The Personal is Political and the Political can be Very Bloody
Personal: Family Farming in a Deregulated Dairy Industry

Terese Reid
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The personal is political and the political can be very bloody personal:
Family farming in a deregulated dairy industry.

Honours Dissertation
Prepared by Terese Reid
School Of Social Work
Edith Cowan University
2001
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Signature: [Redacted] Date: 22 February 2002

Terese Reid

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Abstract

This qualitative study considers the links between the political ideology that led to the deregulation of the dairy industry in July 2000 and the personal lived experiences of dairy farming families at a grassroots level. The post-deregulation experiences of dairy farming families within the South West region of Western are investigated through an engaged critical ethnographic methodology. A critical analysis of the political policies relating to dairy deregulation, is also incorporated within the study’s methodological framework. The underlying aims of critical ethnography are emancipation, empowerment and liberation.

The central purpose of this research is to give the dairy farming families, who participated in this research, a voice. Within the feminist approach to research, this study aims to provide an opportunity for dairy farmers to acknowledge their experiences, to make the reality of their experiences visible and to “seek shared understandings” of those experiences (Crotty, 1998, p. 177).

This study utilises research conversations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to gather the stories of dairy farmer participants and ‘thick description’ (Denzin, 1989) to provide a text which allows the reader to gain an empathetic understanding of the lived experiences of dairy farming families since deregulation.

There is an indication from this research that the participating dairy farmers have faced significant hardships as a consequence of the policies that led to the deregulation of the dairy industry. Participating dairy farmers have struggled to cope with losses at a number of levels since deregulation, including income, assets, and power within the dairy industry’s supply chain. Farmers spoke of experiencing a number of emotional responses to their changed circumstances including: feelings of failure; loss of identity; grief; anger; and a strong sense of injustice. This study suggests that dairy farmers face ongoing uncertainty about the future of their industry and the future of their family farms.
Chapter One

Introduction and Background to the Study

Introduction

Under the current political 'umbrella' of the capitalist market system, the dairy industry of Australia was deregulated on July 1\textsuperscript{st} in the year 2000. Since deregulation, dairy farmers across Australia have experienced substantial decreases in the average farm-gate price of milk, with dairy farmers in Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales incurring the largest farm-gate price falls. Many dairy farmers in these three states have also faced a significant financial 'set-back' associated with the asset loss of their market milk quota. (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics {ABARE}, 2001, p.9) The number of Western Australia dairy farm enterprises has dropped from 424 in 1999 (Dairy Industry Authority of Western Australia, 2000, p.17) to between 350 and 352, as at the beginning December 2001 (personal communication L. Paravacini, National Foods; L. Kranzberg, Challenge Dairy; R. Musitano, Harvey Fresh; and R. Dodds, Peters Brownes, December 2001).

This study considers the links between the political ideology that has led to the deregulation of the dairy industry and the personal lived experiences of the dairy farmers at a grass roots level.\textsuperscript{1} Whilst recognising the significant impact of deregulation on many dairy farmers across Australia, this study only focuses on dairy farmers in the south west of Western Australian. The decision to confine the study area has been based on a pragmatic rather than a parochial consideration. The scope of this study has been necessarily limited according to the time constraints associated with the Social Work Honours program. This research is not considered to be generalisable across Australia or indeed generalisable across Western Australia. Although there may be some similarities in farmers' experiences of deregulation this study allows for individual stories to be heard and acknowledges and values the individuality of the experiences of the dairy farmers in this study.

\textsuperscript{1} Unless otherwise mentioned references to 'dairy farmers' or 'dairy farming families' in this dissertation pertain to 'family farms' as distinct from large conglomerate agribusiness enterprises.
I have undertaken this qualitative study within an engaged critical ethnographic methodological framework. I extended the established methodology of critical ethnography (Quantz, 1992) to reflect an intensified level of engagement between the researcher, the research participants and the field of study. As a member of a dairy farming family and the dairy farming community, I am intimately connected to both the field of study and the process of research. It has been my intention to be very clear about my personal and political location within the research project, not to give myself further prominence within the study, but with the aim of establishing and maintaining integrity in the research process.

**A Word About Language**

Whilst recognising that this research is being undertaken as an academic project, I have chosen to avoid the use of technical or academic language as much as possible. My concern is that valuable knowledge and understandings can often be lost to the wider community as academic writers become immersed in the language of their disciplines (Griffiths, 1995, p. 34). In contrast to some of the more dense academic writing, my aim is to produce a document that is accessible, readable and useful in the wider community.

In the style of feminist writing, I have used first rather than third person language throughout the text. In contrast to the passive voice of third person language, which not only places a distance between the researcher and the research but also provides a level of anonymity for the researcher, first person language elicits an active voice and an acknowledgment of researcher accountability in the research process (Irigaray, cited in Crotty, 1998, p.169). It is my intention to remain informative, reflexive and present for the reader, throughout the text. Schratz and Walker (1995) maintain that researchers need to find a way of placing themselves within the text and of allowing the reader a "sense of access to the writers" (pp. 16; 17).

**The Research Question**

Although the research question may appear very simple for such a complex area of study, I felt a strong need to provide a very ‘open’ question – a question which broadened rather than narrowed the research opportunities.
This question was developed to be the principal question for the research participants as well as the overriding question for the research project. I felt that the research question needed to be broad enough to allow the participating dairy farmers to share as much or as little, of their experiences, as they chose — to provide real choices around which aspects of their lives they wished to share through the research process. This question was purposely designed to invite shared experiences and is a real attempt to deliberately limit the imposition of my own presumptions on the research. The research question is:

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE EXPERIENCES OF DAIRY FARMING FAMILIES SINCE THE DEREGULATION OF THE DAIRY INDUSTRY?

The Purpose of the Research

The central purpose of this study is to give the dairy farming families, who participate in this research, a voice. Within the feminist approach to research, this study aims to provide an opportunity for dairy farmers to acknowledge their experiences, to make the reality of their experiences visible and to “seek shared understandings” of those experiences (Crotty, 1998, p. 177). I am taking a feminist approach to this research, which will be explained at a later stage in the dissertation. I feel that there is a real need to identify, acknowledge and validate the experiences of dairy farming families and this has been a compelling motivation for undertaking this research. I believe that people’s accounts of their lived experiences are often silenced within the dominant discourse of market capitalism. I also strongly believe that people have a fundamental right to speak and be heard.

Through the use of thick description, this study aims to provide a text, which will allow the reader to gain an empathetic understanding of the lived experiences of the dairy farming families. Denzin (1989) suggests that thick description provides deep and detailed accounts of “context, emotion and the webs of social relationships” which allow for “the voices, feelings, actions and meanings” of individuals to be heard (p.83). Wadsworth (1997, p.7) suggests that people can make sense of their experiences from the social meaning that is created through the sharing of understandings.
I also aim, through this study, to contribute to the social work profession's ongoing effort to demonstrate the link between the personal and the political. This research will attempt to illustrate how policy and political decision making processes can personally impact on people's lives. Through this research, I am attempting to make:

a deliberate link between the individual and the structural, requiring that individual suffering be understood in its political context, and the corollary that political structural issues must be understood in terms of their impact on people's lives, and must not be seen in purely abstract or macro-political terms (Ife, 1997, p.95).

The research process has provided me with a very valuable social work learning experience, particularly in terms of working within a rural community. I live and work in a rural community and I believe that rural research is not only important in terms of contributing to the body of social work knowledge but in terms of extending levels of understanding about rural issues to a wider community. Liepins (1996, p.250) contends that social research is not only challenging and diverse but imperative, in terms of protecting "the important social components of rural Australia", particularly in this time of economic rationalism. Liepins (1996) further suggests that social research should continue to challenge the "urban dominance of academic thought and policy development" through "vigorous commentary and alternative contributions from the rural community" (p.250). Liepins maintains that:

the issues of community, sustainability, and decision making that we explore in rural based social research are imperative to the viable future of rural Australia. Similarly, as researchers the forms of research that we choose can ensure that we challenge inequitable assumptions of dominant discourses and the excessive consideration of economic and scientific concerns. (p. 260).

**The Researcher**

Glesne and Peshkin (1992, p. 1) suggest that as qualitative researchers, we attempt to 'make sense' of other people's stories and of how different stories may connect. They suggest that it is important for researchers to share our stories so that our readers may have an awareness of our perspectives and a clearer way of making sense of our writings. With that in mind, I would like to introduce myself.
I am, among other things, a mother to four wonderful children, a wife to a loving and supportive husband, a daughter to a caring mother, a daughter-in-law, a sister, a friend, a colleague, a graduating social work student, a family counsellor with an Aboriginal Medical Service, a dairy farmer and an active member of my community. I believe that there have been different aspects from each of these roles, to a greater or lesser degree, which have brought me to this research. The deregulation of the dairy industry has also had a significant impact on my life, on the lives of my family members and on the lives of many of the people within my community.

My family is a third generation dairy farming family in the Elgin area in the South West region of Western Australia. Dairy farming requires a 365 day-a-year commitment – and although there are long working days and a great deal of hard work, in many ways, we have been very fortunate to have had the opportunity to live and work on the land. The recent deregulation of the dairy industry has however, placed us in a position where we have been forced to rethink our whole way of life. This has been a very painful process. I don’t believe that we were prepared for the magnitude of change or for the extent of the impact, even though my family resisted deregulation at every level. My husband and I attended meetings to outline our concerns, lobbied our politicians, lobbied our industry leaders, attended protests – we did everything that we knew how, to alert the decision makers to the significant risks and likely impacts of deregulation for dairy farming families and their communities. Nevertheless, the industry was deregulated! At a head level, I understand (but don’t accept) the political and ideological reasons behind deregulation, which will be discussed at a later stage within this dissertation – at a heart level however, I feel devastated. I feel really disheartened about my own family’s future well being, and terribly saddened by the grief and the worry that I have seen friends and other community members’ experience.

It has been especially difficult to cope with our farming circumstances. Since deregulation, my family has experienced a drop of approximately 37% in our dairy farm income. Our costs however, have pretty much remained constant, except for the cost of grain, which has increased as a result of poor seasons in the grain growing areas. The 37% drop in income has impacted enormously on the way that we farm and the way that we live. The drop of income has meant that for some months, it has actually cost us more to milk than what we have been paid.
Although it would appear, at times, that continuing to milk the cows made no financial sense, we had a substantial debt that still needed to be serviced and we had no other way of meeting the interest payments on that debt. What that has meant in turn however, is that just about all other things have needed to be put on hold. Since deregulation, patching-up has replaced repairs or renewal, our tree-planting program has stopped, our pasture improvement program has been severely curtailed and our contracting of workers has ceased. It has been very difficult to meet account paying deadlines, which I know in turn, places enormous pressures on the other businesses involved – unfortunately, usually small businesses who are facing problems of their own.

The implementation of deregulation has also meant the loss of our dairy quota asset. Up until the deregulation of the industry, our dairy quota was listed with our bank as a $430,000 asset. This asset was signed away when the Western Australian Government passed the legislation to allow for deregulation and there has been no compensation for that asset. My family also has a $450,000 debt that sat alongside that quota asset and although the asset disappeared, we still needed to find some way of meeting our repayments on our $450,000 loan. Until deregulation, we had viewed our quota asset in terms of an ‘insurance’ policy around that debt – we always felt that we could put our quota up for auction and repay our loan, if something was to happen that would prevent us from continuing as dairy farmers. The loss of our asset, along with the significant drop in income, has raised significant concerns about our future in dairy farming.

One effect of the new state of play is that we have already needed to place part of our farm on the market (as have many other people in the district) in an effort to reduce our debt. The real estate market however, currently appears to be overwhelmed with sellers and somewhat short of buyers. The Commonwealth government has supported a dairy restructure package, which will provide some assistance to dairy farmers and the Western Australian Government will compensate dairy farmers for approved restructure projects to a value of $23,000 per dairy farm. These financial assistance programs (which will be discussed at a later stage within the dissertation) have provided some relief, but unfortunately, will not go anywhere near to solving our current financial issues.

It remains hard to relate the enormity of the pressure that has been associated with this situation. Sometimes, it feels as though we have been totally preoccupied with simply
preserving our way of life, holding our connection to our home, our land, our animals, and our community. I have worried about ourselves, the future of our children, my husband’s father (who lives with us on the farm), our future work, our identity, our friends in similar situations, other dairy farmers in the community and other businesses in our community. I am still not sure what all of this means, but I am desperately trying to work things through and to find a way of feeling ‘safe’ around our future again.

A Brief History of the Lead-Up to Deregulation

Australia introduced an open market for fluid milk with the removal of state government controlled farm gate prices in July 2000. Before deregulation the Dairy Industry of Australia was supported by two sets of regulatory arrangements. The Commonwealth Government administered the Domestic Market Support Scheme, which ended on June 30 2000, and the state governments administered various regulatory arrangements within their own states. (Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, 1999, p.22). In Western Australia, the dairy industry had been regulated under a market milk quota system since the 1940s. Market milk was supplied through the quota system, under the Dairy Industry Act of 1973. The Western Australian Dairy Industry Authority had been set up under the 1973 Act, in 1974, and all milk, that was produced in Western Australia, was vested under this authority. The Dairy Industry Authority was responsible for the regulation of the production of milk; the acceptance of, the payment for and the sale of milk; the continuous availability of milk; and the wholesomeness and quality of milk.

The Dairy Industry Authority had administered a quota system to control the supply of market milk; administered a licensing system for dairy enterprises; determined the price paid for market milk; administered the various allowances associated with milk production, milk promotion and milk transport; conducted research; operated the quality testing and monitoring programs; and organised the sale of quota through a tri-annual auction system (Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, 1999, p. xii; 17; 18; 31).
Western Australia, as with all other states, had deregulated past the farm gate, in respect to milk processors, vendors and transportation, before July 2000.

The impetus for deregulation appears to have originated at a number of levels; increased pressure from global markets (Australian Dairy Industry Council cited in Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, 1999, p. 5); the reform agenda of the Victorian Dairy Industry (which provides the vast majority of Australia's total milk production) (ABARE, 2001, p.2); the phasing out of the Domestic Market Support Scheme, as of June 30, 2000 (ABARE, 2001, p.1); the widening gap between market and manufacturing milk prices (ABARE, 2001, p. 2); and the requirements of National Competition Policy (Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, 1999, p. 66).

Kain, (1994, p.i), maintains that the aim of National Competition Policy, was to eliminate barriers to trade by introducing pro-competitive policies and the Australian Government encouraged competition through the lowering of trade barriers and the reduction of restrictions on domestic competition. Under National Competition Policy, all Australian state governments were required to review their statutory marketing arrangements and initiate appropriate reforms by the year 2000 (Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, 1999, p.66).

In line with National Competition Policy requirements, all Australian states conducted a review of their dairy industry regulatory arrangements. Although there was some criticism with respect to the consistency of the review procedures (Senate and Regional Affairs References Committee, 1999, p.41), the Western Australian review established that the regulated farm gate price for market milk, had passed the ‘public benefit’ criteria as related to National Competition Policy requirements (Western Australia Farmers Federation, 1999). In announcing the result of the Western Australian review Primary Industry Minister, Monty House, (1999), declared that the Western Australian Government “had no intention or plan to make any amendments to the dairy Industry Act” (p.1).

Despite complying with National Competition Policy requirements and assurances from the Western Australian Government, the deregulation debate continued.
There was a concern that if the state of Victoria maintained its deregulation agenda, the rest of the states would be forced to follow “due to the competitiveness of Victorian producers, processors and manufacturers, the operation of the Mutual Recognition Act and the threat of inter-state trade” (National Competition Council cited in Senate and Regional Affairs References Committee, 1999, p. 45).

Dairy farmers faced additional pressure/encouragement to deregulate when the Australian Dairy Industry Council negotiated a restructure package with the Australian Government. Dairy farmers were informed that the restructure package would only be available if all state governments agreed to remove supply and pricing regulations by June 30, 2000 (Rowley, 1999). Dairy farmers were offered two opportunities to vote on the deregulation proposal, the first from the Australian Farmers Federation and the second from the Australian Milk Producers Association. The outcomes of the two votes were different and considered somewhat controversial.

Despite the ongoing debate and a good deal of uncertainty in the dairy farming community, all states agreed to remove their various supply and pricing regulations and the Australian dairy industry was deregulated in July 2000.

**Dairy Deregulation (Within the Context of the Capitalist Market System.)**

Dairy deregulation has occurred within the context of the capitalist market system. I found that much of Self (2000)’s analysis and critique of that capitalist market system, resonated strongly with my own understandings and concerns. Self (2000), maintains that the largely uncontrolled capitalist market system, which operates on a global scale, has a dominant influence on individuals and society (p. ix) and that the extensive measures of privatisation and deregulation have been brought about by the “methods” and “motivations” of the capitalist market institutions. The demands of the market system appear to have a compelling influence on the politics and the policies of most countries, as political decision makers struggle to “equip the national economy to meet the challenge of global market competition and to maintain or restart the engine of economic growth” (Self, 2000, p.2).
Although there appears to be no question that competitive market systems do have a place in contemporary Western society, the present form of market capitalism:

has over-stepped the bounds which are socially and ethically appropriate to any market system and is invading and undermining political and social spheres of life which has and should be operated according to different standards and values" (Self, 2000, p.3).

Self (2000, p.ix) maintains that the growth of the capitalist market system has been at the expense of other important societal values and suggests that the market system needs to be reigned back in the interests of a more balanced and sane society. The operations of the global economy are a threat to the interests and the values of many people and that "remote economic decisions, made by either business or government on efficiency grounds, impinge strongly upon the work, life and habits of communities, whose members can suffer a loss of meaning and value" (Self, 2000, p.241).

Farming as a choice of occupation and way of life has become increasingly more difficult and small family farms are being replaced by larger farms or agribusinesses.

Although the theory, associated with the capitalist market system, would suggest that displaced farmers would move on to higher paying employment, this does not necessarily occur. There is an expectation that people will respond to economic changes by regrouping and immediately adjusting to the changing work patterns however many people have considerable difficulty in making the changes or are not able to make them at all (Self, 2000, p.241). Self (2000) maintains that communities may be changed forever as, for example, “young people migrate to look for a new job, they may leave behind a sad community of aged or unemployed individuals” (p.241). This type of community cost has significant social importance, “but figure little or not at all in economic models, presently because they are tiresome and unquantifiable” (Self, 2000, p.241).

**Dairy Deregulation (In the Context of Globalisation)**

Capling, Considine & Crozier (1998) suggest that there are countless descriptions of globalisation including “American cultural imperialism, ‘the borderless world’, the internationalisation of finance, production and consumption, and a glorious new age of information sharing and interconnectedness through cyberspace” (p.3).
Capling et al. (1998) contend that globalisation has been likened to the Industrial Revolution and they cite Castells (1996) who points out that “economies throughout the world have become globally interdependent, introducing a new form of relationship between economy, state, and society” (p.3). Capling et al. (1998) maintain that globalisation has challenged Australia’s political institutions with new “pressures, imperatives and values” and suggest that “the values that have informed our political institutions – equality, equity, justice, solidarity, and a sense of shared obligation – are being transformed by the values of market efficiency and corporate growth” (p.4). The emergence of a global economy, which can be characterised by “uncontrollable market forces and new economic actors such as transnational corporations, international banks and other financial institutions”, appear to have left national governments powerless in their encounters with international markets.

The largely uncontrolled and unregulated global economy appears to have no “global political authority which can impose limits, rules or disciplines on such markets and market players” (Capling et al. 1998, p. 5). Self (2000) suggests that:

Globalisation is vigorously pushed throughout the world by what can be described as a transnational capitalist class. This class comprises leaders of business corporations with strong international interests or aspirations, major international banks and lending institutions, together with supportive politicians and bureaucrats. One important element is a supportive media, often now owned by rich proprietors with international interests (p. 152).

Australia is already economically vulnerable because of its size and yet Australia’s enthusiastic submission to globalisation, is likely to also place Australians in a socially and politically vulnerable position. Australia’s political institutions need to be revitalised and strengthened in an effort to develop policies and strategies that will promote the interests of the Australian people in the context of globalisation (Capling et al., 1998, p.15).

**Relevant and Timely**

The Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics (ABARE), 2001 report into the impact of deregulation states that “While the move to an open market in milk was widely publicised, the speed and the scope of the resulting changes appear to be further and faster than some industry stake-holders anticipated” (p.1).
ABARE (2001, p.10) maintain that there have been substantial decreases in the farm gate price of milk and suggest that approximately 30% of dairy farmers will have left the industry within five years. The Western Australian Dairy Industry Working Group (2000, p.5) contends that farmers have become isolated from the rest of the market supply chain which has left farmers powerless and with no involvement in the industry's decision making process. The dairy industry is now controlled by the larger processes and by commercial pressures.

Apart from the convincing and obvious anecdotal evidence that I have been privy to since the deregulation of the dairy industry, there have been numerous media reports that have indicated that dairy deregulation was having an adverse impact on Western Australian dairy farmers. Mirikilis (2000) contended that there had been reports from support services within the South West region, which had indicated that many farmers were depressed, struggling to cope and unable to see a future for themselves in a deregulated industry. Ms Leiper, from South West population Health Unit suggested that deregulation had had a substantial impact on many parts of the community and that deregulation, was causing a lot of grief among farmers (Mirikilis, 2000).

The ongoing media reports, the various government reports and the anecdotal evidence that has been raised through informal community gatherings and social interactions would all suggest that this research is both relevant and timely.

The next chapter will consider the philosophical, theoretical and methodological consideration underpinning this study and outline the method, ethical considerations and limitations of the research process. This chapter is followed by a brief prelude to chapter three, which describes the locality of the study. Chapter three, entitled Shared Conversations, introduces the dairy farmer participants and contains excerpts from their stories. The final chapter, entitled Making Meaning: One Understanding, includes: a critical discussion of the issues raised within the research; places the dairy farmers' stories within a political and social context; presents a summary of the research findings; and proposes a number of recommendations for further research and social actioning. Chapter four is concluded with an epilogue containing some final reflections from the researcher.
Chapter Two

Philosophical, Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Philosophical and Theoretical Traditions Informing the Study

It has been difficult to elucidate the philosophical and theoretical traditions, which will inform this study. This section of the dissertation is clearly associated with the academic aspect of this study and I have found that I have struggled to maintain a readable approach to my writing. One of the other areas of difficulty is associated with my personal resistance around compartmentalising complex understandings of sense-making into distinct and designated categories. I see sense-making as a much messier process! I would liken my sense-making process as a more transformative process - where understandings form and then transform, as knowledge connects and shapes with shifting levels of consciousness.

