Fire, families and decisions

Using the Wangary fire in South Australia (10-11 January 2005) as a case study, Mae Proudley explores the factors influencing decision making within families when they are threatened by bushfire.

Abstract

"As I was getting the kids in the car embers were coming over the fence."

Scant attention is paid to women and their roles in the emergency management landscape. This is particularly relevant in the field of community bushfire preparedness and mitigation. The culture of emergency management remains a very masculine field with the command and control system continuing to dominate and influence the roles and processes of emergency events.

Within this context, research into gaining a deeper understanding of families and the role of women in bushfire has been neglected.

Acknowledging and understanding how families and women make decisions in critical times must help shape future bushfire education programs. This includes the modification, application and implementation of the 'prepare, stay and defend or leave early' policy. The family and a woman's role within the family are where crucial decisions are made in advance of and during a bushfire. The family unit, in its various forms, is an important and frequently overlooked field of bushfire research.

This paper explores how family dynamics inform critical decisions and suggests that there is significant value in listening to the narratives of families and couples who have experienced a major bushfire. A people-centred focus, not a pre-determined system or a theory, is needed. In order to reduce, or eliminate, last minute decisions to evacuate at the height of a bushfire, there must be recognition and understanding of how family dynamics and women's role within the family influence behaviour during a crisis.

"There was panic. We are going to burn in this bathroom. There was some panic there."

Locating the case study in the literature

In their assessment of English and Spanish literatures on gender relations and disaster contexts Enarson and Meyreles (2004) note the lack of attention to gender and an absence of a community of scholars and activists pursuing gender and disaster concerns in Australia. In her segment on ABC radio in 2005 Merilyn Childs, from the University of Western Sydney, made reference to Enarson's puzzlement over why Australia remains one of the few countries in the world that "does not have a vibrant conversation about women and disasters" (Childs, 2005). Childs emphasised that "it simply isn't possible to foster disaster resistant communities if we fail to see that women make up half the communities we live in and that they have something to offer" (Childs, 2005).

Enarson and Meyreles (2004) state that developing countries are more advanced with their analysis of the effects of disaster on women. Researchers in developing countries cover ground that is too often overlooked by their counterparts in industrialised countries where populations have the protection of emergency management systems and generally high living standards. Disaster researchers in industrial countries have been slower to examine how social structures of gender, race, age and class impact on specific disaster experiences of men and women. Whilst the issues of poverty, and how women are impacted, are more obvious in developing nations, the complex social, historical and cultural construction of gender in industrial countries needs to be understood in the context of disasters and how women's resilience, or lack of it, is determined.

Gender is a central organising principle of social life and thus far has largely been overlooked by Australian bushfire researchers. In their guidelines for future gender-focused research, Enarson and Scanlon (1999, p. 119) assert that couple-focused research ("comparative investigation of the 'his and hers' of disaster experiences") should be a priority.

Fordham (2001) identified some of the areas within environmental management that have been neglected. Her paper, 'Challenging Boundaries: A gender perspective on early warning in disaster and environmental management,' argues that the scarcity of studies incorporating gender analysis "points to a real need in both research and practice" (Fordham, 2001, p. 2).

Within the Australian research environment, two studies conducted on drought by Stehlik, Lawrence and Gray, (2000) and Alston (2006) have been influential in this bushfire case study. Bushfire (particularly in the South Eastern region of Australia) and drought are a common, and inevitable, part of the national landscape. These two case studies on drought place the people who have been impacted by the disaster in the foreground with the aim of contributing to and informing social policy through the lived experience. This bushfire case study will attempt to mirror that approach.

"I just wish I could have that day all over again… I would've sort of done it so differently….would've felt better with yourself."

'Prepare, stay and defend or leave early'

"It is time government and agencies stopped pretending that awareness raising campaigns and information dissemination will ever be sufficient or effective." (Rhodes, 2003, p. 5).

Although the dilemma of whether to flee or fight had been previously recognised it was after the tragic Ash Wednesday fires of 1983 when surveys were conducted that a position became firm and, later, official. The important Wilson and Ferguson (1985) study assessed the merits of staying with the home or evacuating. Based on the experiences of Mt Macedon residents during the Ash Wednesday bushfires it was suggested that "able-bodied residents who are threatened by a bushfire should remain in their houses" and that "evacuation should not be undertaken lightly."[1] Through this study and others, it was established that fewer people perished in their home than out in the open.

