the men concern themselves with the broad issues of fire as an 'out of home' threat, and the women have concentrated more on the 'in home' concerns (England 2005). 'In home' concerns can widen into community level

concerns. Neal and Philips (1990) draw attention to the ‘support role’ women play during and following disasters at a community level.

There are links here too with the history of brigades, where there has been an emphasis on collective local action, but still with some gender divisions along who takes up what role – with the men more active in the operational aspects of fire defence, and the women in the less visible support roles (which of course is also changing, again, more obviously in some areas than others; see McLennan et al, 2005)). So the emphasis in the ‘field’, where the ‘field’ is narrowly defined in response and operational terms, has been historically and in still in many ways currently, a gendered one. With the heavy emphasis on matters of ‘property’, there is a simultaneous diminution of emphases on ‘relationships’ and ‘relatedness’ between household members, including other family members, children and pets. Davidson and Freudenberg (1996) found that the role of nurturer and care provider, a role largely performed by women, is associated with health and safety issues in general, that is, the well being of others. This role may be particularly ‘active’ when women are parenting.

## *Conclusion*

With England (2005), we find value in building knowledge about the everyday operations of care in the various field in which we study and practice. This research also points to the importance of linking aspects of care, with that of disaster response, and seeing where increased attention is needed for support to particular groups within communities. For those groups whose activities are focused on care as part of their usual practices, they may need to modify these caring activities if these activities are placing them or those they care for, at greater risk. One of the functions of community education and awareness activities is to assist people to strengthen their capacity to be mindful of each other in ways which heighten the chance of a safe outcome in a disaster situation. While community education staff can seek to promote more inclusivity in shared thinking at a community level, they have less traction in the wider organizational context. This context often exhibits a culture of ‘reactive operational expediency’ (McLennan et al, p.68), and in which the senior ranks are dominated by those with career operational backgrounds, ranks which seldom include women.

We would also argue, along with Scanlon (1997) and McLennan et al (2005) that more women need to be at the table discussing and deliberating matters in both policy terms and practice terms in the context of hazards and disasters. Scanlon observes that as more women are involved in local government, they will also 'assume increasing power in disaster response" (Scanlon, 1997, p.6). With increased attention to reducing the barriers between the mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery phases of disaster, this stronger presence of women in recovery may 'flow backwards' to strengthen mitigation and preparedness activities. We would argue, with Fordham (1998) and others, that women need to be made, and make themselves, more visible. This is said in the knowledge that women already shoulder an uneven burden of 'care' already, in the domestic domain (Orloff, 1996; Fraser, 1997).

While being concerned to highlight women's perspectives where they are not visible, we are careful that the reader should not conclude that women will just have to 'do more' than they are already doing in the household, community, and 'out of home' roles. Lister's 1990 British study needs repeating and contextualising, but its findings bear keeping in mind – that 52% of the women surveyed, compared to 21% of men, said they 'felt tired most of the time'. We walk a fine line here; we wish to throw light on women's perspectives, without helping to create the conditions which lead to more expectations being thrust upon them.

Women and men alike need to have the opportunity to think and talk about their responsibilities as they perceive them, and where necessary, seek to change, and be assisted to change, those role definitions which impede safer responses to disaster situations. We need to consider the whole of the 'emergency management' spectrum, and include in this, mainstream 'non emergency' people and perspectives. We need to keep working to increase opportunities for key parties to either be able to show respect for, or learn to respect, the views of women, and in so doing, increase everyone's capacity to both create, and then be responsive to, a more balanced community safety perspective.

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