With this in mind I would like to suggest that, at a very personal level, I do hold an overriding philosophical perspective which embraces an impassioned hope and belief in humanity and a vision for a better world (Ife, 1997). Encompassed within that hope and belief is an affirmation that social justice can prevail through the emancipatory actioning, which arises out of “critical consciousness” (Freire, 1970, p.164). Although I believe that my philosophical perspective is the overriding influence for this research, I would suggest that this particular study could be described as evolving within a critical theory paradigm (Ife, 1997); from a standpoint feminist epistemology (Assister, 1996); and with a dialogic, transformative, critical ethnographic methodology (Quantz, 1992). A paradigm can be defined in terms of a basic set of beliefs that has an influence on the world view of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.99).
Epistemology, which questions how individuals know their world, and methodology, which focuses on how we acquire knowledge about the world, are both encompassed within the research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.99). Although, the different aspects of the study are to be outlined as separate entities – for the purpose of creating understandings – it is important to recognise that all areas of the study process are intrinsically connected.

**Critical Theory**

Values, which are viewed as critical to determining the research outcome, have pride of place within a critical paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.114). Guba and Lincoln (1994) contend that:

> Just as theories and facts are not independent, neither are values and facts. Indeed, it can be argued that theories are themselves value statements. Thus putative ‘facts’ are viewed not only through a theory window but through a value window as well” (p.107).

From the emancipatory perspective of a critical paradigm, research values are essential to safeguard the interests of the less powerful in the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.114). The values, assumptions and political baggage of the researcher need to be clearly laid out so that there is no confusion about what the researcher brings to the research process (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994 p.140). Critical theory establishes an inseparable connection between the personal and the political (Ife, 1999, p.220; 221). Guba and Lincoln (1994) contend that the aim of critical research is to critique and transform the “social political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender structures that constrain and exploit humankind, by engagement in confrontation...” (p.113). Critical research is not simply viewed in terms of advancing knowledge through description or interpretation:

> Critical research can be best understood in the context of empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name critical must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or sphere within that society. Research thus becomes a transformative endeavour unembarrassed by the label “political” and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness. (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p.140).

Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.113) caution however, that it is the research participants who have the right to determine their need for change – it is their lives that will be most affected by any transformation.
Transformations can occur as individuals develop greater insight, through dialectic interaction, into the "nature and extent of their exploitation" and when individuals are sufficiently "stimulated to act on it" (p.115).

**Standpoint Feminism**

Research has traditionally been dominated by men and Hartstock (cited in May, 1993) maintains that "Standpoint feminism has developed in contrast to many of the dominant ways of viewing knowledge" (p.21). Notwithstanding that there is considerable diversity in terms of feminists' standpoints, values and outlooks, feminists also hold a collective anti-oppressive standpoint, which has a "shared set of values that makes feminists feminist" (Assister, cited in Crotty, 1998, p.173). Cook and Fonow (1990) maintain that women are in a unique position to undertake research – female researchers are "able to operate from both an oppressed position as a woman and a privileged position as a scholar" (cited in May, 1993, p.22). Standpoint feminist research provides an opportunity for researchers to build on and from women's experiences in their everyday life (Harding, cited in Olesen, 1994). Gilligan, (1982) contends that women have a different way of knowing or perceiving the world, a different way of relating to the world and a different concept of self, than men (cited in Crotty, 1998, p.174). Crotty (1998, p.174) suggests however, that the difference lies in how men and women "theorise the act of knowing" and acknowledges nevertheless, that women tend to "express concerns, raise issues and gain insights" that are not generally expressed, raised or gained by men.

Standpoint feminist research deliberately moves away from a hierarchical research process and works towards a more collaborative and participatory approach – intentionally minimising the, all to common, assumption of researcher as expert (May, 1993, p.22). Olesen (1994, p.163) maintains that standpoint feminism demands a high degree of reflexivity from the researcher.

Olesen, (1994) contends that if feminist research is sufficiently reflexive, researcher biases may be viewed as resources for understanding the researcher's interpretations and actions within the research process. Reflexivity needs to be rigorously applied however, to "uncover what may be deep-seated but poorly recognized views on issues central to the research" (Olesen, 1994, p.165).
In addition, our cultural backgrounds are likely to affect our positioning. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes (cited in Olesen, 1994) suggests “We cannot rid ourselves of the cultural self we bring with us into the field any more than we can disown our eyes, ears and skin through which we take our intuitive perceptions about the new and strange world we have entered” (p.165).

Crotty (1998, p.182) suggests that re-visioning is at the heart of feminist research and that feminist researchers continue to strive towards emancipatory, equitable and just transformations. I believe that re-visioning is at the heart of all social work practice and in undertaking this research, I have attempted to work towards emancipation, equity and social justice, not only as research outcomes but also within the research process. I believe that feminist theory has not only provided me with a framework for considering oppression and marginalisation in terms of gender, but also in terms of other structural issues.

The Personal is Political

Heywood (1998, p.242) argues that although the idea of political is usually understood in terms of the public sphere rather than private life, the relationship between the government and its citizens is clearly political. Feminists insist that “politics is an activity that takes place within all social groups and is not merely confined to the affairs of government or other public bodies” (Heywood, 1998, p.242). The understanding within the ‘personal is political’ dictum is that the political system and social structures are not separate from, but experienced within, the personal of everyday life and that a focus on power within the everyday “points up that ‘politics’ doesn’t lie beyond people’s front doors and outside of feelings, beliefs, relationships and behaviours” (Stanley and Wise, 1983, p.54). Stanley and Wise (1983) suggest that just as power and its use are examined within personal life, political power “must” also be examined through personal life – “through an exploration of relationships and experiences within everyday life” (p.53). Issues that have traditionally been viewed as personal problems can be understood in terms of having social and political foundations and solutions (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p.54).

Ife (1997, p.95) contends that feminisms’ insistence that the personal is political has been one of the most significant contributions of feminism.
Ife (1997, p.96) suggests that social workers not only need to make the connection between the personal and the political but also have the responsibility of working towards social justice through challenging oppressive social structures. My understanding is that all social work (which includes research) takes place within a political context as well as a personal context, and that it is vital to understand and make the links between the personal and the political – to not simply rationalise issues down to a personal responsibility or an individual blame level. This is a complex concept and I think that our organisational and political contexts are often such that it is easy for social workers to find themselves only thinking and working at a personal level.

Humphries (2000, pp. 181; 182) argues that all research is value-laden and inevitably political in that it ultimately represents the interests of the more powerful groups within society. From a critical theory perspective, Jamrozic and Nocella (1998) contend that:

> A study of social problems, and any study of society, is a political act. The political nature of such study is not seen in the subjective interpretation of a social problem, but simply in the awareness that the act of choosing a social issue as a topic for enquiry is intrinsically political because it brings the issue to public notice (p.30).

This political nature of research is further discussed at a later stage in this dissertation. Humphries (2000) contends that “what is required is research which ‘brings to voice’ the excluded and marginalised groups as subjects rather than objects of research, and which attempts to understand the world in order to change it” (p.182). Bringing ‘voice’ to the dairy farmers and making the link between the personal experiences of the participating dairy farmers and the wider political context have been at the very heart of this study.

**Reflexivity**

Maynard and Purvis (cited in Woodward, 2000, p.44) contend that reflexivity is intrinsic to feminist epistemology. Reflexivity provides a means for drawing “attention to the complex relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes as well as the involvement of the knowledge producer” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, p.9). Researcher reflexivity encourages a mindfulness with respect to the influence of language, culture, theory and political factors in terms of the generation, interpretation and presentation of knowledge, (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p.5).
Reflexivity stimulates a critical reflection and awareness with respect to the researcher's "taken for granted assumptions and blind spots in their own social culture, research community and language" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 6). Gubrium and Holstein (1997, p. 16) suggest however, that whilst reflexive consciousness is an important ingredient in terms of understanding the researcher's position in relationship to the study, researchers need to be cautious about becoming too preoccupied with themselves in the process. Bruner (cited by Denzin, 1997) argues that "No one is advocating ethnographic self indulgence" – researchers need to find a balance in terms of being open about their own positioning without "putting the personal self so deeply back into the text that it completely dominates" (p.218).

Gubrium and Holstein (1997, p.110; 111) suggest that researchers are “granted a privileged place with regard to telling others what is going on in their social world”. I believe that reflexivity not only provides a process whereby the researcher can be remain mindful of their own positioning, it allows the reader to place the researcher and gain a greater understanding with respect to the integrity of the research knowledge. I see reflexivity as a critical aspect of researcher accountability. Blaikie (1993) contends that reflexive research not only requires the researcher to critically reflect on the research process, but to be “open to be changed by it” (p.91). My sense is that this research project has provided me with an incredible opportunity to reflect on and enhance all aspects of my social work practice as well as an opportunity to reflect on and develop my membership within the dairy farming community.

Supervision has been critical to my reflexive approach to this research project. The supervision process provided valuable opportunities for grappling with the many complexities associated with my level of engagement with the area of research, the research community and the research process. I felt that my extensive level of engagement demanded a high degree of reflexivity in order to establish a trustworthiness in the research data and the research outcomes (Price, 1996, p.209). I found that I was constantly reflecting on my methods and motivations. Although not distinct positionings, I also found that I was constantly reflecting on my insider dairy farmer positioning and my outsider researcher role (Hill Collins, 1986). Much of my reflective practice was associated with attempting to maintain a transparency and accountability around my movement across these insider/outsider positionings.
I was particularly aware that it was not only important to employ a high degree of reflexivity throughout the research project but to remain transparent around that reflexivity within the dissertation. I felt that this required another level of reflexivity with respect to maintaining an openness within the dissertation without giving myself further prominence within the research project.

**Methodological Considerations**

This research is being undertaken as a qualitative study with an engaged critical ethnographic methodological framework. I have attempted to explain my understanding of the ‘engaged’ aspect of engaged critical ethnography, so I would like to attempt to explain the other aspects of my chosen methodology.

Denzin & Lincoln (1994) contend that “Qualitative researchers think historically, interactionally, and structurally” (p.199). A qualitative methodological framework allows for the investigation of the public, private and personal issues that determine a given historical period. Qualitative researchers employ a diverse range of research methods, which are determined in accordance with the particular research paradigm. Qualitative researchers are able to draw on their own experiences, to assist them in making the connections between the lived experiences of individuals, and the “larger social and cultural structures” of society (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.199).

Critical ethnography is a form of qualitative research, which has an underlying aim of emancipation, empowerment and liberation. Unlike traditional ethnographic research which is descriptive, critical ethnographic research “critically analyses the relationships between social practices and overarching macro-cultural principles” (Sarantakos, 1993, p.266). Quantz (1992) maintains that critical ethnography evolved during the late 1960s, as academics started to challenge the researcher role as “apologist for the status quo” (p.450). Around the same time, Quantz (1992, p.461) suggests, some researchers were challenging the research prejudice of giving greater credence to the theoretical perspectives of academia, than to people’s lived reality (p.46). Quantz (1992, p.461) maintains that critical theory has been strengthened by the ethnographic method of incorporating experience into research, and that ethnographic methodology has been deepened by critical discourse.
Quantz, (1992) argues that:

Theory without empirical knowledge of lived cultures is too easily reduced to mere formalism; it remains an elitist exercise in academic conversations, which does more to advance the careers of university professors than it contributes to the empowerment of ordinary people. (pp. 461; 462).

Quantz (1992) suggests that instead of attempting to define critical ethnography, critical ethnographic research needs to be placed within a critical discourse (p.448). Quantz further suggests that critical ethnographic researchers should participate in “the larger ‘critical’ dialogue rather than follow any particular set of methods or research techniques” (p.449). Quantz (1992) explains that although there are no particular methodological disciplines or conceptual categories that determine critical ethnography, there is a real expectation that critical ethnographers will be “engaged in an ongoing dialogue related to issues of emancipation in an historically structured society” (p.463). Through dialogue, critical ethnographers are required to depict the real circumstances of a marginalised group within a broader socio-political framework (Quantz, 1992, p.462). Although critical researchers may instigate their research process with an assumption that the group is disempowered: the critical researcher enters the research process with no assumptions as to how that disempowerment impacts on the study group participants; how participants respond to their positioning; whether participants see their responses as anything other than individual choice; or even, whether participants consider themselves to be disempowered (Quantz, 1992, p.468).

Although ethnographic knowledge is generally created through the interactive experiences of the researcher and the people participating in the research – critical ethnography privileges the meaning-making of the participating dairy farmers over the meaning-making of the researcher. Even though this may present an ongoing contradictory tension, Simon and Dippo (1986) argue that critical ethnographers need to recognise that researcher knowledge is undeniably limited by their own histories and structural constraints (cited in Quantz, 1992, p.471). Indeed, Hammersley and Atkinson, (1983) suggest that researchers should conduct their research in such a way that the researcher becomes part of the researched. Critical researchers choose a position and cannot pretend to be value-free (Hammersley & Atkinson, cited in Quantz, 1992, p.472). An essential and worthy aspect of critical ethnography is the strong emphasis on an open and transparent research process.
One of the other primary aspects of critical research, is the acknowledgment that critical ethnographers bring a theoretical focus to the data – they do not simply collect data and then seek a theory to explain it. Critical ethnographers recognise that data is not merely collected by the researcher but is produced by the researcher (Quantz, 1992, p.459). Simon and Dippo (1986, cited in Quantz, 1992) contend that:

For ethnographic work to warrant the label “critical” requires that it meet three fundamental conditions: (1) the work must employ an organising problematic that defines one’s data and analytical procedures in a way that is consistent with its project; (2) the work must be situated, in part, within a public sphere that allows it to become the starting point for the critique and transformation of the conditions of oppressive and inequitable moral and social regulation; and (3) the work must address the limits of its own claims by a consideration of how, as a form of social practice, it too is constituted and regulated through historical relations of power and existing material conditions. (p. 448).

Method

Dairy Farmer Participants

Ten dairy farmers, from across the South West region, were invited to participate in this study. Participation was invited through a combination of a purposive (Alston & Bowles, 1998) and snowballing (Bhopal, 2000) sampling techniques. Purposive sampling involves the inclusion of participants who are considered to be part of a particular group whose members are significant to the area of study (Alston & Bowles, 1998, p.92). In this study, it was dairy farmers from the South West region of Western Australia who were invited to participate in the research project. As part of my continuing effort to reduce my influence within the research project, research participants were nominated through a snowballing strategy (Bhopal, 2000, p.69) rather than a selection process. Because of my level of engagement with the research community, I felt that the snowballing strategy would reduce the likelihood of participants being selected or sidestepped on the basis of my presumptions or familiarity. I wanted to minimise the risk of selectively inviting participation according to the likelihood of dairy farmers’ experiences correlating with my own or in accordance with my personal levels of comfort. I found that the snowballing strategy provided me with a means for making the “familiar unfamiliar” (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner & Steinmetz, 1991, p.124).
Ely, et. al. (1991) suggest that although there are advantages in undertaking research in a familiar setting, such as familiarity with the subject, the culture, the jargon and the unwritten codes of behaviour, there is also a danger associated with the researcher's "presumption of understanding" (p.124).

The snowballing strategy involved a process whereby dairy farmers nominated other dairy farmers as research participants. My initial approach to prospective participants was through a telephone conversation and once dairy farmers indicated that they were interested in participating in the research project, they were provided with a letter of introduction (attached as appendix a.) and a consent form (attached as appendix b.). I was particularly rigorous with respect to providing accurate and comprehensive information to prospective participants. Participants were also invited to nominate the time, the place and the duration of the interviews. I was aware, from my experiences within the farming community, that it is not always easy to maintain privacy in a family farming situation, so I was determined to provide farmers with real choices in terms of where and when the research conversations took place. As determined by the dairy farmers, each of the research conversations took place at the respective homes of the dairy farm participants – and always around the kitchen table.

**Storying**

My intention, through the research conversations, was to provide an opportunity for people to tell their stories with respect to dairy deregulation. I found that my social work understandings of genuineness, connectedness, rapport, empathy, listening, valuing, integrity, humility, respectfulness, competence, confidentiality, humour, and 'doing no harm', facilitated the storying process.

Tirosh Ben-Ari (1995) explains that storying is a way of attempting to "restore a sense of order and meaning to experience. That is, stories are a way of organizing experience, interpreting events, and creating meaning while maintaining a sense of continuity" (p.155). Storying, which allows for storying and then restorying of peoples lived experiences, can be therapeutic (Tirosh Ben-Ari, 1995) and can provide an opportunity for people to create new and possibly liberating ways of understanding their experiences (White & Epston, cited in Tirosh Ben-Ari, 1995, p.155).
Ellis and Bochner (1992) contend that

By making intricate details of one's life accessible to others in public discourse, personal narratives bridge the dominions of public and private life. Telling a personal story becomes a social process for making lived experience understandable and meaningful (pp. 79; 80).

Participating dairy farmers were invited to share their stories with respect to the deregulation of the dairy industry, through conversational style interviews. Kvale (1996) suggests that although people "get to know other people, get to learn about their experiences, feelings, and hopes and the world they live in" through conversations, the research conversation is a "conversation with a structure and a purpose" (p. 5; 6). Whilst aware of the purpose for the research relationship, I felt that the process was as important, if not more important, than the research outcomes. To that end, I attempted to provide as unstructured a process as possible, in an effort to create an interview environment where people felt comfortable to share as much or as little as they chose.

In terms of the research relationship, I was aware that I was likely to be experienced as both a fellow dairy farmer and a researcher during the research conversations and I always attempted to remain mindful around not using my dairy farmer positioning to influence the direction of the conversations. Kvale (1996, p. 6) reminds researchers of the unequal power differences associated with the research conversation — it is the researcher who introduces, defines and controls the research process. Coles (1989) reminds the researcher that:

The people who come to us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is their story (cited in Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 1).

Excerpts from dairy farmers' stories are presented in Chapter Four, entitled Shared Conversations.

**Audio-taping and Transcribing**

With the permission of the research participants, each of the research conversations was audio-taped. I felt that the taking of notes was likely to be disruptive to the conversational process and I had serious concerns about trusting the conversations to memory. Once I transcribed the tapes, I personally returned the transcripts to the participating dairy farmers for their verification, modification or deletion.
Only after the participants had verified their transcripts and given permission for their use, were the transcripts accepted as research data. Dairy farmer participants were informed that although my aim, wherever possible, was for the participants to ‘speak for themselves’ within the text, through direct quotations, other aspects of their stories would be paraphrased. Participants were also informed that not all data would be included in the final dissertation.

It seemed to me that the depth or intensity of people’s feelings was diminished through the audio-taping and transcribing process. What is lost to the reader are the facial expressions, vocal intonations and body language, elements that may support, give nuances to, or contradict what has been said (Kvale, 1996, p.167). The lived and evolving conversation of the research interview becomes “frozen in time” and separated from their context through the transcribing process (Kvale, 1996, p.166). I found that the transcribing process required a good deal of time and a great deal of sensitivity. In attempting to apply a high degree of accuracy to the transcripts, I found that I often needed to replay different sections of the tapes quite a number of times. I also found that conversational pauses needed to be placed in exactly the correct places in order to correctly reflect people’s meaning.

In transcribing the tapes, I chose to use an ellipsis (...) to denote the pauses, repetitions or omissions in people’s conversations. For example:

Bob: Yes we are still now. It’s not so bad now. The first thing that we did...young Billy got a job...at some times it’s an absolute pain in the neck and at other times that’s quite fine...hay time and times like that.

The research conversations were transcribed verbatim except for substituting real names with people’s chosen pseudonyms or if references were made to other people who had not consented to being part of the research project. Although I was concerned about any fragmentation of people’s stories Woodward (2000, p.47) suggests that although there is no substitute for the “original words and contextual flavour, there are often other factors which take precedence. Kvale (1996, p.172) suggests that there are differences between oral and written styles of language and explains that it is not unusual for “verbatim, transcribed, oral language” to appear as somewhat “incoherent and confused speech”. Kvale (1996, p.172; 173) advises researchers to be mindful of the ethical considerations associated with publishing interview transcripts that have the potential to stigmatise particular individuals or groups of people.
All research participants were provided with a letter of thanks (attached as appendix c.) and a token of appreciation to acknowledge their very generous contribution to the research project.

**The Transcripts**

One of the greatest dilemmas that I faced in undertaking this research, was deciding which parts of people's stories were to be included in this dissertation and which were to be left out. Apart from my reluctance to fragment people's stories, I felt that each transcript, *in its entirety*, not only provided a valuable insight into the social impact of dairy deregulation but also an important commentary on current issues of rurality.

The whole transcripts could not be included for two reasons: firstly, I was concerned, that some of the participating dairy farmers may have been identifiable if the complete transcripts had been included. The dairy industry in Western Australia is a relatively small community and even though pseudonyms had been used throughout the transcripts, there was a risk that dairy farmers may have been recognisable through their stories; and secondly, the transcripts in their entirety would have far exceeded the word limit for the whole dissertation.

**Data Analysis**

Ely, et. al. (1991) contend that data analysis is about teasing out the essential meaning from the raw data and reorganising and refining it in such a way that it “speaks to the heart of what was learned” (p.140). Ely, et. al. (1991) maintain that data analysis begins right at the start of the data collection process. I felt that much of the data analysis for this study, took place during the research conversations with meanings being clarified within and through the storying process. Kvale (1996, p.178) suggests that the analysis, to varying degrees, may be built into the interview process with meaning being clarified, confirmed or rejected within the interview process. Kvale (1996) contends that the “ideal interview is already analyzed by the time the tape recorder is turned off” (p.178). I found the idea of analysis more complex than this last statement might indicate.
Landau (cited in Ely, et. al., 1991) explains:

Knowledge of others’ hearts, minds, and experiences simply cannot be assumed, regardless of familiarity, or perhaps especially when one is familiar with the subcultural landscape. When dealing with familiar terrain, self-exploration is crucial for the qualitative researcher. “Am I talking about them or am I talking about me?” The question must be asked time and again. (p.125).

Kvale (1996) offers a pertinent question for the researcher to ponder when embracing their analysis of the data: “How do I analyze what my interviewees told me in order to enrich and deepen the meaning of what they said?” (p.183). Although I believe that the research participants offered much of their own analysis, I felt an enormous responsibility around interpreting and representing the shared meanings from the different dairy farmers’ stories. I was particularly concerned that the interpretation of shared meanings would serve to invalidate the unique experiences of particular individuals – and to a degree this has probably occurred. Regrettably, the pragmatics of the research process, such as available time and agreed word count, appear to have afforded precedence to the shared meanings of participants, in as much as it is the shared meanings that have been included within this dissertation.

The process of interpreting shared meanings involved what Palmer (2001) describes as an “immersion” process, whereby the researcher immerses herself in the research data until patterns or themes begin to emerge (personal communication, April, 2001). I considered various coding systems before recognising that I was already very much immersed within the data and already making links between different farmers’ stories. This process was supported by the assistance of a valued colleague who had generously agreed to review my interpretations. I had been particularly pleased to have someone from outside of the research, in addition to my supervisor, to assist me with discussions and review around my meaning-making process. Again, I had been concerned that my level of engagement with the research may unduly influence the analysis process.

In the following chapter, entitled Shared Conversations, various excerpts from the dairy farmers stories have been linked together to provide one (the researcher’s) interpretation of the shared experiences of the participating dairy farmers since the deregulation of the dairy industry. Ryan and Bernard (2000) maintain that by the time researchers have identified the themes and then refined and applied them across the range of data, “a lot of the interpretative analysis has already been done” (p.790).
Another aspect of the analysis took the form of critically reading and analysing the available texts that pertain to the deregulation of the dairy industry – texts such as policy documents; political reports; agricultural reports and reviews; dairy farmer magazines; dairy farmer newsletters; media reports; internet reports; and academic texts; and most importantly the texts of the dairy farmers' stories. This was an ongoing process throughout the research project.

A Word about the Literature Review

I feel that the literature review for this project actually began a good twelve months before the deregulation of the dairy industry and long before I decided to embark on this research project. Leading up to the proposed deregulation, I, like many others, was concerned about the possible social impact of deregulation and I attempted to seek information that might assist me to understand the possible implications for my family and my community. Although, at that time many people held hope of retaining a regulated industry, dairy deregulation seemed inevitable. In an effort to ensure that appropriate services were in place if deregulation did proceed, I joined forces with workers from relevant government and non-government agencies to work towards that end. My initial review of the available literature left me feeling discouraged. Although there appeared to be information that related to the likely economic consequences of deregulation, there appeared to be little information with respect to the likely impact on people at a very personal level. I felt that there were some gaps in the literature in relation to current rural issues and in relation to the likely social fall-out from the current political preoccupation with the capitalist market system. I believe that this information may have been invaluable in terms of: educating the decision-makers; developing appropriate service responses; and preparing funding submissions to acquire the necessary resources to provide for appropriate service responses.

Although I anticipated drawing on a number of bodies of work to inform this study, I saw the literature review as an evolving and integrated process. Ultimately, I see the literature/research relationship as a two-way process – with the literature informing and enriching the study and the study expanding and enriching the literature. As part of my commitment towards privileging the dairy farmers' experiences and avoiding my own presumptions around those experiences, much of the literature review took place alongside the interview process and alongside the data analysis.
I felt that this process would lessen the "likelihood of the literature influencing the outcomes of the research"...and help...“ensure that the research was participant led” (Gray, 1997, p.69). Kirby and McKenna (cited Gray, 1997, p.69) assert that primary sources of data are as valid as secondary sources and that the review of the literature can be undertaken at any stage during the research process. There are a number of bodies of knowledge that have informed the process, the context and the meaning-making of this study and this associated literature has been integrated within and across this research project.

**Ethical Considerations**

**Introduction**

Ife (2001, p.112) suggests that the “idea of ‘professional ethics’ implies a constraint on the power of professionals to practice oppressively” and it was through this framework of attempting to constrain my power as researcher and attempting to ensure that my practice was anti-oppressive, that I considered the ethical issues associated with this research. I felt that the ethical considerations for this research were intrinsically linked to my integrity as a researcher, as a graduate social worker, as a member of my family and as a member of the dairy farming community. Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner and McCormack Steinmetz (1991) contend that:

> Striving to be faithful to another’s viewpoint is striving to be ethical. Striving to maintain confidentiality is striving to be ethical. Striving to be trustworthy is striving to be ethical. It is impossible to confine ethical considerations to a chapter or a section. Actually they are present from the beginning and are woven through every step of the methodology. (p. 218)

**Well-being of the Participating Dairy Farmers.**

The well-being of the participating dairy farmers has remained my uppermost concern throughout the research process. Although I was aware that the interview process may have some benefits for those involved, perhaps in terms of sharing their stories or referencing their experiences against other people’s experiences, I was also aware that the interview experience was not necessarily going to be a positive experience for all of those involved.
With this in mind, I attempted to remain respectful and sensitive to the well-being of the participants throughout the research process. Participating dairy farmers were informed from the very beginning, that it was their right to withdraw from the research process, at any time throughout the research project, and that their decision would be respected and valued.

Many dairy farming families, including my own, were likely to have some degree of vulnerability as a result of the significant and ongoing change associated with deregulation and I attempted to be especially vigilant around avoiding any harm. I was also sensitive to the understanding that work and family life are inextricably linked for dairy farming families and that conversations around people’s work were likely to be intertwined with conversations around people’s families. In presenting people’s stories, I have attempted to be particularly rigorous around protecting other family member’s privacy.

Before beginning the interview process, I obtained permission from South West Counselling Services to offer their contact details to the participating dairy farmers. In the initial information that I provided to prospective participants, I suggested that the research process may evoke some unexpected emotional reactions for people, and I informed participants that I would have contact details for available support agencies at the time of the interviews. I also raised this issue again at the start of each interview conversation.

I was mindful, going into the interview process, that there may be situations, where it would be easy to move from social worker as researcher to social worker as counsellor. I felt that there were times, throughout the interview process, that I needed to remain very conscious of my purpose for being there. I am not for a moment suggesting that the social worker as researcher is unable to respond compassionately or unable to offer a caring hand in a moment of sadness, but I do believe that it is crucial to maintain awareness around the agreed purpose for the interview – the agreed purpose for being invited into people’s homes.

One of the other issues that I felt was particularly important, was to only include the information that dairy farmers provided in the agreed interview process.
I have chosen not to include any parts of the informal conversations that took place before or after the agreed interview conversations because I feel that people were conversing with me as a fellow dairy farmer and not necessarily a researcher during those times. I was aware that although people may not know me personally, it was possible that they may still feel some connection to me through either my husband, his extended family or through common friends or acquaintances. Although I was aware that my connection to the community had perhaps assisted my access to dairy farmer participants, I wanted to remain vigilant around not abusing that connection. I have also attempted to remain rigorous around not presenting any of the participating dairy farmers in a devaluing way.

Although, each of the participating dairy farmers has spoken very positively about their experience in the research process, I felt an enormous obligation to complete this dissertation in a manner that will not only remain sensitive to the well-being of the participants but also honour their generous participation.

Well-being of the Researcher

Although, in undertaking this research, I committed to maintaining a high degree of reflexivity around my level of engagement in the research process, I was unsure of how I would manage my own emotions around other people's stories. As a member of a dairy farming family, who has been significantly affected by dairy deregulation, I understood that there may have been some risk associated with taking-on some of the emotional pain and disillusionment of the participating dairy farmers. I felt, going into the study, that I had worked through many of my own issues and that I was also very open to seeking support from my supervisors and colleagues.

Before beginning the interview process, I also organised for a colleague to interview me. This interview was to serve at least two purposes - to assist me to bracket, or put aside, my understandings and beliefs associated with my own experiences (Crotty, 1998, p.219); and to raise my awareness around my own vulnerabilities. I felt that this was a very useful process and I found, that in addition to the two stated purposes, I gained an invaluable insight into the experience of being interviewed. When my supervisor first suggested that I consider the idea of being interviewed, I was overwhelmed by my panic.
I had many thoughts rushing through my mind such as: "who would I trust enough to interview me?"; "what if I cried?"; "what would they think if I cried?"; "what if they think I am silly?"; "what if it turns out that I am the only one who thinks this way?". It was a really uncomfortable moment and I found myself really struggling around whether I should even continue with the research. I found that I needed to revisit my purposes for conducting the research in the first place and I needed to make a real commitment to an ethical and respectful process. Stanley and Wise (1983) suggest that locating oneself within the research is a "hazardous and frightening business. Vulnerability is always frightening because it can be, and often is, abused or countered by invulnerability" (p.180). Stanley and Wise (1983) maintain however, that by placing ourselves within the research we can do something towards minimising the "imbalance of power between researcher and researched, though it obviously can't remove it. If they are vulnerable, then we must be prepared to show ourselves as vulnerable too" (p.181). As uncomfortable as those initial feelings were, I am glad that I had the opportunity to gain an insight into how others may also feel. I tried to remember those feelings throughout all of my interactions with the participating dairy farmers. It is also these feelings that I remember when I pay tribute to the generosity of those who so very kindly agreed to participate in this study.

Confidentiality and Non-identifiability

The issue of confidentiality and non-identifiability is significant in the research process and critically important to rural based research. It was not enough to simply use pseudonyms for the participating dairy farmers - there was a need for absolute vigilance around maintaining non-identifiability at every level of the research process. In preparing this dissertation, I have remained very mindful that people can be identified not only through their stories but also through their language patterns, particularly in small communities. As requested by the participating dairy farmers, all audio-tapes were wiped clean once the transcripts had been completed and returned to the participants for their approval, modification, amendment or deletion. Some of the participants felt that their voices were distinctive and were concerned that they had named other family members during the interview process, so were more comfortable with having the tapes wiped clean than having the tapes stored, even with guarantees of secure and confidential storage.
Expectations Arising from the Research

I am very aware that research can create expectations for change, indeed my chosen research methodology incorporates a change perspective. Although I firmly believe that individual and social change can arise through a critical research process, I have been mindful of not creating unrealistic expectations for the participating dairy farmers. In keeping with the feminist epistemology I believe that the research is owned by the participating dairy farmers and, even though I have a strong commitment towards activist social work (Healy, 2000), I have assured dairy farmers that their information will only be used for the purpose of this research unless another purpose is negotiated with them. Ideally, with the agreement and support of the participating dairy farmers, my aim is to provide opportunities for the dairy farmers’ experiences to be heard and understood within the wider community. This may be through media releases or through rural or academic journals. It is my intention to actively raise this issue with the participating dairy farmers and to invite their suggestions as to how their stories may best be used in an effort to bring about change.

The Researcher/Researched Relationship

Stanley and Wise (1983) contend that “...all research involves, as its basis, an interaction, a relationship between researcher and researched” (p.162). I felt it was crucial to remain mindful around power issues within that relationship, and to consciously work towards minimising power inequities. Bhopal (2000) suggests that the researcher/researched dichotomy is one of power relations and that people within the research relationship are not “just passive” (p.76). Although the researcher can be both powerful and powerless in the research process, it is the researcher who initiates the research and the researcher who defines and translates the reality of the participants lived experiences (Bhopal, 2000, p.76).

Although I was aware that my university student/researcher role was likely to create some power inequities in terms of the researcher/participant relationship, I equally felt that my dairy farmer/community member role was perhaps able to provide some degree of balance.
I was concerned that dairy farmers may have experienced similar feelings of powerlessness and loss of control, to those that I had experienced following deregulation, and I did not want the research process to compound those feelings. In an attempt to facilitate a more egalitarian use of power (Healy, 2000, p. 87) in the research process, I invited the participating dairy farmers to determine the place, the time and the duration for the interviews. The participants also had final veto over all information that they provided. I felt that the opportunity to be interviewed ‘at home’ and the conversational style of the interviews also assisted with minimising power differences. My aim, within a feminist approach to research, was to provide a research relationship that was “non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, non-manipulative” and aiming to empower” (Bhopal, 2000, p. 70).

Power, I believe, is the underlying issue for all ethical considerations and I believe that anti-oppressive practice requires a critical analysis of power at every level. Humphries (2000) suggests however that emancipatory research identifies traditional research as:

deeply implicated in power, and set as their goals the equalising of power between researcher and researched subjects and the changing of oppressive relations of power. However, both approaches are implicated in power. The very act of engaging in an activity implicates us in power, so that our efforts to liberate perpetuate the relations of dominance. (p. 184).

As Humphries (2000) implies, in researchers’ efforts to share power with the research participants, they are “inevitably implicated in the power in the process.” (p. 185). Even with the best of intentions the researcher holds a disproportionate amount of power in the researcher/researched relationship. I believe that it remains the responsibility of the researcher, as an ethical obligation, to stay reflexive and accountable around the use of their researcher power.

Limitations

Introduction

Glesne and Peshkin, (1992) contend that the description of the study’s limitations not only helps to set the context for the research but also assists in setting the trustworthiness of the data.
Glesne and Peshkin suggest that the “Limitations are consistent with the always partial state of your knowing in social research, and elucidating them helps readers to know that they should read and interpret your work” (p.147). Although I have attempted to outline this study’s limitations at each level of this research project, I think that, in terms of trustworthiness and context, the following limitations require highlighting.

**Distance**

Distance has also been a significant limitation to this research. Although this research has deliberately been limited to the Western Australian dairy industry, distance has provided a constraint with respect to accessing dairy farmers, both in terms of cost and time. My experience of working and living in a rural community is that distance is a critical issue across all aspects of rural social work practice, and this has also been apparent in this project. I felt that the supervisory process mirrored some of the challenges that I had experienced with distance throughout the research process. My supervisor, Dr Susan Young, resided overseas for most of the year and the supervision process took place via the telephone and email. I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to work with Susan, although I felt that there were some difficulties associated with access, and I really did miss the personal contact.

**Who is Missing?**

One of my concerns, throughout this research project, has been related to the question of “who is missing?”. This questioning is not to devalue this particular study, because I believe that this study is especially significant in terms of demonstrating the links between the lived experiences of the participating dairy farmers and society’s social and cultural structures (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.199). The questioning is related to a recognition of the likelihood that other groups of people are also affected by dairy deregulation. There has been anecdotal evidence that suggests that dairy deregulation has adversely impacted on a number of people across the community including: dairy farm employees; community members; local businesses and their employees; milk tanker drivers; and other dairy industry related workers. I would suggest that there is room for further research to investigate the impact of dairy deregulation on the wider community.
Researcher Position

Although, I recognise my level of engagement with the research area as a resource, in terms of access, language, history and culture, I also wish to raise it as a possible limitation. As a result of my level of involvement with the area of research, I was concerned that my experiences as a dairy farmer within a deregulated industry had the potential to unduly influence the research process and perhaps create a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' in terms of the research outcomes. Olesen, (1994) contends that researcher bias has been a long standing criticism of qualitative research and argues:

To the charges that the researcher brings her own biases, qualitative feminist researchers would reply that bias is a misplaced term. To the contrary, these are resources and, if the researcher is sufficiently reflexive about her project, she can evoke them as resources to guide data gathering or creating and for understanding her own interpretations and behaviour in the research...what is required, they would argue, is sufficient reflexivity. (p. 166)

Researcher reflexivity and an openness around the researchers positioning within the research project, are critical in terms of re-presenting participants' stories in a trustworthy manner. It is the researcher, who has the power over the "overall structure of where the words go and subsequently, what the words ultimately say within the context of the thesis" (Woodward, 2000, p.44).

Other Influences

Dairy farmers have experienced a significant amount of change over a short period of time, which may also have impacted on the research outcomes. Around the same time as dairy deregulation, dairy farmers were also facing: the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST); the introduction of the new tax system; the implementation of the Dairy Industry Quality Assurance program; and the new requirements of the Meat Standards Association.

Participation

I was aware that the levels of participation, in interviews conducted with couples or family members, may have been influenced by issues relating to gender, age or family position.
Although, in most cases, couples appeared to encourage each other’s level of participation, there perhaps were some cases where one member may have participated to a greater degree than another and therefore may have a greater influence on the research than the other.

*Alternative Research Methods*

Although, I feel that the culture of the dairy farming community would not necessarily have been conducive to, for example, group based research, avenues for exploring alternative research methods which included greater participant involvement, were considered but not fully investigated. Although the issues of time, resources and distance were particularly significant to that decision, part of my reluctance to pursue alternative methods, was associated with my understandings around the traditional culture of dairy farming communities, wherein private matters are not usually discussed outside of the family. I was also aware from my community involvement, that dairy farmers were feeling somewhat exhausted from: their involvement in the farmer meetings and protests leading up to and following deregulation; complying with government requirements in relation to accessing the restructure packages; the negotiations and processes involved with the implementation of the new milk contract systems; the demands of the new tax system and the GST requirements; meeting the requirements of the recently introduced Dairy Farm Quality Assurance program; and the farming practices changes associated with the deregulation process, and I was particularly reluctant to ask any more of dairy farmers than I had already asked. Research is an exacting process and I am especially grateful for the time that dairy farmers contributed to this research through their participation in the research conversations and their feedback on their interview transcripts. Nevertheless, I would have greatly valued further input from dairy farmer participants with respect to interpreting the connections between their stories and placing their stories into a broader social and political context.

Apart from feeling a great sense of responsibility and a degree of vulnerability around undertaking the interpretation and discussion process without further participant involvement, I have struggled with the notion of “reinforcing power differentials” by undertaking research on rather than with the research participants (Kirby & McKenna, cited by Ife, 2001, p.160).
Although, Ife (2001) suggests that from a human right’s perspective, researchers wherever possible, should include the participants in the “design, implementation, interpretation and presentation of the research” (p.160). Ife (2001) also contends that “Within the overall perspective, however, different designs and methodologies will be appropriate, depending on the specific issue being researched” (p.159). I would also suggest that there may be various considerations, including other unrelated demands on the participants, which need to be taken into account when determining the level of participant involvement in the research project. Although I elected, for a number of reasons, not to invite greater levels of participation from the dairy farmer participants, I wish to raise this issue as a possible limitation of this study.

**Time**

The scope of this study has been limited by the time constraints associated with undertaking this Social Work Honours project in the same year as completing the final year of the social work program.

This chapter is followed by a prelude to chapter three, which describes the locality of the study. Chapter three, entitled *Shared Conversations*, introduces the dairy farmer participants and contains excerpts from their stories.
Prelude to Chapter Three: Setting the Scene

The Western Australian dairy industry is situated in the south-west corner of Western Australia, extending from Armadale in the north through to Albany in the south. Most Western Australian dairy farms are situated on the coastal plains within 50 kilometres of the Western Australian coast - the Indian Ocean in the west and the Southern Ocean in the south. The climate for this region could be described as typically 'Mediterranean', with dry summer months and generally high rainfall during the winter. The diverse natural vegetation of this area ranges from hardy coastal shrubs through to areas of rich wetland marshes, and centuries old Karri and Tuart forests. The fertile soils and the high rainfall of this region have also provided for a wide range of agricultural industries which include, among other things, dairy, beef, sheep, vegetables, fruit and viticulture. (South West Development Commission, 2001)

My family farm is situated on the Elgin Plains between Bunbury and Busselton, within approximately 20 kilometres of the Indian Ocean and 5 kilometres of the Darling Scarp. Through my travels to meet with the participating dairy farmers, I was not only reminded of the diverse nature of the South West region, but also reminded of how seldom I venture from the main roads or highways, except within my own area. Distance was a real issue in terms of accessing farming families and distance, I would suggest, became one of the major limitations with respect to the number of farmers involved in the study. My husband and I are often amused when people who live in town suggest that we come to them, rather than them coming to us because it is ‘too far’ to come out to the farm. In undertaking this research, I also related to the notion of places being a little too far, particularly when I was trying to find my way to people’s homes, in areas that I didn’t know well, or in some cases, didn’t know at all. Sometimes it felt as though the very corrugated and very winding gravel road was never going to end. There were times when I was sure that I had taken the wrong turn and that it was actually “the second turn to the left after the fork in the road” and not “the third turn to the left after the fork in the road”. I also needed to keep reminding myself that “just past” the railway line or “just off” the highway can actually mean many different things to many different people.

There were also some excruciatingly long and slow drives up and down those nightmarish hills of the South West Highway between Donnybrook and Bridgetown.
If you have ever followed behind one of the fully-laden log trucks as they negotiate those hills, you will surely understand what I mean when I describe the hills as 'nightmarish'. Although, on one hand, there is a heart-in-your-throat fear, associated with following the trucks, it is difficult not to also appreciate the magnificent valleys that fall below.

Although the spectacular and never ending hills of the Ferguson Valley and the Bridgetown/Greenbushes area, appear in stark contrast to the flats of the Elgin Plains, the timing of my interview process coincided with the magnificent greenness of early spring – a greenness, which seemed to stretch endlessly across all of the areas that I visited. By the time that I returned to deliver the transcripts (and a tin of thankyou bickies) to each of the participating dairy farmers, many of the paddocks were already beginning to change from the greenness of the fresh pastures to the yellow of the summer dry feed. By this second visit, there were thousands of rolls of the new season's hay scattered across the countryside. As a city-girl turned dairy farmer, it is difficult to explain the feelings that are engendered by the sight of the new rolls of hay, but there really is something very exciting about seeing the rows and rows of hay rolls lined up across the paddocks. I am not sure whether this excitement is to do with the completion of one of the years most difficult and worrying farming jobs or whether there is something aesthetically pleasing about the neatly arranged rolls of yellow/gold hay extending endlessly across the countryside – and perhaps it is both!

One of the other bonuses associated with undertaking the interviews during the spring time was that, in addition to the country being at its beautiful spring best, people's house gardens were also in full bloom. Many of the older homes had magnificent stands of beautiful roses, their thick and hardy stems and incredibly large blooms showing their decades of growth. I often feel that the farm house gardens appear like a little 'oasis' in the distance, as you approach the farm. The bright and colourful roses, camellias, hydrangeas and hibiscus appear in distinct contrast to the starkness of the paddocks that surround them. I am often amused to see the young calves hanging their heads over the fence of the house garden, somewhat like young children peering through the window of a lolly shop.

There was as much diversity in the different farms and different farm houses, as there was across the natural environment of the dairy region.
Some of the homesteads, with their timber floors and large shady verandahs, have housed the one family across three generations or more, whilst others were reasonably modern brick and tile homes. Most houses had been built within walking distance of the dairy and in close proximity to the various hay and machinery sheds. Grain silos and calf pens usually line up alongside the dairy and it is not unusual for a number of calves to be racing around the dairy surrounds. Although farms are often portrayed as quiet and peaceful, I always think that dairy farms look and sound busy – with the continual movement of tractors and motor-bikes, the constant whirr of the water pumps and milking machine motors, the continual mooing and bellowing of the cows, the bursts of ‘colourful’ language from the farmers and the barking of the excited dogs.

One of the constants throughout my interview process was that I was always ‘greeted’ by at least one farm dog, usually two. Now farm dogs take their job very seriously and they are certain to take every opportunity to show that they are worth their ‘dog bickies’. Some of the dogs however, seem to think that their job includes terrifying any intruder who is silly enough to come down their road, others think that their sole duty is to sniff and lick the intruder until they choose to either enter the house or leave the farm. Unfortunately, some of the dogs that I encountered seemed to think that their job sat somewhere between the two and they chose to alternate their barking with their sniffing and their licking. I usually found that whatever they chose to do was distinctly uncomfortable for me. Although we have always had a dog on our farm, as do most of our friends, I tend to be very cautious around dogs that I don’t know, particularly if they are farm or working dogs. So...finding the right farm was my first task, finding the right house on the farm was my second task and respectfully negotiating the farm dogs was definitely my third task.

The next chapter entitled *Shared Conversation*, introduces the dairy farmer participants and contains excerpts from their stories.
Chapter Three

Shared Conversations

I feel very privileged to introduce Beth, Bob, Elizabeth, Ivan, Joe, Julio, Lucy, Mary, Rex and Todd. I thank them for sharing their stories.

More Than a Job: It's a Family Farming Lifestyle

I just enjoy the life...you know...I have got my family around all of the time...and I like going to the dairy...it doesn't seem like a job...I don't think of it as a job...it something that I enjoy doing  (Todd).

Each of the dairy farmers spoke of their farm in terms of a valued “way of life” rather than simply a business enterprise. Although dairy farmer participants emphasised different aspects of their lives that they considered important, all participants spoke of feeling connected to their family farming lifestyle, to their land and to their animals. Todd indicated that he had always wanted to live and work on the family farm as had his father and grandfather before him. Todd indicated that he could imagine no better life for himself and his young family and despite the difficulties that he and his family had encountered since deregulation, Todd seemed determined to continue dairy farming.

Mary and Bob were equally determined to maintain their family farming lifestyle and although Mary had married into the family farming lifestyle she felt that it had become part of who she was:

I have been on the farm 31 years and it still never ceases to delight me when I see a little calf get up and walk away. And another thing when the green grass comes after the rain...now that's not every body's cup of tea but that's part of me.

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Although Bob and Mary have several children, only one of their children Billy, has remained working on the family farm. According to Mary, farmers were born — not made and one of her greatest concerns with respect to deregulation was that Billy might not have the opportunity to retain the farming lifestyle. Bob felt that Billy belonged on the farm and was angry that Billy’s opportunity to farm may have been jeopardised through deregulation:

Like yesterday...these two heifers walked up and here is Billy just playing with these two heifers...I think that they may have bunted him in the bum and he probably has a bruised bum today... this is not a bad way of life...but it is just annoying that you have some goon come in with this deregulation to stuff it all up.

Concern for their children’s future, was also an important issue for Elizabeth and Joe, who shared the running of their family farming enterprise with two of their adult sons. Elizabeth and Joe enjoyed their farming lifestyle and enjoyed sharing the farm with their children and their grandchildren. As Elizabeth proudly asserts:

I like the dairy farm and the cows... when I am home I am over the dairy...I like the life here...I don’t want to go moving anywhere. I milked the cows up until the night before the babies were born and then when they were a fortnight old they were back over the dairy with me...in the pram.

In the tradition of family farming, Joe and Elizabeth were anxious to ensure that future generations of their family had the opportunity to live and work on the farm. As Joe explains:

We’ve got sons and that’s all that they want to do...that’s all that they want to do.... they were brought up in the dairy...kids leave school and teachers even ask kids “why aren’t you going on at school?” and they get “well there’s cows to milk”.

Joe suggested that he felt a sense of obligation to a lifestyle and an industry that had maintained his family over several generations:
Well...it is the dairy that has generated our asset...we feel that we owe it our loyalty to stay in there...over maybe a short period of rough road...to try.

For Beth and Rex, who have now left the dairy industry, deregulation has meant a complete change of lifestyle and losses at a number of levels. Although Beth, Rex and their children continue to live in the lovely old rambling farm house, that had been the home of Rex's parents before them, it was not viable for them to continue dairying in a deregulated industry. Although pleased that they could continue living on the farm, Beth spoke of her sadness around discontinuing dairy farming and of her disappointment for their daughter Stacey, who had wanted to continue dairying:

I was the one who thought “this is the end of a life style”...what would we pass onto Stacey...the cows had been ours...we knew who they all were...it was that sort of sentimental attachment...but as an economic decision...its wasn’t viable. Being able to still live here – that is a bonus - but we are no longer dairy farmers ...we just live here. It has felt sad. About 3 months ago I was coming home and often you would come to the top of the road and you would see the cows looking over the fence and I come home and there were no cows...it was like a loss. They were part of the family.

It’s Part of Who You Are: Connection to the Land

To sell some land...Mum and Dad would have killed me...if I even thought of doing such a thing (Bob).

When the participating dairy farmers spoke of their land, they spoke of it in terms of their identity, in terms of the land being part of who they were. There was a real sense from farmers that the land belonged to past, present and future generations of their family and it wasn’t a commodity that could be easily sold. Bob, who farmed the land with his parents until his parents were very elderly, now continues to farm the land with his wife Mary and their son, Billy.
Bob indicated that he would be very loath to sell the family farm:

Billy is third generation on this farm...this is what Dad bought...If we had to, then I guess we would have to...it would be the last straw...the only reason you would sell it is if we went broke.

For Todd, the thought of losing the family farm was also particularly burdensome,

if you were the one who lost the family farm...that would be a pressure on you for the rest of your life...that would be something that you would never forget.

Julio felt a sense of connection and an obligation to the land. He believed that farming was an important occupation and he was concerned that he may not be able to continue farming. For Julio, there was a sense of frustration that farming was often only considered in economic terms:

its part of who you are...you love being on the land...we also need agricultural products...it's an important occupation...I feel honoured that I am able to work on the land...since deregulation...it's been depressing...the thought that we might have to sell the land...that was devastating...we are entrusted with it...to pass it onto future generations...people look at your farm in terms of your financial viability...in terms of return on your investment...people don't seem to have an understanding that your farm is more than that...that you have a connection with the land...it's a love of the land...everything is not just to do with dollars and cents and about seeing a return on your investment...its more than that.

Part of the Family? Connection to the Cows

The cows are part of your life...you know all of your animals...you work with them every day...they become...sort of part of your family as well  (Julio).

Each of the dairy farmers spoke of a strong attachment to their cows. Mary encountered the story of receiving their first cheque after dairy deregulation.
Mary explained that both she and Bob had been particularly disappointed after discovering how low prices had dropped in the deregulated market. Despite their disappointment, when they went to the dairy that night and saw all their much-loved cows, the first comment that Bob made was:

"but I couldn't get rid of these."

Bob could not imagine ever selling their dairy herd:

"The day I sold my cows I don't know what I would do...there are days that I could shoot them but on the other hand...underneath it all I know is that they are the creatures who are keeping us going."

Mary explained that Bob's father, although now frail and very elderly, still maintained an attachment to the dairy herd:

"Bob's Dad used to say that he could drive anywhere and pick one of his animals..."they stand out". With all of his problems...we made a book up for him and it's got a lot of his show cows in there...and the last time that I looked at it, he was flipping over and I said "now you tell me which is your best cow" and back he went and found his cow. He knew it and Bob said, "I'll bet you he will pick Lullabelle out"...and he did."

After making the decision to discontinue dairy farming, Rex and Beth needed to sell their dairy herd. For Rex, selling the dairy herd was particularly difficult, although made a little easier when one of his neighbours purchased some of the cows:

"I think that's the worst thing...all the cows...the fact that half of them went next door...that was a lot easier...if you had to sell the whole lot at the sale yards...it was really horrible...because I knew who they were...they were all our cows."

Selling the cows through the sale yards was particularly difficult for Beth. There was no guarantee that the cows would go to another milking herd and there was a risk that they would be bought by the butchers.
Unfortunately for Beth, she was rostered to work in the sale-yard on the same day as the cows were sold:

\[ \text{that's a horrible thought...I worked in the sale yard on that day...someone said that the butchers were there that day and I was thinking "ahhhh"...I saw them all...I heard them...I saw there name tags - tags that we had written out...it was just horrible.} \]

Ivan, Lucy and their family also made the decision to discontinue dairying following several months of milking in a deregulated market. Ivan and Lucy however, have been able to hold onto their dairy herd although they felt that they had been ridiculed, by other people in the community, for keeping their cows. Ivan indicated that although they felt an attachment to their dairy cows and would be reluctant to sell them, they also held some hope that milk prices would increase and that they would be in a position to begin dairy farming again:

\[ \text{you get to know your cows like you do your kids...we have still got 200 cows running around...we haven't sold our cows...we always had probably more cattle than we should...and they were all farm bred...nothing was bought...if things brighten up...we could start milking again.} \]

**Working Longer for Less: Consequences of a Diminishing Income**

\[ \text{In the end you can write down what you want to believe...if you think that you can make a living and you are a farmer who really wants to do it - you can make 15 look like 20 or 20 look like 25 ...and you might say well, maybe I can make a go of it} \quad \text{(Rex).} \]

Dairy farmers have struggled to cope with the significant cuts in income since deregulation. The drop in income has meant different things to different farmers. Despite their best efforts, deregulation meant the end of dairy farming for Rex and Beth. Rex, who grew up on the family farm, left school to work with his parents in their dairy farming enterprise.
After his parents retired, Rex and Beth continued dairy farming on the family farm. Although Beth chose to participate in some off-farm employment, the dairy farm enterprise provided Beth and Rex with their main source of income. Although Beth and Rex continued dairy farming for a few months following deregulation, it soon became obvious that the figures did not add up. Rex suggested that the decision to cease dairying was not taken lightly:

It probably took ...about a month or so of virtually sitting down there doing budgets, trying to work out where the money was coming from...altering budgets...looking at figures...the price was coming down and down and down and when it got to 16/17 cents a litre...by the time you did your budget...you were virtually working twelve months for nothing...now that could have been $20000 – but it could have been $10000. Now what's the point of putting 55 hours a week or sometimes 60 or 70 hours a week for that sort of money? At the end of the day the figures still didn't hold up. Every time your account went over someone from Sydney who knew nothing about your account would ring you up...or ring Dad up...and say "your accounts overdrawn"...there would be a big panic. It's been pretty tough.

For Beth discontinued dairying meant an increase in her off-farm working hours,

it has increased my workload away from the farm. I know that I have had to pick up extra work, with the work that I was doing part-time. It was another income as far as grocery shopping ...the extra money that we needed...more work!

Rex also needed to find off-farm work – he was not entitled to unemployment benefits because of their farm asset:

I am not working at the moment...I worked for a number of month...which was good...to pick up a job...if you haven't got a job, you need some other income coming in regularly. The really annoying thing is that Social Security doesn't want to know about you...you can't get assistance at all.
Beth was particularly annoyed about Rex being excluded from receiving unemployment benefits:

*It makes you wonder – if farmers can’t get a Centrelink payment because of their assets and they can’t get work... how do they get on?*

Ivan and Lucy faced a substantial decrease in their income following deregulation and also made the decision to stop dairying after milking for a number of months in a deregulated industry. Prior to deregulation, Ivan and Lucy held a substantial market milk quota, which ensured a reasonable living for the four families who depended on the farm for income. For Ivan and Lucy, who had planned (pre-deregulation) to retire and leave their son’s Arthur and Kelvin running the farm, deregulation meant a change to their retirement plans. With the drop in income, the farm could no longer afford the cost of the farm worker and Ivan needed to assist with the work. Ivan and Lucy unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate a contract with one of the processing companies that was paying higher prices. As Ivan explains,

*when they deregulated, we were getting 17 cents [per litre for milk]... our income just disappeared. The first thing that went was our married worker... and that was another fellow out of work... and that put me back into the work force full-time... the economics of milking the cows for 17 cents a litre – are just not there, in my eyes... and never were... we tried to shift [change to another processor] but no one wanted us... Peters didn’t want us and Nationals didn’t want us so we were stuffed... we had two options... work for nothing or pack up for awhile... giving up dairying is probably the biggest decision that I ever had to get involved with, that I didn’t want to do... we’ve been milking cows for over 100 years... it’s a really big decision... but there’s no point in milking the buggers, if you are getting a bill at the end of it.*

As Lucy explains, costs remained constant even though their income had dropped significantly:

*The thing is that the fuel bill didn’t get any smaller, the insurance didn’t get any smaller... none of the fixed costs got any smaller... where were the cuts going to come from?*
Having made the decision to stop dairying, Ivan and Lucy faced another problem - either one or both of their sons needed to find off-farm employment. In the tradition of family farming, both sons had returned to work on the farm immediately after completing their schooling. As Ivan indicates:

> in my era, the thing was for the sons to come back to the family farm...and they came back to the family farm without any training to do anything else...because it wasn’t thought of that this was going to happen...now my boys are both at the age where nobody wants them...they are too old...Kelvin is in his forties and Arthur is in his late thirties...and it is pretty difficult to find a job...I brought the two boys onto the farm...what I should have done is sent them out to get a trade...and if they wanted to come back on the farm then, that was a plus...that wasn’t the thinking in those days...you had to get your boys home onto the farm...you had to come back on the farm because Dad was waiting for you to come back...they knew that the farm was going to pass down...that they could get an income.

Although concerned about their family situation, Lucy was also worried about the environmental consequences associated with farmers increasing their herd size to compensate for their diminishing incomes:

> Environmentally, I think that it is a disaster...the effluent Terese, that is coming out of these big dairies...in a small community, in particular...with the run-off into streams or bores or whatever...it has got to go somewhere.

Ivan agreed, he was concerned that some farmers were increasing their dairy herds without ensuring that they had upgraded their facilities to cope with the changes:

> The environmental issues with some of these bigger dairies...their laneways are bogging up, everything is bogging up...their water...it is not only their dairy that you need to build, you have got to upgrade the whole lot.
Julio felt that he and his family had come under considerable pressure with the considerable drop in dairy income and the uncertainty surrounding the dairy industry. Julio indicated that they had needed to make some changes to their way of working:

*I have found...the 12 months since deregulation, one of the hardest times in my life...I have been working longer hours...because you can't afford to get contract people...we really can't afford to get anyone in to help with the work. There has been a great deal of uncertainty...we are not too sure whether the prices are going to increase or stop at the low prices that they are now...we had about a 30-35 % drop in our income since deregulation...I can see our machinery and our repairs falling down...we don't fix anything now unless it is completely broken...whereas before you would keep your maintenance up.*

The drop in dairy farm income has also meant cut-backs for Todd and his family:

*we have just cut everything down...we haven't spent a lot of money on our household stuff...we save everything that we can...you know...just in case it gets a lot worse...if there are any parts that we might get a few more hours work out of, then we put them back...we replace just the bare essentials...every time that we do a job we don't know if it's going to finish the job...it is just the constant worry...it just depresses you all the time...because your machinery is falling to bits and there is no way to get it back up to the standard where you used to hold it.*

Todd was also concerned about the flow on effect from deregulation within the community:

*talking to everyone else...you get to see that everyone else is in a similar situation...some are in worse situations. I got to be good friends with one bloke...he's been working on a dairy farm for five years and they were going to have to let him go...and he's still on the wire now...he goes from month to month not knowing whether they can afford to keep him. It doesn't only go for the farmers...everyone around them has got the same uncertainty.*
For Joe, the drop in income meant that his family needed to make some big changes. Ivan was especially concerned about the impact on his family and on the cows:

we had to make some changes...and increasing production was not one of the things that we thought we could afford to do. The kids have taken pretty big cuts...they have borne a fair bit of the load of it and that has been the hardest part. The way that we have had to treat our stock, with feeding them less, and the way that we have had to treat our farm and then the way that we have had to treat our family...we had to address some big financial cuts there. I think that we have all been down...I initially told the kids that there are people who deal with droughts of all sorts and this was an income drought...a financial drought for us...I am hoping that maybe we can hang on.

One of the greatest concern for Bob and Mary was that the drop in income meant that their son Billy, needed to find off-farm employment. This in turn meant that their workload increased. According to Bob:

It [the price] went right down once deregulation came in...right down...it was a hell of a drop. The first thing that we did...young Billy got a job...some times it's an absolute pain in the neck and at other times that's quite fine...hay time and times like that... that's one of the worst things...there are times when we really wish that he was at home.

Apart from the increased workload, which resulted from Billy working off-farm, Bob and Mary faced additional concerns related to their family partnership. The nature of family farming is such, that it is not unusual for family partnerships to span two or three generations. With the drop in income, Bob and Mary found that they needed to reorganise their finances, which created some legal difficulties because of Bob's elderly father's involvement in the family partnership. This was a particularly painful episode for both Bob and Mary:

we found that we had to approach the bank to get an overdraft raised, which opened a can of worms because of our family situation...which just created an absolute minefield of paper work and emotional hassles.
Bob had to finish up getting an administration order for his father...that was terrible. That was something that Dad and Mum wanted to do...stay in the partnership and continue on... and that was their right. Bob’s Dad came out at 14 and worked his fingers to the bone. We didn’t feel that it was our place to say “get off – we want to take over”...that’s just not how we feel. He would have worked until he was a good 85.

**The ‘District’ is Gone: The Cost to the Community**

*The loss of young people is a loss for any community* (Julio).

Julio was especially disappointed that his children would no longer have the opportunity to return to work on their family farm and he lamented the loss of young people from the community:

> Originally, one or two of the boys wanted to come back and work on the farm but now there won’t be the income for any of the children to come home onto the farm. I believe that is a big loss...not having young people coming back into the community...the younger people are definitely enthusiastic...they are up-to-date with the new technology...keener to do the work...more able to do the work...and it’s a loss. The average age of dairy farmers is going up...the younger ones are moving away from rural areas and I am not sure who is going to be there to produce the rural products in years to come. The loss of young people is a loss for any community...people need young ones to keep the communities vibrant...and if you haven’t got the young ones staying or returning to the communities the communities become smaller and smaller and you start losing the facilities...the community then starts to go backwards.

Ivan saw the loss of young people’s involvement in the community as an inevitable tragedy and he was concerned about the decline in community involvement:
they will rent the houses...that's about all...I can't see a hell of a lot of future there...the district is gone...there is only a handful of older people...once the district got involved with district affairs...now you wouldn't even know who was driving those cars that go past the front gate...once you would knew every body's car by its number plate...you don't any longer.

Lucy despaired at the loss of young women's participation in farming and community life. Much of Lucy's life had been dedicated to her family, her farm and her community. Lucy had proudly worked alongside Ivan and her sons on the farm, been involved in various sporting clubs, volunteered in local service organisations and participated in community activities. Lucy had been there to assist others in times of trouble and known that there had been others to turn to in her times of need. Lucy was disappointed that her son's wife needed to seek off-farm employment:

Arthur's wife is either studying...she is doing extra study so that she can upgrade her skills -- and if she is not doing that she is working to try and bring in income. When Arthur lost his job, she decided that she was going to bring some money into it...so she is working, studying, trying to look after their children and a husband...so there is no time left for the farm or any of the things that women used to do, in years gone by...if I was still out on the farm, who would I talk to...who would I talk to...there is nobody there.

Julio also expressed concerned that the drop in income would affect people's ability to volunteer their services to the community:

I have always done voluntary work in the community, but since deregulation I have needed to spend more time working on the farm and therefore my contributions to the community have fallen away...which is a really sad, because in the long run, it is the community that misses out.

Although Julio felt that some other local businesses were beginning to be affected by dairy deregulation, he didn't think that non-farming people understood the situation for dairy farmers:
I don't think that the community has understood the magnitude of the issues about deregulation...I don't think that people have cared about it...and I don't think that people have understood what it has really meant for farmers...I know that some of the local rural traders and some of the local businesses understand it now, because they know that their incomes have also dropped since deregulation...as the farmers have cut back on their expenditure...I don't think that people are too worried about the farmers...I think that maybe they just see it as another industry that has been deregulated...they don't really care.

Loss of Security: The Loss of the Quota Asset

Well...I think that it just dampens the incentive...to try and do something and then someone can just take it off you so easily...it feels like being kicked in the guts...to describe it...that's the sort of feeling that it gives you...it's just like someone has kicked you in the guts for no good reason (Todd).

The removal of market milk quota entitlements (quota) was a significant issue for dairy farmer quota holders. Although some market milk quota had been allocated to dairy farmers through the Dairy Industry Authority, farmers had also acquired quota via: purchase through the Dairy Industry Authority auction system; the purchase of a dairy farming enterprise with the quota entitlement included; family succession; and inheritance.

The very act of deregulation, automatically rendered dairy farmers' quota holdings both invalid and valueless For Todd and his wife, who felt that they had invested in their future through the purchase of market milk quota, deregulation came as a substantial blow. Todd, a young and enthusiastic dairy farmer, was willing to work towards building up his asset base, with a mind to securing a reasonable ongoing income for his young family. As farmers were paid a premium price for their market milk in a regulated industry, the more quota they held, the higher income they would receive.
As Todd explains:

"after we were married we borrowed some money and bought some more quota in our name...we had a plan that we were going to keep building it up...like spending money to increase our income...the more quota we bought, the more income we earned ourselves...that was what we put everything into since we have been together...it was hard at first to explain to my wife...to buy 'fresh air' for that much money...but once she could see that it changed the cheque that was coming in, she got onside.

Todd felt an enormous sense of disappointment around losing their quota asset when the industry was deregulated. He had difficulty accepting that someone else could have so much control over his life and his hard-earned property:

"if you bought something and you didn’t look after it and it went down in value...something that was your own fault...and you buggered it up financially...but when someone else has taken your financial stability away...for no good reason...it’s just someone’s decision...that’s hard to follow...if you make a bad decision yourself then you have got to eat humble pie and deal with it...you have just got to take it on the chin...but when it’s someone else’s decision and it effects you and so many other people...it’s hard.

For Joe, the removal of quota not only jeopardised farmers’ opportunity to determine their own direction within the market but also decreased farmers’ equity in their farming enterprises:

"Our quota was the vehicle that we used to put ourselves at so many cents-per-litre, to make ends meet...you could position yourself where you wanted...on the income stream...to have enough income to service your debt...it made our family affordable...where I noticed my asset loss...my equity in my farm had changed...substantially.

Joe was also bitterly disappointed for one of his young sons, who had worked so hard to acquire his own quota:

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a few people smiled when they would see him early days...he'd go in and buy 2 or 3 litres of quota and some people thought, "just a little operator"...but he only spent what he had...and he saved...he saved on a small wage...he saved to build that quota up. He went from zero and at the end he had what...450 litres of quota. The restructure package didn't pay him what he had paid...and he felt that he was cheated...he had done it the hard way.

For Julio, the loss of quota represented a loss of security for himself and his family:

we have lost our security...our quota was there for us...for our future...we had to take out a large debt, when we took over the farm, and we had our quota sitting alongside that debt...we borrowed money against that quota...we knew that we could sell the quota to retire that debt if we needed to...the quota was classed as an asset...we virtually lost a $400,000 asset with the stroke of a pen when the government deregulated the industry...the debt remained there...it's been a huge loss...a huge worry.

Julio no longer believed that farmers would be compensated for the removal of the quota asset. He was angry that quota had been considered as property, prior to deregulation, and yet rendered valueless through the deregulation process:

we haven't received any compensation what so ever for our quota...and yet the quota was classed as property...the Western Australian Government sold quota through an auction system and charged stamp duty on the transfer of quota. I have personally paid over $25,000 stamp duty on the transfer of quota in the past ten years...and all of a sudden the government deregulates and our so-called property is not worth a cent.

The loss of quota meant a loss of power as well as security for Bob:

With quota you had that bit more bargaining power and prices were likely to go up not down...with deregulation prices could go down tomorrow and we are really at the whim now of the dairy processors. I think this has given the processors too much power...the power has shifted and they control it. I am not sure how much they are controlled by the supermarkets.
We are the little boys at the end of the line...security is blown out of the window. The bank manager just said "once the quota goes, you go from low risk to high risk"

Mary was incensed by the inequity. Prior to deregulation, the quota was considered as an assessable asset, which was taken into account when farmers applied for Centrelink payments, such as Austudy. Mary was angry that the asset value of the quota property, which had disqualified some farmers from receiving Centrelink assistance prior to deregulation, was now deemed valueless as a result of the decision to deregulate:

when our children were wanting Austudy and things like that, they used it against us and we were denied some of the money that other could access, when we were educating our children...and now they have just wiped the slate.

From Ivan’s perspective, the removal of his quota amounted to the removal of his son’s inheritance:

that was part of my son’s inheritance...I bought nearly all of it and the bastards stole it off me...and I paid stamp duty

Rex was also extremely angry that the removal of their quota asset, had undermined his family’s equity in their family farm and their opportunity to continue dairy farming:

Mate if that isn’t the biggest sore point of this whole thing – it’s the $350,000 that we lost in quota. That was despicable. That is what the farm was structured on...the fact that with a stroke of a pen they can take away a living

Feelings of Failure and Other Emotional Issues

And that is a lot of pressure too...you know the old saying...and I don’t know how many times people have said it to me... “The first generation buys it, the second generation develops it and the third generation loses it” (Todd).
Farmers spoke of experiencing a number of emotions and stresses associated with deregulation. Todd, who had followed his father and his grandfather into the dairy farming tradition, felt a great deal of responsibility around maintaining the family farm for future generations of his family. Apart from feeling the pressure of maintaining the family farm, Todd suggested that he had encountered some difficulties coping with the changes:

*the loss of control as to where you are going...that's a big part of it...sometimes I have been as cranky as buggery...I've had stuff on my mind that I know I can't do anything about. I think that you probably have to talk to my wife about that.*

Because of the culture of farming families, there are inter-generational issues that impact on farming decisions. Although the decision to discontinue dairy farming was Rex and Beth's to make, there were other family members who needed to be considered. Rex found it particularly difficult to tell his father that it was no longer viable to continue milking cows and that they'd made the decision to stop dairy farming. Rex struggled with feelings of failure:

*he told me that it wasn't my fault. I think that the hardest thing I have ever had to tell him was that we were no longer going to milk cows. He was pretty well devastated...it was not my fault...I guess if the money was there, we would still be milking. Everyone thinks that because you are not farming any more that you went broke. There's a lot of stigma in going broke. There's a difference between being 'not viable' and 'going broke'...you are still an ex-dairy farmer...yeah...you do feel a bit of a failure.*

Bob also struggled with the issue of failure:

*It has crossed the mind many a time...not failed...the fact that...the possibility that you could fail...it is another thing that sort of gnaws at the back of your head for awhile.*
The issue of failure was more complex however, for Mary:

*I have sort of heard of others who really felt that they had failed their family. I find that a bit hard...because you just don't go out to deliberately lose that sort of money.*

Lucy suggested that Ivan felt that he had failed his family. Although Lucy understood the feelings that Ivan was experiencing, she found it difficult to cope with his distress:

*It's the sense of failure...that he hasn't made a provision for his family. He thinks that he has failed...he feels that he has failed to support his family...failed his grandmother and grandfather, because they were the originators of the farm...I didn't have the bitterness or the sense of 'failure' that Ivan did...that was all of his...I had to cope with his distress...I used to get cross with him because he wouldn't pull himself together...it has happened...and we have got to get on with life...it's been hard...but harder for Ivan.*

Ivan really struggled with the thought of letting his family down, particularly because he had encouraged his children to take-up dairy farming. He was angry about the impact of deregulation on his family and angry about the repercussions for the dairy industry:

*I am angry...I really am angry...I am not only angry because of what has happened...it is the emotional side of it...it all sort of gels around the whole family...it has really made a big impact on us...I just get so depressed about the whole bloody thing...I sort of get so angry...I am really bitter about it...the silly buggers have gone and turned the industry around on its ear and done exactly the same thing...and the plants and the supermarkets are sitting back and laughing about it...to see the best industry in the state...in the country...just stuffed...it is pretty hard to sit there and watch it crumble.*

The feeling that he had let his family down was also a significant issue for Julio. Julio felt an enormous pressure around supporting his elderly parents as well as his children. Over the years, Julio had farmed with his father, mother, grandfather and other members of his immediate and extended family.
Julio helped out on the family farm from a very young age and grew up understanding that he would leave school and work on the farm as soon as he was old enough to do so. In the tradition of family farming, Julio also understood that once his parents were no longer able to continue working because of their age, he would take over the running of the family farm. Again, because of the culture associated with family farming, Julio never questioned his responsibility towards providing for and taking care of his parents once they were elderly. Julio’s parents were ineligible to receive an aged pension because they had chosen to maintain part-ownership of the family farm, despite their retirement. Julio was aware that his father continued to hold more than an ownership interest in the farm and like Rex, was concerned about how his father would react to deregulation:

*From my father’s point of view, he can see that what he has worked towards for a good number of years...or what we have all worked for...the asset which we had built up over the years, has been taken away from him and from me. Obviously he feels a huge loss...he didn’t think that the government would ever deregulate...being a third generation farmer myself...I feel a sense of...letting my father down...letting my parents and grandparents down...not a failure...because it’s not as though it is my fault...but we weren’t able to stop it happening...I feel obligated to my children who are the fourth generation coming on...I don’t want to lose the farm...I am also worried because we have been supporting my parents financially...although my parents are in their eighties, they have never got a pension because they still have an interest in the farm...which is their right...but it has put a lot of pressure on my family...I used to get up and milk in the morning, knowing that I was losing money.*

Julio felt supported by his wife and children but recognised that they were also dealing with their own issues:

*I think that mainly just having a strong family and a caring wife...a loving wife who helped me through those times...otherwise I don’t think that I could have managed at all...she was obviously under pressure as much as I was...and maybe more...she also had outside pressures...she had to get an income to help us survive with the financial pressures...she has also had the family problems as*
well as the problems with deregulation...the children actually knew what had happened with deregulation and they were really upset.

Julio suggested that the implementation of GST and Quality Assurance just added to his burdens:

it was a very stressful time...we have deregulation, GST and Quality Assurance.

Mary and Bob indicated they had encountered some family tension and some grief since deregulation. As Mary explains:

We yell at one another that perhaps, we have never done before...throw insults at each other...it's usually the minor things that trigger some reaction from either of us...I guess it is part of the frustration...and I guess it is part grief as well... I did go to a support group...the counsellor that was there was extremely good...I mean she had all of us absolutely bawling our eyes out...I think that this is probably the difference between a man and a woman...women at some point sit down and have a cry but most fellas don't feel that they can.

Mary was particularly concerned that farmers had lost their incentive to continue farming:

they have taken the incentive out...in all the time that we have been married I have never heard Bob say, "why am I milking" up until this last 12 months...and he has probably said that more in the last 3 months.

Joe, like Mary was concerned about farmers' loss of enthusiasm around dairy farming:

I have never heard...really good farmers...and they have said, "I haven't got the patience to get out of bed in the mornings". I think in this first year...and Elizabeth will tell you this...I don't think that I have finished a milking...I used to go to the dairy and get that fed up...I had to get myself out of it...I just felt, "why are they doing this to us?" I just had to get out of the dairy and not because the dairy annoyed me.
For Bob, it has not only been difficult to sleep with the worry:

> You wake up in the middle of the night and wonder what the hell you are doing...your heads still ticking over about what's going to happen or what should happen or won't happen...I guess that's what the not sleeping is about.

but also difficult to deal with his frustration:

> it has certainly been a difficult year...You just get frustrated...throw a book at the wall and leave...blow my stack and that's the end of it.

Beth was concerned about the Rex's health and the effects of the increased levels of stress:

> The blood pressure is something that I have noticed. I am sure that you were stressed and you were more grumpy than you usually are.

**Small Cheese: The 'Personal is Political’**

> I honestly believe that the dairy farmers of Australia...didn’t matter...didn't matter...they can get their milk from New Zealand or America or wherever (Lucy).

Dairy Farmer participants raised a number of concerns about the political response to deregulation at a federal, state and industry representative level. Farmers were also particularly critical of the opportunism displayed by the milk processors and supermarkets following deregulation. It seems that dairy farmers have been left with little market power in the newly deregulated industry.

In Lucy's opinion, agriculture is no longer a priority for Australia's political leaders:

> I think that politicians want to down-grade agriculture...they are more interested in other things...dairy farmers in Western Australia weren't very big
voting rights, for a start...we were small cheese...and I think that we were expendable...people didn't matter

Mary felt that the political focus remained on economic outcomes rather than people:

I really don't think that people mean anything to them...the monetary part seems to be all-important – not people.

Ivan was particularly critical of the political intervention at a Western Australian level:

the politicians all got involved...and they stuffed it up a bit more...they wouldn't listen...and we finished up with a political decision that I don't think many people will benefit from...I think that Western Australians should have toughed it out...they could have toughed it out...but they didn't – they all caved in.

Todd felt that the Western Australian politicians had not listened to Western Australian dairy farmers:

the Western Australian Government...just not paying attention...just not listening to what the farmers wanted...they do all these reviews and then...don't listen to what is said. I felt more like the pollies were against us...to me it seemed like the Western Australian pollies were working for Victoria.

Rex felt a sense of betrayal and believed that the Western Australian government could have done more for Western Australian producers:

I can't believe that they sold us down the drain...I can't believe that they didn't turn around and say “no” and held out for a better package...WA was the last state to accept ...with the other states accepting it and WA being the last – surely there would have been a lot of phone calls to make...that was the annoying thing Kim Chance was over here and we spoke to him and he said, “it will never happen”...it didn't take him long to change.
Joe was critical of the lack of political will to address the issues associated with deregulation. Joe was especially angry that the necessary structures had not been put in place to facilitate the deregulation transition process and to address some of the equity issues related to milk prices. The price that farmers received for their milk, post deregulation, was determined by the individual processing companies, and there was considerable variation in the prices paid. The farmers who were supplying milk to Peters Brownes or National Foods, for example, seemed to be in a considerably better position, price wise, than farmers who were supplying George Westons. In a deregulated market, dairy farmers were left to negotiate their milk supply contracts with the processors on an individual basis. Joe felt that the lack of structural support following deregulation, left farmers with little power in the negotiation process:

our prices in Western Australia went down as low as they did...because there were some people left outside of the square...that process...should have been addressed before deregulation...but there didn’t seem to be the will...to deal with all of the industry...we could have negotiated a better position...we were cheated...that’s where we were cheated...we walked into an empty room... no structures what so ever...no structures...the powers knew that they were chucking us in with the lions...the ‘furniture’ that they should have put in place...I am talking minimum ‘furniture’, not talking about luxury ‘furniture’...I am talking about a minimum structure that would have said, “hey, there’s a transition here”. They talked about transition...money isn’t transition...money is not transition.

Bob felt that the WA Farmers’ Federation representatives had attempted to address some of the concerns for Western Australian dairy farmers but had not had the necessary influence at a federal level to make a difference:

I felt very sorry for [farmer representative]...I don’t perhaps agree with anything that he did but I think he bent over backwards to try and get a better deal...I think that word Canberra kept coming up every time he tried to do anything...and I’m afraid that was the end of the story.

I think that the Farmers Federation tries but they seem to have lost their clout a bit too...I don’t think that we have got too much power at the moment.
Mary explains:

*I think that they [Western Australian dairy industry representatives] got swayed...I think that they get swayed by higher authorities...it looks good on paper but when you get down to it, sometimes it's not practical...they get drawn in.*

Todd suggested that although there had been criticism of the Farmers Federation at a state level, the National Farmers Federation maintained considerable influence:

*I know that people were saying that our [state leaders] didn't stand up for Western Australia...to me...I think the problem was with the people on the next rung on the chain...they were passing the decisions down...I think that there were a lot of bad decisions made further up...higher up.*

Julio attempted to be involved in the decision making process but felt unheard by his industry representatives:

*I went to a lot of meetings...I feel very upset with the Western Australian Farmers Federation...the dairy section of WAFF...I believe that they didn’t really listen to what the farmers were saying... they said that they did surveys and that they gave the farmers a poll...but I think that they really didn’t listen to what the farmers wanted...I know that a lot of the farmers are really upset with the dairy section of WAFF...so much so that I know that there have been farmers who have withdrawn their membership from WAFF...I can’t support an organisation that voted to deregulate our industry...I just can’t...can’t support them at all.*

In addition to feeling unheard, Julio was angry that some industry leaders had depicted deregulation and the associated restructure package as a “window of opportunity” for dairy farmers. Dairy farmers had been advised to accept the restructure package ‘opportunity’ or risk the deregulation of the industry without any restructure assistance.
Julio felt that the Western Australian industry representatives had bowed to the pressure of eastern states counterparts:

*I don’t see any ‘windows of opportunity’...I think that the windows are looking very cloudy...to me the dairy industry is moving down the path of ‘you: either get bigger and bigger or you get out’. The WAFF dairy section was supposed to be in there fighting for us but I believe that...the eastern states blokes were able to talk them around...I was more than happy not to receive any money, to maintain our quota and to fight on for the Western Australian industry and see how we would survive. I believe that Western Australia could have maintained our quota system and still operated efficiently and profitably...and competed in the market system. Western Australia had already met the competition policy requirements.*

Julio was also somewhat cynical about the government’s intentions around the restructure package:

*It seems to me that the government is the winner out of the DASP...they are to receive something like $400 million dollars in taxation out of all of this.*

Although very adept at handling the normal administrative requirements of the dairy farming enterprise, Mary, like other participating dairy farmers, found the paper work associated with the Commonwealth and State restructure packages both complicated and burdensome:

*You almost needed a qualified person to do it...you had to go and get someone else...and we had to outlay money...I found that the way that they wrote it was sometimes confusing...it wasn’t very clear...they almost make you feel...not under threat but...you had to satisfy their requirements.*

Joe felt that dairy farmers were the losers within a deregulated market:

*The bigger powers have gained...the processors are winners...the supermarkets have gained...we have taken the biggest cuts, we are the only ones who have taken the cuts.*
Rex believes that the contract system, which has been implemented since deregulation, has been divisive. There had been considerable difference in the prices paid by the three main processors in Western Australia, following deregulation. George Westons, at Capel, did not have access to the higher priced white (drinking) milk market, as did the other main processors, and was only involved in the manufacture of lower priced milk products. Consequently, the prices paid to dairy farmers supplying milk to George Westons were considerably lower than prices paid to other dairy farmers supplying other processors. As a result of the differences in prices paid, some George Weston’s producers attempted to negotiate new contracts with either National Foods or Peters Brownes. This in turn created some uncertainty for those dairy farmers who were already contracted to supply milk to National Foods and Peters Brownes. Rex felt that George Weston’s producers became ostracised within the dairy farming community:

You’ve got Peters here, Nationals here and Capel [George Westons] right down here – before we were all on equal terms. If you are a big Peters supplier you are all right, or Nationals whatever...but if you are only a guy who milks 100 or 50 cows and you are a Capel supplier – you are nobody...your useless...people think that you are less than what they are...I reckon that Capel producers have been a bit ostracised.

Like Rex, Julio felt that the contract system had caused divisions between farmers, particularly as dairy farmers scrambled to secure a contract with one of the higher paying processors. Julio suggested that farmers were concerned that milk prices would be further jeopardised if dairy farmers were willing to accept lower prices in return for secure contracts. Julio felt that it was not only the relationship between farmers that had deteriorated but also the relationship between the farmers and the processors. Julio spoke of feeling let down by the processing companies:

under the quota system, once you supplied a particular processor...in most cases...you stopped with that processor...you were very loyal to them...but once the quotas were taken away...I believe that the processors showed no loyalty towards their farmers...cutting the milk prices back and back...and they didn’t seem to care about how much the farmers were hurting...I believe that the loyalty thing went out the door...it became really competitive...I believe that the
communication between the farmers totally dried up because of the uncertainty around who would get contracts.

With the processors determining contract allocation, contract conditions and prices paid, Julio felt that farmers had lost control in the supply chain:

the processors say "well this is the price, the contract"...the processors and the supermarkets now control the prices that we receive for our milk ...whereas before the prices were set and the farmers received a reasonable income for milking their cows 365 days of the year...whereas now, we are told that "you will have a contract and we will pay you x amount of cents-per-litre and that's all you'll receive for the next 12 months"...we are totally powerless...we don't have any bargaining power what so ever.

Lucy believes that the fear that processors would import milk from inter-state or overseas, not only influenced the deregulation decision but continues to reinforce the processors' power:

they all thought that the milk was going to flow over from the Eastern states and that they would be worse off...there was real fear around that...but whether it may have happened or may not have happened...now of course we have the fear of it ... that it is going to come in from New Zealand. There is no way if processors can buy milk cheaper and bring it in...that they're going to pay the dairy farmers big dollars...they are going to bring it in from New Zealand.

Bob could see no gains for dairy farmers through deregulation:

It just made you wonder why you had stayed...who has gained ...I don't think anyone has gained...the people buying milk haven't gained...someone must be getting the money...maybe the processors...supermarkets...we sit firmly at the bottom...we have no power as dairy farmers.
For Mary, the public's lack of understanding around the government's response to deregulation, was disappointing:

*if you talk to the average person on the street, they think that the government has given all us farmers this huge payout...we feel that for the average person out there think that we have nothing to grizzle about.*

Ivan held little hope that dairy farmers would receive any further assistance:

*politics has moved on... we are 'old news'... they reckon that they have done a marvellous thing, bailing these dairy farmers out of all their difficulties...they haven't done anything at all.*

Julio believes that it is time for governments to rethink some of their policies:

*I would like to tell our politicians to "look at your National Competition Policy...you don't have to go down that path...Australia is only a small country". They should revisit some of their policies around the market system and globalisation...they should revisit them...we are people...they need to look at how their policies affect people...not just carry on with policy for the sake of policy.*

**Who the Hell Do You Talk To? Available Assistance**

*I think that you really need people who understand where you are coming from...you don't want to have to explain the basic parts of our life*  (Julio).

Lucy did not feel that there was any help for her family:

*There was nothing that anyone could do...we knew that we had to do what we did...we didn't have any options...didn't have any option...the biggest thing...if Arthur could have good employment...with a good wage...that would have taken that guilt feeling away from us...that would have been a big help...but it didn't happen.*
For Ivan, seeking help was costly:

who the hell do you talk to...I said to Lucy, "I haven't got a brother or anything like that...that I could sit down and talk these things through with"... I have got nobody...I have got people around the district who I get on extremely well with and I can talk in confidence to...but I don't have anyone who I can sort of hack these things around with...because a lot of people don't know what the hell you are talking about...I could go to the accountant...I get on really well with the accountant...talk to him about an issue...but by the time that you get home, there is bloody bill for $1000, that follows you home. There are always plenty of people to offer advice...but by hell you pay for it too.

Julio was not confident that the available service providers really understood the issues for dairy farmers. Julio felt that some of the advice provided was unrealistic and costly. Julian suggested that he was not in a position to fund a new venture and that he had little time to dedicate to new projects:

the Ag Department had people coming around...they suggested different ventures and had different ideas about farmers diversifying...but its just not that easy...you just can't diversify over night...a lot of the ideas that they were coming up with were things that were going to take a lot of money and a lot of years before you would see any income...unrealistic...you still have to milk the cows night and morning, seven days a week...and if you want to change to do something else...maybe trees or vines or olives, vegetables, whatever...it still takes a lot of finance and it also takes a lot of time...you would have to get rid of the dairy to find the time...and then you wouldn't have any income.

At a personal level, Julio suggested that:

farmers are notorious for keeping things to themselves and not looking for outside help ...maybe if there were people to talk to...but I'm not sure what is even out there...it would have to be private...I would feel uncomfortable going into town or to the city...we live in a small community...and people talk a lot...you are talking about issues that are very personal and obviously you would like
those personal issues to remain within your family...things are hard enough. I spoke to one of the support workers that came out to the farm once...but I found it really difficult...they virtually had no understanding of dairy farmers or rural issues in general...and to have to sit down and explain everything to them like, what the quota was, what our work involved, what our lifestyle was, what we did...that was very difficult...it is too difficult to have to explain everything.

Mary felt a sense of isolation:

We didn't really have any one to talk to...I guess we were wrapped up in our own problems at the time. Everything seemed to come crashing down all at once. The general feeling, out in the community, is that you should just be able to 'carry on'...they did just not understand...things were really difficult.

Bob felt that there was no one that he could talk to about his concerns, except for perhaps, the accountant:

Apart from the accountant...Mum was really sick at the time...you had that in the back of your mind...and then this happened...you were trying to make it work...

Rex indicated that he would have appreciated some outside support, particularly if the support could be provided at the farm:

I reckon that there really needed some one to come around to help you -- to have a look at your figures. There was help promoted but it didn't ever seem to materialise and you didn't seem to have time. The money that they have spent on those glossy pamphlets! You had to ring a government department and make an appointment and then go and see them and you didn't know what to take...the amount of farmers...it wouldn't have taken much to employ people to call in here for half-an-hour and probably just reassure you...a lot of farmers do not want to ring people and say, "I've got a problem". They didn't have to be an expert on the whole lot...you just needed someone to discuss things with...to help with the options... It wasn't so much the financial things but having someone to talk to...even if they only came in for a couple of hours...they didn't
have to be really involved...but at the end of the day if you knew that you had someone that you knew that you could ring just to talk to...they'd been out. You are the first person who has come out and even asked us.

Joe was not confident that anyone could have helped:

it is hard for someone...you know...we don't believe that talking to someone is going to change anything...it's hard to imagine...I talk to other people who share a common interest...other dairy farmers...that's how we cope...in the hope that we will probably come out of it somehow...I don't have anything to do with anyone else, other than dairy farmers.

*Just Hanging On: The Future of the Industry*

*The day of the small dairy farmer, in Western Australia, or the family farm, I believe is doomed* (Julio).

Mary believes that there is a future for the dairy industry in Western Australia but is not sure that her family will continue milking:

*I think that there is a future there...I think that this is a period of time where perhaps you just have to hang on...but I don't think he'll [Billy] be milking in 10 years time...not unless there are rewards at the end...I think that they are of a generation where the monetary part of it has to fit the work they do.*

Bob doesn't believe that his son, Billy will have the opportunity to farm on a full-time basis, although he believes that he will remain on the farm:

*Down the track, I think that he will be part-time in the job that he has now and the rest of the time looking at his steers or at his cows and his calves...I think that this where he would head...I think that's what he would love to do...I don't think that he would leave.*
Lucy does not believe that her grand children will have the opportunity to farm and does not believe that her son should encourage his children to be farmers:

Arthur cannot, in all good faith, encourage his son to be a farmer...because he is never going to be a farmer...I mean, he has got to be educated in some way.

Ivan agrees with Lucy and suggests that there is only a future for the bigger farmers:

I think that there will be a future for the big fellow...I can't see a future for the small fellow...the companies want to go to the big fellow and fill up the tanker at their dairy...take it into the plant...come back to another big fellow...they are not interested in going the milk round like they used to...we used to milk up to 150 cows...we were one of the biggest dairies in the area...we are bloody hobby farmers now.

Julio believes that there is little future for small dairy farmers in Western Australia and big problems associated with bigger dairy herds:

unless you can milk 250, 500, 600 cows, you are not going to be able to make a living. And the problem with that is...in the main dairy areas in Western Australia...our land, especially in the winter time, is not capable of running those sorts of numbers of cattle...what is going to happen is that the land will become bogged up and we are heading for an environmental nightmare...there is no way...milking those number of cows...in these wet areas, that you are going to be able to maintain and keep all the effluent on your own property...it is just not going to work.

Joe believes that the dairy industry in Western Australia can survive as long as the system is fair for all farmers:

the only way that we will claw our way back...and I am not saying where we used to be...is by doing it slowly and taking everybody with us. How ever small the group of farmers, left outside...it will hinder our improvements.
I was left, after participating in the research conversations, with a realisation that the participating dairy farmers have faced significant hardships and a great deal of anguish as a result of the policies that led to the deregulation of the dairy industry. Participating dairy farmers have struggled to cope with significant losses at a number of levels since deregulation, including loss of income, loss of market milk quota asset, and a loss of power within the dairy industry supply chain. The participating dairy farmers indicated that they felt unsupported and somewhat betrayed by their political leaders at a state, federal and industry level. Farmers spoke of experiencing a number of emotional responses to their changed circumstances including: feelings of failure; loss of identity; grief; anger; and a strong sense of injustice. Dairy farmers suggested that there was little understanding of the impact of deregulation within the wider community and a lack of appropriate assistance. Dairy farmers appear to face ongoing uncertainty about the future of their industry and the future of their family farms.

Some of the issues raised by dairy farmers during the research conversations, will be discussed in the following chapter entitled *Making Connections: One Understanding.*
Chapter Four

Making Connections: One Understanding

Introduction

It was with some humility that I approached this discussion. At the time that I prepared my research proposal, I made the assumption that I, as the researcher, was responsible for interpreting and analysing the stories of the participating dairy farmers. I think that I had become somewhat entangled in the research rhetoric and for a brief time, overlooked my own conviction around people being the experts on their own lives (Duke & Kreshel, 1998). As soon as I began transcribing the audio-taped conversations, I realised that the dairy farmers were providing much of their own analysis around their own stories. I felt that my researcher role, within a critical ethnographic methodology, needed to be one of interpreting the connections between dairy farmers’ experiences, placing the dairy farmers’ stories within a wider social and political context, and propounding a change perspective (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p.299).

There are many ways of interpreting other people’s experiences and I see the ensuing discussion as only one subjective way (i.e., the researcher’s) of interpreting the connections between dairy farmers’ experiences, and of providing a social and political context for the dairy farmers’ stories. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) maintain that as qualitative researchers, we draw on our own experiences, knowledge and theoretical perspectives as well as our collected data to present our understanding of “the other’s world” (p.153). Glesne and Peshkin (1992, p.153) also suggest that qualitative researchers need to see themselves as meaning-makers who make sense out of the interaction between themselves and the other, rather than as experts who determine the facts about other people’s experiences. I felt a great responsibility around re-presenting dairy farmers experiences in a manner that befitted the trust, generosity and courage that people displayed in sharing their stories.
From the outset of this discussion, it remains important to acknowledge that dairy farmers are not a homogenous group and there were different views and varying levels of intensity around particular issues discussed in the research conversations. In the linking or collectivising of the participating dairy farmers’ experiences, I feel that the people’s depth of feeling with respect to specific issues has been considerably diminished. It is also important to acknowledge that it was particularly difficult to interpret the research conversations into separate threads of meaning because of the inter-connectedness between the issues raised by the dairy farmers.

More Than a Job: It’s a Family Farming Lifestyle

Attachment to the family farm and the rural lifestyle was an important component in each of the participating dairy farmers’ stories. Dairy farming was described as much more than a job by the participating dairy farmers – it’s a valued way of life. Cheers (1998) maintains that there has been little acknowledgment of the embeddedness of rural Australians in their “natural, spiritual and social worlds”. Cheers (1998) contends that although within dominant Western ideology, people tend to compartmentalise the different components of their lives (p.61), many people who work directly with the natural environment such as farmers, “experience greater connectedness with their natural world than Western ideology suggests” (p.66).

Family farming, with an emphasis on family contribution to production and self-sufficiency, has been the dominant mode of agriculture since the nineteenth century (Alston, 1995, p.8). Australian farming remains family based with “some 98% of properties owned and operated by families” (Lawrence, & Gray, 2000, p.38). Lawrence and Gray (2000) explain that:

The term ‘family farm’ is generally taken to mean an operation which can be handled by the members of one family, possibly (although rarely now) with the assistance of a very small number of farm employees. Family members, meaning women and children, can be called upon to do farm work at time of seasonal or other need, if not throughout the year. (p.40).

Alston (1995) contends that the family farm not only provides an occupational identity but an “opportunity for personal fulfilment” for farming families (p.23).
For many dairy farming families, home is work and work is home and it is not unusual for the productive side of the farming enterprise to be “enmeshed in family relationships” (Alston, 1995, p.23).

In this study, each of the participating dairy farmers was part of a family farm operation, which had evolved over a number of generations. In most cases, there were at least two and sometimes three generations of the one family currently involved in the farming enterprise. Some of the participating dairy farmers indicated that they felt a sense of responsibility around maintaining the family farm for both the past and the future generations of their family. For some, the sense of responsibility extended to the dairy industry, which had provided them with their income and, in many cases, generated their assets.

Voyce, (1996) however, contends that farming in Australia has always maintained a capitalist rationality and suggests that:

> With the globalisation of the economy, fewer farmers identify with the phrase ‘farming as a way of life’ and increasingly, see farming as a business where families regard the family property like any other asset that can be sold off. (p.103)

Although participating dairy farmers appeared to have a very evident business focus, they were also very clear about the high value that they placed on the family farming way of life. The farmers who had left the industry indicated a real sense of regret around the loss of future farming opportunities for their families, and the continuing dairy farmers seemed particularly eager to safeguard the tradition of family farming.

Lawrence (1987, p. 112) states that one of the contradictions of capitalism is that participation in the market itself, brings about the seeds of its own change, if not its own destruction.

In placing the issue of family farming lifestyle into a broader context, it is important to acknowledge that not all experiences of family farming are positive. Alston (1995) contends that family farms have historically been structured around gender relationships and have not necessarily been “undifferentiated sites where all members share equally” (p.50). Alston (1995) suggests that the prevailing patriarchal ideology has placed many women into subordinate positions on family farms (Alston, 1995, p.63).
Alston (1995) also contends that along with their lack of control over agriculture resources:

Women are limited to entering agriculture through marriage. They rarely figure in inheritance, which is the most usual way that farms are acquired, and are often, therefore, effectively disinherited if their natal farm is a family farm ... a farm woman's position is marginal if her husband is involved with his parents, and even more marginal if he is involved with his brothers. (p.19).

It's Part of Who You Are: Connection to the Land

Read (1996, p.2) writes of humans forming “powerful and mysterious connections to country” and connection to the land was particularly significant within dairy farmers’ stories. Dairy farming appears to provide a sense of identity and belonging to dairy farmers, who spoke of their land in terms of being part of who they were. Voyce (1996, p.102) contends that it is not unusual for people's identity, sense of personal achievement and social acceptance to be linked to the ownership of their land.

The social meanings that are attributed to land ownership are complex and often underpinned by values relating to such things as gender and work (Voyce, 1996, p.96). Voyce (1996, p.98) further suggests that the stories that accompany the acquisition and development of property, can serve to reinforce gender roles, family identity, and family hierarchy. Each of the participating dairy farmers has acquired their land through patrilineal inheritance. Although in two family situations, Rex and Beth's and Joe and Elizabeth's, there had been an expectation that one of their daughters would eventually return to work on the farm, there still seemed to be an understanding that it was the sons in the family who would continue the tradition of family farming. Alston (1995, p.134) suggests however, that farmers are beginning to actively encourage their sons to give up the idea of farming, and to undertake training or education that has the potential to increase their employment opportunities. Alston (1995) contends that some farmers no longer want to see their children facing “the hardship and financial strain of farming in Australia” (p.134).

I have elected not to discuss the contrasts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples' connection to the land, as has been discussed by other writers such as Read (1996) and Voyce (1996).
I see this as an important area for discussion but one that goes far beyond the scope of this study. My recognition of non-Indigenous people’s connection to the land sits humbly alongside my acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custodianship of the land.

**Part of the Family: Connection to the Cows**

One of my most powerful recollections from the research process is of Beth speaking about her distress associated with being at the sale yards when some of their cows were sold. Although Rex and Beth were the only dairy farmer participants who had parted with their dairy herds, it was apparent, from the other participants’ stories, that they also felt distressed at even the prospect of losing their dairy cows. I believe that issues of loss and grief are important aspects of this study and these will be considered at a later stage of this discussion.

I had some initial difficulties correlating some of the farming practices with the feelings that farmers expressed in relation to their dairy herds. Many of the dairy farmers described the cows as ‘part of the family’ and although I understood the dairy farmers’ connection to their cows at one level, I had been unaware of the extent of that connection until participating in the interview conversations. As a city girl turned farmer, I often despaired at some of the more difficult farming decisions (such as culling the older cows from the dairy herd) that seem to be made in the name of economy. Upon reflection, I think that this issue is far more complex than an ‘economic farming practices’/‘connectedness to cows’ dichotomy and that these two aspects of dairy farming may run parallel to each other. Given that dairy farmers spend at least six to seven hours-per-day (often on a 365 day-per-year basis) with their dairy herds, it is perhaps not too surprising that dairy farmers develop a familiarity or connection with their cows. I would suggest that farmers’ connection to their dairy cows could be described as one of the everyday taken-for-granted (Smith, 1988) cultural aspects of the dairy farming community.
Researcher Recommendation:

- That research is undertaken which takes account of the multiple lifestyle features of the farming sector to ensure that the full extent of people’s experiences are included in policy determination.

Working Longer for Less: Consequences of a Diminishing Income

The substantial drop in income, following the deregulation of the dairy industry, appears to have had a significant impact on dairy farm participants, their families and their communities. Most Australian rural communities have depended heavily on agricultural production, which up until the 1950's, contributed up to 90% of Australia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Since that time however, the agriculture industry's contribution to the GDP has steadily declined to around 30% (Lawrence & Williams, cited in Alston, 2000). Alston (2000) contends that:

The major restructuring of agriculture has been brought about by the globalisation of food production and the necessity for Australian farm families to trade competitively in a world marketplace unsupported by tariffs and at the mercy of policies adopted by competitors" (p.30).

Since deregulation, dairy farm participants appear to have undertaken a number of measures to cope with their diminishing incomes including: working harder and longer for less money; belt-tightening on household expenditure; cost cutting on farm equipment and farm expenditure; reducing hired labour; seeking off-farm work; allowing capital equipment to deteriorate; increasing dairy production; and leaving the dairy industry altogether.

The coping measures undertaken by the participating dairy farmers, appear similar to coping strategies adopted by other Australian farmers in their attempts to survive the impact of agricultural restructure, as identified by Alston (2000, p.30) in her study on rural poverty.
Alston (2000, p.30; 31) suggests however, that there can be wide-ranging consequences associated with farmers adopting these strategies:

- An increase in production can contribute to environmental degradation and can lead to over supply of the product;
- Cost cutting of farm products can lead to a reduction in weed and parasite control;
- Depreciation of capital equipment can lessen farmers opportunities to take advantage of current technology;
- The acquisition of more land is likely to increase farmers’ debt burden, lead to a reduction in the community’s population base and undermine the local community’s service infrastructure.
- The reduction in hired labour adds to the already unacceptable unemployment levels in rural Australia and contributes to the population drift away from rural communities;
- Working harder and longer for less money is likely to contribute to family stress;
- Belt-tightening on household costs can lead to the impoverishment of children and contribute to a reduction in the quality of life for farming families;
- For some, the idea of working off-farm runs contrary to the tradition and ideology of family farming and can impact on the family system.
- The leaving of agriculture altogether contributes to the population decline in rural areas, which again, places the service infrastructure of small rural communities at risk.

Gray & Lawrence (cited by Lawrence and Gray, 2000, p.41) suggest that although off-farm work is frequently adopted as a legitimate strategy in terms of attempting to balance the books, off-farm work can have the effect of destabilising family relationships which often form the basis of the family’s coping strategies. Indeed farmers’ attempts to hang on to their family farming lifestyle can lead to an erosion of the very family relationships that farmers “so desperately want to preserve” (Lawrence and Gray, 2000, p.41).

Alston (2000, p.30) suggests that it is usually the farm women who compensate for the reduction in hired labour and usually the women who carry the burden of seeking off-farm work as part of the farm restructure strategy.
Alston (2000) cites Alston (1995) assertion that women “now earn income, continue to replace hired labour and take almost sole responsibility for domestic chores” (p. 30). Alston (2000, p.30) maintains that one third of rural women accept off-farm positions, for which they are over-qualified, because it is difficult to find employment in rural areas. The reduction of hired farm help can also lead to farm children being required to assist with farm duties from a much younger age (Alston, 2000, p.30). Lawrence and Gray (2000) contend that farm businesses are dependent upon family labour and that up to 85 per cent of all farm labour is supplied by family members” (p.39). Lawrence and Gray (2000) suggest “It is the flexible supply of labour, along with the willingness to suffer periodic poverty, which has created the resilience of the family farm system.” (p.40).

It is important to acknowledge that there is likely to be considerable diversity with respect to the impact of dairy deregulation on individual farming enterprises (ABARE, 2000, p.19) Although there has been no attempt, in this study, to make comparisons between the particular circumstances of the participating dairy farmers, there appeared to be an understanding that the bigger the farming enterprise, the better the prospect for farming survival. As Julio suggested, it seems that dairy farmers need to either expand their dairy farm enterprises or leave the dairy industry altogether. This in turn, has implications for the concept of family farming and rural communities.

Alston (1995, p.14) suggests that there are a number of factors that influence the impact of rural restructuring on individual families, including:

- the size of the farm;
- regional viability;
- the commodities produced;
- the level of capitalisation;
- the level of indebtedness;
- the level, and the amount of, off-farm income produced.

The ABARE (2000) report on the Australian Dairy Industry asserts that the degree to which dairy deregulation impacts on individual farming enterprises will ultimately depend on the “extent to which individual farm’s average farm gate milk price has fallen, and the size of their DSAP [Dairy Support Adjustment Payment] payment” (p.22, brackets added).
I would suggest, after participating in the research conversations, that the impact of dairy deregulation or other forms of rural restructure are perhaps more complex than either Alston (1995) or the ABARE (2000) report indicate. The focus appears to remain on economic indicators and there doesn’t appear to be any consideration afforded to the emotional and social factors that may influence individual farmers’ coping capacities. Alston (1995) contends that a “distinguishing feature of farming families is their ability to drastically reduce their standard of living in order to survive for relatively long periods with little or no profit” (p.51). Alston (2000) also warns that the major restructuring of agriculture and the structural adjustments that farm families have made have led to a “significant rise in the number of farm families living in poverty” (p.31).

Participating dairy farmers were also concerned about the environmental outcomes of deregulation, particularly the effect of effluent increases resulting from larger dairy herd sizes, and the curtailment of farmers’ tree planting programs. Dairy farmers suggested that they have needed to abandon their participation in, and their contributions to, environmental and other community projects in order to meet their most pressing farming expenses. Although these decisions seem short-sighted in terms of the future of the community (and the future of the planet) dairy farmers choices, at this time, appear limited.

Four of the dairy farmer participants, Lucy, Ivan, Beth and Rex, had discontinued dairy farming since deregulation. Because Lucy and Ivan’s dairy farming enterprise had supported four families pre-deregulation, the departure of these four participants actually equated to the loss of five dairy farming families from the industry. Although each of these participants has retained their family farm, family members have needed to seek off-farm employment. Share, Lawrence and Gray (1993) warn that:

Farmers may, as a final option, elect to leave agriculture. In a period of economic decline it may not be in the farmers’ best interest to sell: indeed the price obtained for the farm may not even cover outstanding loans. The farmer may have few skills outside agriculture, and his or her removal from agriculture may simply add to the rural unemployment problem (p.576).

Although Lawrence (cited by Share et al., 1993, p.576) contends that there are often substantial welfare costs associated with farmers leaving farming, Rex and Beth indicated that they were ineligible to access any unemployment assistance because of the asset value of their family farm. Lucy was also particularly concerned about the lack of off-farm employment opportunities for her family.
The issue of off-farm employment seems especially significant for those farmers who are no longer dairy farming but unable to access Centrelink payments because of their farm asset. This issue may also be exacerbated if farmers are relying on the sale of their farms to provide an income. In her article entitled Selling out a grim prospect, Mirikilis (2000, November) reported that a local real estate agent had suggested that “the situation was grim for dairy farmers trying to sell farms because there were no buyers” (p. 14). It seems that there may be some important issues that need to be addressed in relation to employment opportunities for dairy farmers leaving the dairy industry and dairy farmers’ access to unemployment assistance.

**Researcher Recommendations:**

- That there is further investigation into the employment issues for dairy farmers who have left the dairy industry or who anticipate leaving the dairy industry as a result of dairy deregulation;
- That there is further investigation into the employment issues for dairy farmers seeking to supplement their farm income as a result of deregulation;
- That there is further investigation into the issues associated with access to Centrelink payments for unemployed dairy farmers.

**The ‘District’ is Gone: The Cost to the Community**

The ABARE (2000, p.22) report on the Australian Dairy Industry indicates that the extent to which different regions are affected by dairy deregulation is dependent upon the aggregate reduction in dairy farm incomes within the region, the proportion of people from the region employed in the dairy industry and the region’s overall dependence on dairy production. Capel and Harvey are the two regions in Western Australia that are considered to be “relatively heavily dependent” on dairy production (ABARE, 2000, p.23). The Western Australian Dairy Industry Working Group (2000) reported that:

It's estimated each $1 of dairy farm output generates an additional $2.18 in the community through processing and other flow-on activities. Perhaps half of this would be lost to the community. The total value to the community of the dairy industry during 1996/97 (the most recent estimate) was about $318 million, so shrinkage to half the present size could mean an annual loss to the community of at least $160 million (p.6).
Haslam McKenzie (2000, p.87) maintains that rural and regional Australia is increasingly exposed to issues that threaten social sustainability and that this “tearing of the social fabric” has environmental as well as economic consequences. Haslam McKenzie (2000) suggest that the future of rural communities is dependent upon the regeneration of a “socio-economic fabric through the restoration of a sense of community and place” (p.87). There appears to be increasing pressure on rural communities to meet their own needs and this often requires voluntary labour. My sense from the research conversations was that dairy farmers were struggling to meet their own needs and had little energy or resources to continue their contributions to the community. Haslam McKenzie (2000) indicates that there are consistent complaints that businesses can no longer afford that benevolence, and consequently the sense of community is further threatened (p.87).

Participating dairy farmers expressed concern about what they described as, the loss of community. Although Alston (2000) raises the issue of declining population and loss of services and infrastructure, some dairy farmer participants appeared to also mourn the loss of some of the social and cultural aspects that they had come to associate with rural community life. Lawrence and Gray (2000, p.47) suggest that there appears to be a progressive erosion of the rural culture that has been reproduced over many generations. Structural changes appear to have clashed with values and lifestyle choices that have been part of rural tradition – tradition which has provided “stability in the interpretation of what is acceptable and unacceptable in the ways the farm is operated, in family relations, and in community obligations” (Lawrence & Gray, 2000, p.47).

Lawrence and Gray (2000, p.47) suggest that rural tradition has been changed – probably forever - as a consequence of such things as loss of community members, the necessity for off-farm work and the breakdown of some areas of farming. Haslam McKenzie (2000, p.74) maintains that communities are becoming progressively smaller as farmers increase the size of their farms in an attempt to achieve economies of scale and to reduce labour costs. Haslam McKenzie (2000) contends that the shrivelling of community impacts on rural social “institutions such as community repertory clubs, sporting clubs and service organisations” (p.81)
Although Haslam McKenzie (2000) maintain that the youth drain from rural communities is a real concern in terms of “the continuing viability of the community services that remain” (p.87), dairy farmers also described the loss of young people in their community in terms of the loss of enthusiasm and vibrancy. Self (2000) maintains that the social costs of losing young people from their communities is significant, but figures “little or not at all in economic models, presently because they are tiresome and unquantifiable” (p.241).

**Researcher's recommendation:**

- That there is a need for community building projects to develop creative and sustainable opportunities to encourage and support young people to remain in their rural communities.

Dairy farmers also expressed their concern that the loss of young people from the community would have the effect of limiting opportunities for incorporating up-to-date technology into farming practices. Julio spoke of his concerns about the increasing average age of farmers and what that might mean for the future of food production in Australia. Lawrence and Gray (2000, p.38) contend that the average age of farmers in Australia is now 52 years. Lawrence and Gray (2000, p.38) also maintain that Australian farm numbers have fallen by 1.3% (or by 2000 farms) per year since the mid-1950s. Although I felt that Julio's question, with respect to the future of food production in Australia, is valid and relevant to the outlook for dairy farming, it is a question that most certainly goes beyond the scope of this study.

**Researcher's Recommendation:**

- That there is further investigation into the future of food production in rural Australia, particularly in light of the decline in the number of young people from Australian communities.

Participating dairy farmers felt that there was little empathy for their circumstances outside of the dairy farming community. There was a real sense that people neither understood nor cared about the difficulties experienced by some farmers.
McManus and Pritchard (2000) suggest that although the divide, in terms of incomes, service provision, lifestyles and outlooks, between urban and rural is far more complex than the dichotomy of 'urban 'winners' and rural 'losers'"..."The sharper end of global competition, combined with the rationalisation of both public and private sector services, has impacted harshly on many people in rural and regional Australia" (pp. 2; 3). McManus and Pritchard (2000, p.2; 3) contend that the rapid pace of economic, social and cultural changes over the past two decades and the resultant decline in economic and social infrastructures have not only created particular difficulties for people in rural communities, but left them poorly equipped to deal with the changes. "In the eyes of many, rural and regional Australia has not only been extremely exposed to social and economic change, it has been without adequate resources to respond effectively to new challenges." (McManus & Pritchard, 2000, pp.2;3).

**Researcher's Recommendations:**

- That there is further investigation into community building or community development opportunities in an effort to develop creative responses and collective approaches towards strengthening rural community sustainability, particularly in relation to agriculture restructuring;
- That restructure packages target social as well as economic infrastructures to reflect the diversity of rural living.

**Loss of Security: The Removal of Quota**

The loss of the quota asset seemed to signify a loss of security, at a number of levels, for the participating dairy farmers. As an asset, the quota provided 'security' in terms of farm equity and farm debt as well as providing a degree of security in terms of the farmers' future. At the same time, the quota provided a 'secure' means of controlling the level of farmers' income. Historically one of the ways that dairy farmers in Western Australia have grown is by buying quota to add value to their milk income (National Foods, 1999, p.2). As Todd explained in the research conversations, the more quota that dairy farmers bought, the more income they could earn themselves.
Quota had cost as much as $400 per litre and the average price, for quota, was approximately $312 per litre (Boylen, 1999). The quota not only provided a means whereby dairy farmers could position themselves with respect to their current income, but also position themselves with respect to their future income. My understanding, from my dairy farming background, is that it is not unusual for farmers to have considered their quota in terms of an investment in their future. Dairy farmers seem to have viewed their quota as either: their superannuation, if they were planning to sell their quota when they retired; or, as a means of income, if their children were planning to continue their dairy farming enterprise.

Farm assets often preclude dairy farmers from receiving an aged pension and it is not unusual for the dairy farmers’ children to assume the responsibility for supporting their retired parents. The quota therefore, provided a means for positioning the farming enterprise to ensure an ongoing adequate income for both the continuing dairy farmers’ family and their retired parents. Anecdotal evidence, acquired through my participation in the dairy farming community, has suggested that dairy deregulation has created a number of difficulties for farming families who have more than one generation of family members drawing on the farm income. I believe that there are some important issues (including policy issues) that need to be considered and addressed with respect to the impact of deregulation on inter-generational relationships and on retired or retiring dairy farmers and their families. Again, this is an issue that goes beyond the scope of this study, but one, I believe, that requires further consideration.

**Researcher’s Recommendation:**

- That there is further investigation into the inter-generational issues brought about by deregulation;

Some dairy farmers spoke of their quota in relation to their children’s inheritance. For Ivan, who was at the stage of his life where he was considering his retirement, the removal of quota created difficulties in terms of his succession planning. Traditionally, dairy quota has been considered as property, to be included in farmers’ succession plans. It was not unusual, pre-deregulation, for certain family members to inherit the quota in lieu of farming land or other tangible property.
The farmers' children have usually been involved in the farming enterprise, from a very young age, and have spent most of their working lives contributing to the farm assets and seems to be an everyday taken-for-granted (Smith, 1988) understanding that the farm assets would eventually accrue to them.

Each of the participating dairy farmers lost a significant asset with the removal of quota. Farmers expressed a considerable degree of anger about the Western Australian Government legislating to remove their asset quota without providing any form of compensation. Farmers were upset that the quota had been recognised as property at both a state and federal government level, pre-deregulation, and yet not accounted for as property in the deregulation process. As Julio explained, quota was bought and sold as property, pre-deregulation, and farmers were required to pay stamp duty to the Western Australian Government on the transfer of that property. At a federal government level, quota was recognised as property by government departments, such as Centrelink, and taken into account when assessing dairy farmers' eligibility for government assistance.

The quota however, was not afforded any property value in the deregulation decision and dairy farmers have not been provided with any compensation for the resumption of that quota property. Again, anecdotal evidence, from the dairy farming community, has indicated that farm assets, including dairy quota, have excluded dairy farmers' children from receiving Austudy payments and excluded retired dairy farmers from receiving aged pensions. Dairy farmers appeared to have a sense of injustice that the Western Australian Government collected duties and taxes from the transfer of quota and the Federal government recognising quota as an assessable asset in relation to Centrelink payments, and yet both governments failed to account for farmers' property rights in legislating to deregulate.

Although dairy farmer quota holders initially appeared to hold some hope around receiving compensation for their quota asset, the participating dairy farmers indicated that they no longer believed that compensation would be paid. Leading up to deregulation, the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee (1999) inquiring into the deregulation of the dairy industry, recommended that:
The states of Queensland, NSW and WA consider the issue of quota entitlement and any form of compensation that may be appropriate for the resumption of quota entitlement, including the possibility of using NCP [National Competition Policy] payments as compensation. (cited in HISWA, p.8. Brackets added).

Despite this recommendation, the Western Australian Government has still not provided Western Australian dairy farmers with any compensation for the resumption of their milk quotas (Harris, 2001, p.3). Shortly before deregulation, Churchill Fellow, Marie Dilley, warned that:

> You can't just wipe out the asset base of an industry and expect it to survive...Quota has a dollar value that is built into the financial structure of most farms...Most farms have heavy debt and it is the income from the quota content of most people's production that allows them to service that debt (Cited by Hamilton, 1999, p.2).

Todd described the loss of quota asset as feeling like “being kicked in the guts” and his description seemed to reflect the feelings of the other participating dairy farmers. Dairy farmers indicated a real sense of injustice around losing an asset that they had worked hard to purchase, and, in some cases, that they were still paying off. Dairy farmers suggested that they would have found it easier to accept the loss of the quota asset if they were the ones who were responsible (or irresponsible) for that loss, but that it was difficult to accept that someone else could have removed their asset with, as Julio described, *the stroke of a pen*. In his article, *Milked for all We're Worth*, Bartlett, (2000) rebukes the Western Australian Government's failure to compensate dairy farmers' for the removal of quota that they have previously purchased:

> A bit like a taxi diver who buys a license on the open market, only to have it forcibly taken away two years later and be given half price. In another arena, it would be considered an indirect theft but in this case, Primary Industry Minister Monty House has indicated that farmers would be given other things to make up the shortfall. The minister said the government would provide broad industry and regional financial help. (p.15).

It seems that dairy farmers appeared to have little, if any, power in the decision making process around dairy deregulation. Young (1990) argues that “While issues of the distribution of goods and resources are central to reflections on social justice, issues of decisionmaking power and processes...are just as important” (p.241). Young (1990, p.41) contends that the injustices that are inflicted on individuals and groups because of the “everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society” need to also be understood in terms of oppression.
Although dairy farmers would not necessarily be considered as oppressed under distributive understandings of oppression (Young, 1990, p.37), I would suggest that the injustices that dairy farmers have faced since the deregulation of the dairy industry need to also be understood in terms of ‘oppression’.

**Researcher Recommendation:**

- That social equity measures in policy application take account of dairy farming families’ social and economic circumstances.

**Feelings of Failure and Other Emotional Issues**

A number of the participating dairy farmers appeared to struggle with feelings of failure – feelings that they had failed or might fail the past and future generations of their families. At one level, farmers appeared to acknowledge that the adverse outcomes associated with dairy deregulation were beyond their personal control, and yet, at another level, farmers were feeling a real sense of failure around their changed economic circumstances. Dairy farmers spoke of failing their children by encouraging them into a farming lifestyle that could no longer support them or failing their children by not providing them with the opportunity to return to the farm. Dairy farmers seemed particularly concerned that they would be the one’s who failed their past and future family members by losing the family farm. Marris (1974, p.108) explains that how people construct meaning about their lives is as much to do with their hopes for the future as it is their present life. Marris (1974) suggests that feelings of failure can “threaten the purposes and expectations about which the meaning of life has been constructed”... and undermine our...“assumptions about the future which have already become crucial to our present identity” (p.108). Marris (1974, p.108) also contends that feelings of failure can elicit feelings of grief. Dairy farmers also seemed to be grappling with feelings of anger, frustration and grief associated with their diminishing incomes and the loss of their quota asset.

Some farmers questioned whether the physical symptoms they were experiencing were associated with their stress whilst others spoke of diminished motivation and of not sleeping properly at night.
Macnab (1989) maintains that it is not unusual for people who have experienced loss or change to find that they are experiencing physical reactions. Marris (1974, p.25) suggests that people dealing with issues of loss and grief may experience symptoms such as restlessness; exhaustion; loss of appetite; digestive illnesses; headaches; rashes etcetera. There seems to have been a considerable amount of discussion, particularly amongst the women, about the degree of unwellness, in the dairy farming community, since the deregulation of the dairy industry. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that some dairy farmers have associated their increased level of unwellness to their increased levels of stress since dairy deregulation. Marris (1974) contends that typically, grief is signified by “physical distress and worse health” (p.26).

There have been a number of articles in the local newspapers that indicated that some dairy farmers were struggling to cope with their changed circumstances (Mirikilis, 2000, October; Mirikilis, 2000, November; Mirikilis 2001). In her article on the death of a South West dairy farmer, Mirikilis (2001) reported that the dairy farmer’s family believed that the “pressures and stress from the deregulation of the dairy industry contributed to his ill-health” (p.1). Mirikilis (2001, p.1) asserted that there had been an indication, from the dairy farmer’s family, that he had been worried about how the three families, who lived on the farm, were going to survive in a deregulated industry and worried that he was no longer able to provide for his family. This story seems to be only one amongst many that have come to light through the local papers and, I would suggest one story too many.

Although the issue of stress-related unwellness was raised anecdotally, in the media and during the research conversations, this study did not provide the opportunity to investigate any correlation between dairy deregulation and dairy farmers’ health. I would suggest however, that this is an important issue that warrants further investigation.

**Researcher’s Recommendation:**

- That there is further investigation into the correlation between deregulation and dairy farmers’ health issues.
Macnab (1989, p.125) suggests that although individuals may acknowledge that they are distressed or bewildered about a particular events, they don’t necessarily know how to manage their associated feelings. Macnab (1989, p.125) contends that it is not unusual for people’s relationships to become strained, as they struggle to cope and remain confident, during difficult times. Dairy farmer participants spoke of experiencing feelings of anger and grief since deregulation and they suggested that family relationships had become strained as family members battled to cope with their changing circumstances. At the same time, farmers spoke of experiencing a loss of motivation and a loss of purpose. Macnab (1989) maintains that people experiencing distress may become “low on productivity, spontaneity and good company” (p.125).

Marris’s work on loss and grief (1974) suggests that it is common for people to experience grief or distress when they face a loss of continuity, predictability and control in their lives (p.21). People’s ability to survive their situations is dependent on their ability to predict and make sense out of the events that are happening around them (Marris 1974, p.16). There was an indication from dairy farmers that they had little control around the event of deregulation and they made little sense of the decision to deregulate. Marris (1974) maintains that “If events contradict crucial assumptions about our world of experience, they threaten to overwhelm the structures of thought on which we depend to assimilate and adapt” (p.17).

Even though the proposed deregulation had been strongly debated and to a degree, considered inevitable, across the dairy farming community pre-deregulation, there was an indication that the participating dairy farmers were not only struggling with the degree and the swiftness of the change but also grappling to accept that the change had even occurred. Marris (1974) suggests that it is not unusual for people to experience a sense of denial or disbelief when their changed circumstances overshadow their “familiar meaning” (p.21). Marris (1974, p.110) warns that people’s emotional resilience can become exhausted if they experience a number of disruptive changes and suggests that people need time to adapt to disruptive change – time to restore a sense of continuity to their lives.

There was also a real sense that the farmers’ wives had carried much of the burden of their husband’s emotional issues as well as trying to manage their own.
Julio suggested that his wife had provided support for him, even though she was dealing with her own issues. There was an indication, from some of the farmers that it was their partners and families who had not only witnessed and, at times, worn their anger but family members who had provided them with emotional support. Dairy farmers seemed confused about the degree of their emotional reaction to their changing circumstances particularly considering the level of ‘unpredictability’ that is normally associated with farming life. It is not unusual for farmers to face and adapt to such things as ‘unpredictable’ weather conditions and fluctuating markets and as Alston (1995) maintains “That family farming continues to be the dominant form of agricultural production demonstrates the ability of families to adapt to changing circumstances” (p.51).

Small Cheese: The ‘Personal is Political’

The participating dairy farmers seemed scathing of the political processes that surrounded dairy deregulation. Dairy farmers spoke of feeling unheard and unsupported by their political representatives at a number of levels – at an industry level, a state government level and at a Federal Government level. Dairy farmers appeared to appreciate the power differentials faced by the Western Australian industry leaders in the lead up to deregulation, but spoke of feeling let down by their representing body. Dairy farmers suggested that the Western Australian dairy industry did not have the necessary power or clout to influence the decision making process of deregulation and that the Western Australian Government did not have the political will to represent the interests of Western Australian dairy farmers. Sheill (1999) maintains that “rural people feel themselves to be outside a responsive political system and unrepresented by the major political parties who concentrate on their large urban majorities” (p.32). Dairy farmers suggested that people didn’t appear to matter in the prevailing political ideology.

Anderson (cited by Alston, 2000) maintains that governments have been willing to support the loss of some farming families, convinced that “global market forces are the ultimate determinants of farm family survival” (p.32).
Self (2000) contends that the dominant assumption within political institutions resolves that:

global markets are an inescapable fact, that salvation lies through global advances in free trade and conventional economic growth, that the first necessity for any national economy is to adjust to the exigencies of global competition, and that all other considerations must be subordinated to their need.

(p.31)

Hancock (1999, p.60) questions the dominant ideology that markets are “free, fair and efficient” and argues that the markets are not independent from their participating institutions and organisations. Lawrence (1996) maintains that the problem that Australian farmers face “is that they produce, by and large, for an export market which is corrupted by protection and subsidisation from abroad” (p.334). Prichard (2000, p.91) suggests that farmers have approached the “two-edged sword of trade policy” with differing levels of acceptance or dissension. Although farmers have supported Australian government attempts to open foreign markets and reduce agricultural subsidies paid to Australia’s competitors, “the dismantling of statutory marketing arrangements has proved highly contentious” (Prichard, 2000, p.91).

The recent World Trade Organisation agreement in Qatar, with respect to the phasing out of export subsidies on agricultural commodities, appears to have drawn a mixed reaction from Australian farmers (Capp & Trott, 2001, November, p.41). Although Trade Minister, Mark Vaile, indicated that the Qatar agreement would result in higher prices for Australian agricultural commodities, Western Australian farmers remained sceptical about the commitment from other countries (Capp & Trott, 2001, November). According to Tony Pratico, Western Australian Farmers Federation’s, current Dairy President, “It’s good news but I don’t believe that the European Community and the Americans will stop subsidising farmers to keep them on the land. They will find another way to pay their farmers a subsidy” (cited by Capp & Trott, 2001, November, p.41).

Hancock (1999) cites Heilbroner (1990) who contends that the existing narrow economic focus of political institutions serves to negate political responsibility, invalidate “social and moral concerns” and promote “individualist rather than collectivist solutions to social problems” (p.60). Alston (2000, p.32) suggests that in turning their attention outward to global markets, governments are abrogating their responsibility to rural Australia.
Purcell (cited by Alston, 2000) asserts that “Market forces will find no place for the young, the elderly or the disabled. It will throw people on the scrap-heap without compunction and blame them for their own poverty” (p.32). Alston (2000) suggests that governments are ignoring the difficulties faced by rural Australians and not only failing to provide the “resources and infrastructure needed to empower rural people to address their situations, but are actively contributing to the powerless position of rural people” (p.32).

Participating dairy farmers felt that they had been left with little power in the deregulated industry. Western Australian dairy farmers no longer appear to have any involvement in the commercial decision-making processes with farmers’ control of their milk ceasing at the farm gate (Western Australian Dairy Industry Working Group, 2000 p.4). Dairy farmers felt that the milk processors’ contract systems were divisive and repressive. Julio spoke of farmers being left powerless and without bargaining power in the deregulated industry.

In his address to the WA Farmers Federation Annual Seminar and Conference, Kim Chance, Western Australian Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, contended that:

There are also reports that some milk supply contracts are weighted heavily in the buyer's favour and that farmers have little power in contract negotiations. Penalties for undersupply seem unnecessarily punitive. Contracts which reportedly permit one party, but not the other to vary their commitments after signing are unfair and unacceptable. Guaranteeing supply by punitive penalties rather than attractive prices is regressive and has done much damage to farmers’ morale and the supply of milk. (HISWA, 2001, p.8).

Kim Chance warned the milk processing companies that although formal government involvement in setting milk prices had ended with the deregulation of the dairy industry, he would not rule out government intervention “if milk prices and contract conditions are not seen to be scrupulously fair” (HISWA, 2001, p.8).

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has recently supported the Australian Dairy Farmers’ Federation’s plan to allow dairy farmers to collectively negotiate milk contracts. This agreement is to remain in place until the year 2005.
Prior to this agreement the Trade Practices Act has prohibited farmers from collective bargaining. Australian Dairy Farmer Federation president Pat Rowley, maintained that collective bargaining is likely to “help save farmers from the overt strength of processors and even retailers” (Farmers win say on milk price deals, 2001). Although, I think that there are some questions about the logistics of farmers collectivising and the degree of power a collective might have in negotiating prices with processors and supermarkets, this agreement may provide a means for farmers to gain increased prices for their milk and claw back some power in the milk supply chain. This is a very recent development, which may offer some hope to those dairy farmers who are struggling to cope in the deregulated market.

It seemed very clear from the research conversations that farmers did not feel that the necessary structures were in place to support dairy farming families through the transition process. I felt that Joe raised a very important point when he spoke of farmers walking into an empty room without the necessary structures in place. Although there have been some government actions to facilitate the transition process, dairy farmers were disappointed with not only the amount of financial assistance available but also, the processes for accessing that assistance. The Dairy Structural Adjustment Program (DSAP) was implemented by the Federal Government to assist farmers to adjust to the lower prices in the deregulated market. The DSAP, which is funded by a 11-cent-per-litre consumer levy on all liquid milk products, provides dairy farmers with quarterly cash payments over an eight year period. Dairy farmers can receive their DSAP entitlement as an up-front advance or loan through the banking system (WA Farmers Federation, 2000, p.2). Under this arrangement, the nominated bank advances the farmers’ entitlement, less the interest component, as an up-front payment. The farmers’ DSAP entitlement is then paid to the bank, on a quarterly basis, over the eight-year period. The DSAP entitlements are subject to income tax, which are spread over the full eight-year period, irrespective of whether the farmer received an up-front payment or not (WA Farmers Federation, 2000, p.2).

Participating farmers had some concerns about the amount of farmers’ entitlement lost through the interest component of the up-front advance, and some worries about farmers’ meeting their continuing income tax obligations over an eight year period, particularly if they had elected to take an up-front advance on their entitlement.
I also have some concerns associated with the 'morality' of a situation, where the government collects income tax on a rural restructure package, which is to be funded by an 11 cents-per-litre consumer levy on milk over an eight year period.

In his final President's Report to the Annual Dairy Conference and Industry Seminar 2001, out-going president of the WA Farmers Federation, Danny Harris, contended that it had been extremely difficult for most dairy farmers in Western Australia to manage since deregulation and "the very poor prices paid by milk companies in our State has seen many farmers struggle to contain their overdrafts, and they have been forced to direct their DSAP payments towards day-to-day running costs" (WA Farmers Federation, 2001, p.1). Harris (2001) also maintained that many farmers had found the Dairy Structure Adjustment Program (DSAP) "time consuming and sometimes confusing" (The Western Australian Farmers Federation, 2001, p.1).

The Western Australian Government also approved a WA Dairy Farmer Assistance Package, which provided farmers with some assistance towards: business assessment; planning and implementation; and training. Participating dairy farmers felt that the processes involved in accessing the state and the federal packages were arduous and unnecessarily complicated.

In June 2001, Federal Agriculture Minister, Warren Truss, announced legislation to provide additional financial assistance to "address the concerns of dairy farmers and their communities most affected by industry deregulation" (p.1). Approximately 80% of Western Australian dairy farmers will be eligible for the additional assistance (Harris, 2001, p.1). The entitlements associated with this package are also subject to income tax.

Joe was very clear when he stated that money is not transition – that there needed to be some structures in place to assist dairy farmers to deal with the transition process.

Australian dairy Industry Council Chairman, Pat Rowley (2002) maintains that:

One of the things that we have been grappling with in the industry in the past 18 months is the sort of structures required now the industry is totally deregulated. During the last couple of days of industry meetings we obtained broad agreement to go to government to try to get into position a new set of arrangements. (p.9).
There are still so many unknowns—although again, beyond the scope of this study, there is a need to further investigate the structures that need to be in place to assist dairy farmers and their communities to adjust to a deregulated dairy industry.

**Researcher’s Recommendations:**

- That there is further investigation into the structures needed to facilitate the ongoing transition and adjustment processes for dairy farmers and their communities, following the deregulation of the dairy industry;
- That social workers actively work towards the collectivisation of dairy farming community members in order to bring about change.

**Who the Hell Do You Talk To? Available Assistance**

Dairy farmers spoke of feeling isolated in the aftermath of deregulation. There was some indication that farmers felt unconvinced that there was anyone who could help them with the difficulties they were facing. Farmers appeared to be either unaware of the available support services, or to lack confidence in the services that were available. Julio felt that support workers had little understanding of dairy farmers’ issues and little knowledge of rural life.

Alston (2000) contends that the profile of social workers “in the imagination of rural communities is dangerously low”. Farmers appeared to have reservations about accessing local services and they seemed particularly concerned about confidentiality breaches in small communities. Although some of the farmers suggested that they would have appreciated having on-farm support, other farmers related stories of less-than-helpful experiences with on-farm support. There was an indication that to be effective, support workers needed to have a good understanding of the language, the culture and the sub-cultures of rural communities. Dairy farmers were looking to talk to someone who shared some basic understandings of their industry and of their way of life. Cheers (1999) suggests that rural human service workers not only require their: formal knowledge, gained through their education, books and journals; their informal knowledge, gained through practice wisdom, and personal and professional experiences; but also knowledge and skills that are socially produced and “generated through her or his ongoing interaction with the community and its members” (p.98).
Alston (n.d.) maintains that the "social work profession has made little impact on some groups of rural Australians in times of serious hardship" (p. 80) ... despite social work's commitment to... "the pursuit of social justice, to the enhancement of the quality of life and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society" (cited AASW, p. 80). Alston (n.d.) contends that there are some key issues which are impacting on the social work profession's ability to respond to current rural issues: the inability of many rural agencies to attract social work staff; the rationalisation of services; the high rate of staff turnover, particularly for new graduates, in rural communities; and the limited development of a "rural social work culture" (p. 80). Alston (n.d., p. 81) suggests that there are a number of issues that the social work profession needs to address:

- Social work education needs to prepare students to have an understandings of rural cultural factors, service access problems and of the serious social crisis of rural Australia;
- Social workers need to actively advocating for change on the basis of principles of social justice rather than on current economic rationalist ideas;
- Social workers need to be developing new and appropriate models of service delivery to rural communities;
- The social work profession needs to be actively working towards the employment of social workers in rural communities to ensure much needed service delivery;
- There is a need to consider support mechanisms for workers in rural communities;
- The social work profession needs to be a strong voice in advocating for social change in rural communities.

Notwithstanding Lonne and Cheer's (2001) assertion that there seems to be a "committed pool of rural social workers who prefer to live and work in rural locations" (p. 27), I would suggest that there is a need for social workers to be working towards establishing trust, building relationships and developing continuity of services in rural communities. My sense, from the research conversations, was that there was a real need for human service agencies to lift their profile in rural communities and to consider issues of real 'access' for rural community members.
There was an indication from dairy farmers that they had relied on family members and, to a degree, other dairy farmers, for support. It is not unusual for individuals to rely on family and friends for support in times of stress however, people are often unable to help each other when they are faced with their own problems and pressures (Cheers cited by Pollard, 1996, p.271). Lynn (1999) maintains that there has been a much-valued tradition of self-help in rural communities and a “lesser value ascribed to those needing assistance” (p.21). I would suggest that this is a more complex issue than perhaps Lynn (1999) indicates, and that geographic distance and lack of available services have meant that rural people have often needed to provide for themselves. Cheers suggests that “in rural community, if you don’t know how to do something, and there is no-one else around then you simply have to do your best” (p.98).

What has been very clear from the research conversations and the media reports is that dairy farmers have not felt supported or cared about during what has been a difficult period for some farmers. I am aware, from my community participation, that representatives from a number of South West human service agencies have been working towards accessing funds to provide additional support services to dairy farmers and their communities. I feel that farmers would benefit from having access to a rural community-based support service such as the Southern Agcare Financial and Family Counselling Service, which operates across 15 shires in the southern area of Western Australia. Southern Agcare provides “both family and financial counselling to rural families in time of need” (Bailye, 1999, p.5)

**Researcher’s Recommendations:**

- That there is further investigation into the possible implementation of a rural-community based support service, such as Southern Agcare, in the South West region;
- That social workers actively seek to develop the necessary relationships in rural areas to increase awareness of appropriate services;
- That social workers advocate for increased opportunities for rural based education through universities and professional development courses.
Dairy farmers appeared to have mixed views of what the future might hold for dairy farming families. Fairness and equitable treatment were prime considerations for the participating dairy farmers. Although some dairy farmers felt that there was little hope for the smaller farmer in a deregulated industry, others felt that the situation would improve if they could just hold on for a little longer.

In his final report to the annual dairy conference, Harris (2001, p. 1; 2) indicated that he felt positive about the future for the Western Australian dairy industry and welcomed the newly formed Challenge Dairy Cooperative. Harris (2001, p.1) suggested that the Western Australian dairy industry would benefit enormously from an industry-based farmer owned cooperative and that the Challenge Dairy Cooperative provided an opportunity for a “viable single manufacturing base for all WA dairies to supply to, and be a shareholder of” (p.1; 2). Stilwell (cited by Tonts and Jones, 1996, p.151) contends that although cooperatives have the potential to be “plagued with problems of parochialism and localism” they can be progressive and offer a genuine alternative to rural communities as long they receive adequate government support (p.151). The participating dairy farmers appeared to have a ‘cautious’ but generally positive outlook towards the newly formed cooperative.

It is still very early days in the history of deregulation and although dairy industry leaders seem to be talking up the industry (Harris, 2001, Rowley, 2001) the participating dairy farmers appeared to be simply trying to hang on and cope with their changing circumstances. My sense was that farmers were dealing with a number of difficult issues, including feelings of loss and grief, and were not necessarily in a space to consider the future prospects for the dairy industry. Marris (1974) suggests that people need to repair the ‘thread of continuity’ when they have faced disruptive changes to their lives – to “repair the thread, tying past, present and future together again with rewoven strands of meaning” (p.21). My sense, from my participation in this research project, was that a number dairy farmers were still struggling to reweave their strands of meaning associated with living and working in a deregulated dairy industry.
Within a Critical Framework

Kinzeloe and McLaren (2000) contend that "In many ways the globalization process, and the strengthening of the free market capitalism that accompanies it, takes us back to the roots of critical research" (p.304). Kinzeloe and McLaren (cited in Crotty, 1998, pp.157; 158) contend that there are a number of assumptions that underlie critical research and I intend to address each of these in relation to this particular study:

- That all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social in nature and historically constituted.

This study suggests that dairy farmers are now feeling excluded from the existing power relations at a number of levels. It would appear that the participating dairy farmers had little power in the decision making process leading up to deregulation and have little power in the newly deregulated industry. This has been a shift for dairy farming families, who have historically benefited from social power relations gained through the ownership of land, capital holdings, a regulated income, and their participation in Australia’s agricultural industry. Family farming has made an important contribution to Australia’s development and the participating dairy farmers suggested that farming has historically been considered a valued and worthwhile occupation. Family farming has been the dominant mode of Australian agriculture since the nineteenth century (Alston, 1995, p.8) and agriculture has made an important contribution to Australia’s export earnings (Alston, 1995, p.1).

Despite family farmers’ history in terms of societal power relations, it would now seem that dairy farming families figure little within the capitalist market system of the globalised economy. This study indicates that the participating dairy farmers are struggling to come to terms with their feelings of powerlessness and lack of control in the deregulated industry. Self (2000) suggests that capitalist market theory fails to take into account that “Human beings also belong to families and communities, they have personal aims and ideals, they share traditions and prized ways of life. Human beings are not like pawns on an economic chess board” (p.240). Correspondingly, participating dairy farmers have straddled the imperatives and conditions of the capitalist market system and now find themselves among its victims.
That facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from ideological inscription.

This study indicates that dairy farming families have worked long and hard to maintain their family farms for future generations. It seems that the participating dairy farmers have traditionally valued their independence and taken pride in their ability to provide for themselves and their families with little support or intervention from government. The deregulation process has, in itself, raised an ideological dilemma for some dairy farmers in that the ideology of minimal government intervention seemingly supports the deregulation process, and yet adversely impacts on their family farming lifestyle.

Some participating dairy farmers appear to be struggling with feelings of failure and other emotional issues and yet remain isolated from the available support services. Despite the indication from this study, that governments and human service organisations could certainly be doing more in terms of their responses to social issues in rural communities, Buxton (cited in Krieg Mayer, 2001) contends that some rural people continue to hold the attitude that some of the services offered by social workers are an affront to rural values of "self-sufficiency, independence, thrill and family loyalty" (p.99). There was an indication from the participating dairy farmers that they had little confidence that the services provided by the existing human service organisations were appropriate to the needs of people in rural communities.

Additionally, despite the 'free hand of the market, outside of human influence' rhetoric (Hancock, 1999, p.59), the global market system is not value free. As Self (2000) explains:

The global economic system is not at all a level playing field. It exhibits a complex mixture of economic and political power. The main elements in the system are the big corporations, which dominate world trade, the international money market, national governments and international economic organisations. The big corporations use their bargaining power in relation both to weaker market competitors or suppliers and to the national governments, whom they often exceed in resources. (p.138)
With the removal of government regulation, dairy farming families have been left to compete in a global market, which privileges the values of large corporations, and where there seems little room for dairy farming families' traditional values relating to community, continuity and their multiple connections to land, people and sustainability.

The relationship between concept and object, signifier and signified is never stable and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption:

Dairy farmers have been and continue to be, part of the capitalist economy. Although dairy farming families have to a degree, developed farming practices along with advances in technology, they appear to have been left behind in the rapidly changing and expanding capitalist economy. Participating dairy farmers identified that unless they were in a position to get 'bigger and bigger' then they were perhaps unable to continue in the dairy farming industry. There was an indication from dairy farmers that expansion was not necessarily a practical or desirable option for dairy farmers in terms of: available and suitable land holdings; environmental considerations; available finances; community costs; and preservation of family farming lifestyle. This study indicates that dairy farmers have not only been left behind but significantly disadvantaged in the changing capitalist economy.

Language is central to the formation of subjectivity, that is both conscious and unconscious awareness:

There is an indication from this study that dairy farmers' identification of their dairy farming enterprises and family farming lifestyle appear contrary to the prevailing capitalist market discourse. Dairy farmers described: family farming in terms of 'a valued way of life' rather than, for example, 'a productive capitalist endeavour'; farming land in terms of 'part of who you are' rather than, for example, a saleable asset; their cows in terms of 'the girls' or as 'part of the family' rather than, for example 'farm stock'. Family farms and farming land were spoken of in terms of farmers' identity and ancestry, rather than viewed as saleable capital items.
It seems that the values that dairy farmers place on aspects of their farming lives are implicit in their language and there seemed little congruence between the dairy farmers' language and its ascribed meaning and the language and the values of the capitalist market system.

This study indicates that language was utilised as a powerful and disempowering tool in the lead up to deregulation. Industry leaders used terms such as 'a window of opportunity' and statements such as "we must move on to the commercial reality" (Harris, 2000, p.2) in order to convince dairy farmers to support the deregulation decision, even though there was an understanding in the community that up to 30% of Western Australian dairy farming enterprises may not be viable in a deregulated market (Boylan, 1999, p.43). A vote to support the deregulation process was described by one industry leader as "a mature decision" (Harris, 2001, p.2). One can only assume that the inference from this last statement is that dairy farmers who did not support dairy deregulation were making 'immature decisions'!

That certain groups in any society are privileged over others, constituting an oppression that is most forceful when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable:

This study suggests that it has been difficult for the participating dairy farmers to resist the oppressive nature of the current policies and ideology that has led to the deregulation of the dairy industry and the resultant hardships. Dairy farmers indicated that they were no longer part of the industry's decision-making processes and that they felt unheard by their political representatives at all levels. Participating dairy farmers indicated that in addition to dairy farmers finding themselves in a subordinate position within the industry supply chain and the political decision-making processes, another level of 'subordination' emerged within the community of dairy farmers. It seems that dairy farmers gained or lost status according to the milk prices offered to individual dairy farmers through the milk contract systems, which were introduced by the various milk processing companies following deregulation. Dairy farmers suggested that they had little choice but to accept the prices and the conditions offered by the processing companies through the milk contract system.
With the separation between dairy farmers as part of a globalised agribusiness and the small family farm, now reinforced, dairy farmers may be seen as returning to occupy the positions formerly held by Marx' 'peasant' farmers – dismissed, ignored and insignificant in global economics (Lawrence, 1987).

Although, the ACCC’s recent decision to allow dairy farmers to collectively negotiate prices with milk processing companies offers some hope that farmers will collectivise to confront their current oppressive situation, it appears that, to date, the changing circumstances for dairy farmers has served to fragment rather than unite the dairy farming community. It seems that the participating dairy farmers have been so absorbed with the transition and adjustment processes that there has been little or no opportunity to develop collective resistance responses to their changed circumstances.

That oppression has many faces, and concern for only one form of oppression at the expense of others can be counterproductive because of the connection between them:

Oppression does have many faces and although this study supports the notion that the prevailing patriarchal ideology has placed many women into subordinate positions on family farms (Alston, 1995, p.63), gender is but one (albeit, especially significant) form of oppression. Alston (1995, p.144) contends that the powerlessness experienced by women in family farming situations can also often be matched by the powerlessness experienced by farming men. As mentioned previously in this dissertation the “scope of justice is wider than distributive issues” (Young, 1990, p.33) and I would suggest that there is an indication from this study that the injustices that some dairy farming families have experienced since deregulation must be understood in terms of ‘oppression’. Young (1990) argues that:

instead of focusing on distribution, a conception of justice should begin with the concepts of domination and oppression. Such a shift brings out issues of decisionmaking, divisions of labour, and culture that bear on social justice, but are often ignored in philosophical discussions. (p.3)
Dairy farmers suggested that the processors and the supermarkets have gained from deregulation and that farmers are receiving little return for the milk they produce. Young (1990) asserts that “The central insight expressed in the concept of exploitation, then, is that this oppression occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another” (p.49).

There is also an indication from this research that some dairy farmers have been excluded from the work force as a result of dairy deregulation. In some instances dairy farmers have needed to seek alternative or additional employment to dairy farming. Dairy farmers appear to have faced a number of difficulties in seeking alternative work opportunities including: the lack of available employment in rural communities; the unsuitability of employment in terms of individuals being either under-qualified or over-qualified for available jobs; the non-transferability or unrecognised transferability of farming skills to non-farming work places; and discriminatory age practices. Young (1990) suggests that:

Social rules about what work is, who does what for whom, how work is compensated, and the social process by which the results of work are appropriated operate to enact relations of power and inequality. These relations are produced and reproduced through a systemic process in which the energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to maintain and augment the power, status and wealth of the haves. (p.50).

❖ That mainstream research practices are generally implicated, albeit unwittingly, in the reproduction of systems of class, race and gender oppression:

Ife, (1997, pp.180; 181) contends that economic rationalist policies remain largely unchallenged because it is only the voices of the powerful and the most economically advantaged that are heard in public discussions. The systems of class, race and gender oppression continue to be reproduced as marginalised people remain excluded from “the discourses of power” (Ife, 1997, p.181). Ife (1997) suggests that social workers have a responsibility to assist disadvantaged people to gain access to public forums in order to address the structures of power and domination. One of the underlying aims of this research project is to give dairy farmer participants a ‘voice’ in the deregulation discussion – a forum to acknowledge their experiences and to make the reality of their experiences visible.
I have deliberately moved away from a traditional positivist top-down approach to this research project so as not to “entrench the legitimated power and resources of the powerful” (Ife, 1997, pp. 78; 79). Ife (1997) argues that positivist approaches will “primarily serve the interests of any dominant group that controls access to information and resources” (p.79).

The methodology of ‘Engaged Critical Ethnography’ was purposefully chosen to expose oppressive practices within the research area and to minimise the potential to perpetuate oppressive practices within the research process. Simon and Dippo (cited in Quantz, 1992, p. 448) contend that that critical ethnographic research must meet three fundamental conditions: the research processes must be consistent with the theoretical perspective underpinning the study; the research must propound a change perspective; and the research must employ a critical reflexivity. I would suggest that this study has: reflected a feminist epistemology and critical paradigm throughout the research process; identified areas for further research and opportunities for bringing about change; and has not only attempted to employ a high degree of critical reflexivity throughout the research project, but also attempted to ensure transparency with respect to that reflexivity within the dissertation.

Within a feminist framework, I have attempted to maintain a non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, non-manipulative and empowering research process (Bhopal, 2000, p.70). I have also attempted to conduct this research in a manner that would most benefit the dairy farmer participants and their stories told (Woodward, 2000, p.49). Woodward (2000, p.39) suggests that although “the mutual sharing of knowledge so that participants themselves are able to detect sources of oppression in their lives and take appropriate action” is beneficial to research participants, the most beneficial aspects of research for participants is knowing that someone wanted to know about their experiences, believed their stories, felt that they had something worthwhile to say and created a space for them to tell their stories. Woodward (2000) contends that “The process of being able to tell one’s story...and to have it heard and validated is an important first step towards greater emancipation and empowerment” (p.49).
According to Crotty (1998) the intent of critical research is not only to question the current ideology, but also to initiate social action in the “cause of social justice” (p.157). Although the aims of critical research “a just society, freedom and equity”, may seem idealistic and perhaps, somewhat unrealistic (Crotty, 1998, p.157) it is imperative that researchers continue to work towards that end. Critical research can “lead at least to a more just and freer society than we have at the moment” (Crotty, 1998, p.157). Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) suggest that researchers need to be guided by a “dream of a world less conditioned by misery, suffering and the politics of deceit” (p.303). As a social worker involved in critical ethnographic research, I feel that I have an obligation to be actively advocating for a “more just, democratic and egalitarian world” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000, p.304). It is to that end, that I offer the following recommendations:

1. That research is undertaken which takes account of the multiple lifestyle features of the farming sector to ensure that the full extent of people’s experiences are included in policy determination;

2. That there is further investigation into the employment issues for dairy farmers who have left the dairy industry or who anticipate leaving the dairy industry as a result of dairy deregulation;

3. That there is further investigation into the employment issues for dairy farmers seeking to supplement their farm income as a result of deregulation;

4. That there is further investigation into the issues associated with access to Centrelink payments for unemployed dairy farmers;

5. That there is a need for community building projects to develop creative and sustainable opportunities to encourage and support young people to remain in their rural communities;
6. That there is further investigation into the future of food production in rural Australia, particularly in light of the decline in the number of young people from Australian rural communities;

7. That there is further investigation into community building or community development opportunities in an effort to develop creative responses and collective approaches towards strengthening rural community sustainability, particularly in relation to agriculture restructuring;

8. That restructure packages target social as well as economic infrastructures to reflect the diversity of rural living;

9. That there is further investigation into the inter-generational issues brought about by deregulation;

10. That social equity measures in policy application take account of dairy farming families' social and economic circumstances;

11. That there is further investigation into the correlation between deregulation and dairy farmers' health issues;

12. That there is further investigation into the structures needed to facilitate the ongoing transition and adjustment processes for dairy farmers and their communities, following the deregulation of the dairy industry;

13. That social workers actively work towards the collectivisation of dairy farming community members in order to bring about change;

14. That there is further investigation into the possible implementation of a rural-community based support service, such as Southern Agcare, in the South West region;
15. That social workers actively seek to develop the necessary relationships in rural areas to increase awareness of appropriate services;

16. That social workers advocate for increased opportunities for rural based education through universities and professional development courses;

17. That there is further investigation into the impact of dairy deregulation on the wider community;

18. That as social work is a social justice endeavour, policy, research, individual work and community work, are imperatives of social work.
Epilogue: Some Last Thoughts (For Now)!

I have struggled to find a finishing point for this dissertation. I found that my family and colleagues were beginning to question my willingness to ‘let go’ of this project and the motives that might underlie my reluctance. On reflection, I think that my difficulty was associated with acknowledging that there is no finishing point – the issues for dairy farmers and their communities are ongoing and continually changing. I needed to see this study as only one small (and incomplete) part of a much larger ‘story’ -- the story of deregulation and the ideology that underpins deregulatory practices. Although this study is coming to an end (for now) it is still very early days in terms of the processes and the impacts of the deregulation of the dairy industry.

When I set out on this research journey, I had no idea of the changes that I would experience along the way. I feel that I have gained a much greater understanding of the diversity of rural communities and a much deeper awareness of some of the current issues encountered by farming families. As a graduating social worker, I feel privileged to have been provided with an invaluable insight into the difficulties experienced by some rural people when seeking (or requiring) assistance from human service organisations. I believe that I move forward from this research with an increased commitment towards improving access opportunities for people in rural communities and with a good deal of enthusiasm around further developing appropriate ‘community-embedded’ (Cheers, 1999) social work practices.

My earnest hope is that others may equally have gained from this research project. My aims in undertaking this research included: providing dairy farmers with an opportunity to acknowledge their experiences, to make the reality of their experiences visible and to seek “shared understandings” of those experiences (Crotty, 1998); to contribute to the social work profession’s ongoing effort to demonstrate the link between the personal and the political (Ife, 1997); to contribute to the body of social work knowledge in terms of working in a rural community; and to extend levels of understanding about rural issues to the wider community.
Although none of the above have ‘measurable’ outcomes, I very humbly place this research dissertation into the social work, academic and dairy farming communities, with the good faith that it will make a contribution at some level.

For me, one phone call made the whole research process especially worthwhile. I received a thank you phone call from one of the dairy farmer participants, a few weeks after completing the research conversations. The person explained that things had been particularly difficult for their family since deregulation and that their participation in the research process had not only provided them with an opportunity to talk about their individual experiences but to gain an understanding of each other’s experiences and feelings. The caller indicated that it was the first time that her partner had spoken about some of his concerns and she felt that the process had been particularly helpful to both of them in terms of creating understandings and easing family tensions. The caller explained that they had faced another family-related ‘crisis’ shortly after their participation in the research and she felt that their increased understandings had assisted them in dealing with that situation. Perhaps if this has been the experience of one participating family, it may equally be the experience of others.

I have been overwhelmed by the generosity and the trust that has been extended to me by the dairy farmers participating in the research and overwhelmed by the support of so many other members of the dairy farming community. I have endeavoured at every level to re-present dairy farmers’ stories and the story of dairy deregulation in a trustworthy manner. Although I have been left with little doubt that the personal is political and the political can be very bloody personal, I continue to hold enormous hope for the future, faith in people’s ability to bring about change and a vision for a better world (Ife, 1997).
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Dear

RE: Social Impact of Dairy Deregulation Research

I write to invite your participation in a research project that I am undertaking as part of my Social Work Honours Degree at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury. The aim of this research is to investigate the experiences of dairy farming families since the deregulation of the dairy industry in July 2000. This research aims to give dairy farming families a 'voice' with respect to the impact of deregulation.

Apart from being a Social Work Honours researcher, I am also a member of a dairy farming family in the Elgin area. I am very aware of the increased pressures that my family has experienced since deregulation and I am interested in investigating the experiences of other dairy farming families. It seems that there has been little opportunity for farmers to have a 'voice' around the issues of deregulation and I am anticipating that this research will provide a greater understanding of some of the effects of living and working in a deregulated dairy industry.

The information will be collected through either individual or family 'interviews' (informal conversations). I am very mindful of farmers milking obligations and busy schedules and I would like to invite you to nominate an interview time that is most convenient to you. Although I had anticipated that each conversation may take approximately one to one and a half hours, I would be grateful for any time that you may be able to offer. With your permission, I would like to audiotape our conversation. Once the tapes have been transcribed, you will be provided with a copy of the transcript and you will be invited to verify, amend or delete any part of the information. I also give you my assurance that you will not be identified in either the research process or the final document and that your personal details will remain confidential.

I would like to thank you in anticipation.

Very sincerely

Terese Reid
Personal Consent to Participate in Research

I ...................................................... consent to participating in the research project being undertaken by Terese Reid as part of her Social Work Honours research at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury Campus. I understand that the aim of this research is to investigate the experiences of dairy farming families since the deregulation of the dairy industry in July 2000.

In giving my consent I understand the following:

- My participation is voluntary and I may withdraw my consent at any time throughout the research project without any pressure or prejudice.
- All of the information that I provide will only be used for the purpose of this research. Any use further to this is to be negotiated.
- My interview will be audio taped and transcribed by the researcher and a copy of the transcripts will be made available to me.
- My recorded interviews will be either destroyed or returned to me.
- Any information that I provide to the researcher may be modified, amended or deleted by me at any time during the research process.
- I will not be identified in either the research process or the final document and my personal details will remain confidential.

In giving my consent I also acknowledge that my participation in this research may evoke some unexpected emotional reactions for me as a participant. I understand that at the time of the interview the researcher will provide me with details of local support services should I require assistance.

Participant Signature .................................................................

Any questions concerning the research project can be directed to Terese Reid, 97272331. If you have any concerns about the project and you would like to speak to an independent person, please contact Dyann Ross at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury campus on 97807777.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. Your assistance is very gratefully accepted.
November 11, 2001

RSM 148
Elgin 6237

Dear _________________

I wish to thank you very sincerely for participating in my Social Work Honours research project, which is associated with the social impact of the deregulation of the dairy industry. I feel extremely privileged that you so generously shared your stories with me.

Your contributions to the research are extremely valuable and I thank you for your frankness and your sincerity. If there are any aspects of the transcript that you would like to alter or delete or anything else that you would like to add, please feel comfortable to contact me on 97272331.

Once again thank you for your time and your very generous contribution.

Kind regards

Terese Reid