It is this knowledge that has informed the national policy position adopted by the Australasian Fire Authority Council (AFAC), known as the 'prepare, stay and defend or leave early' policy.[2]

This case study will explore the assumptions that underpin the 'prepare, stay and defend or leave early policy' with the crisis decision making of families and women threatened by fire. Some of the questions, in relation to the policy, worth considering include:

- Does the policy take into account any of the dynamics of how people live together and make decisions together?

- Is it possible to acknowledge and cater to the complexities of families?

- Is there value in investigating what people do and why they do it rather than prescribing correct behaviour?

- Should the focus shift from prescribing how people should behave to how people are likely to behave?

- Is it reasonable to expect people to respond to a bushfire in a mechanical, rational manner?

- Is there a heavier emphasis on defending the property? Is there acceptance, within the fire agencies, that 'leaving' is a valid option? How do people go? Where do they go?

Stehlik (2003, p. 88) states that "Public policy, designed for the many, under great stress and in times of turbulence, often assumes a homogeneity where none exists. It tends not to challenge 'taken for granted' assumptions." Stehlik's report to the National Rural Women's Coalition was based on the premise that "voices of women are less likely to be heard in the policy development process because of their lack of opportunities, and because of the continued gendered structured of Australian governance processes" (2003a, p. 7).

This premise strongly resonates in the field of emergency management where women are largely absent from decision-making roles. It is essential to look beyond the traditional reading about community education and awareness of emergencies. Literature on conflict and cohesion in families and family decision making will be more insightful.

"We lost our business and our home and our routine and everything."

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[1] Wilson and Ferguson, (1985), p. 1 and p.8

[2] AFAC provides advice to the public about what they should do during a bushfire. In this paper the national policy position is referred to as the 'prepare, stay and defend or leave early' policy. The position is sometimes referred to as the 'stay and defend' or the 'stay or go' policy. The AFAC position paper on bushfires and community safety is available at: www.afac.com.au

Context of the research

Wangary is located on the Lower Eyre Peninsula of South Australia. The largest town in the region, Port Lincoln, has a population of approximately 14 000 and is 645 kilometres west of Adelaide, the state's capital city. This is a remote location – the landscape is largely agricultural with two major national parks and coastal areas that support a substantial fishing and tourist population.
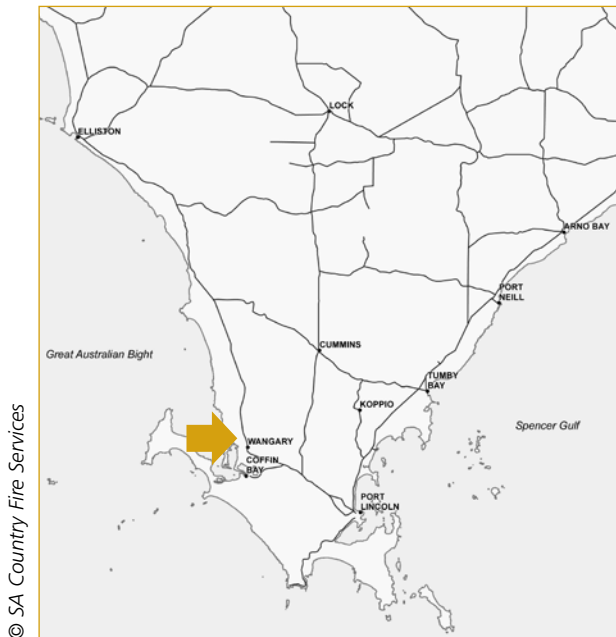
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South Australia, Lower Eyre Peninsula.

On this isolated coast, in the Wangary District, a bushfire started on the afternoon of Monday 10 January 2005. It broke containment lines the following morning (now commonly referred to as Black Tuesday). The weather conditions were extreme: strong winds, high temperatures and low humidity. Due to the speed, complexity and ferocity of the fire most people had very little, if any, warning of the impending danger. The Wangary fire burnt over 77 000 hectares of agricultural and forest lands, destroyed ninety-three homes, over 46 000 livestock, approximately 6, 300 kilometres of fencing and caused substantial damage to essential infrastructure (Smith 2005, p. 10). Nine people perished (three women, four children and two fire fighters on a private unit). The scale of the devastation had not been seen in South Australia since the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983. The death of seven women and children, six of whom where fleeing the fire in cars, warrants an investigation into family decision making, gender roles and bushfire.[3]

"I'm still on bloody anti depressants and that."

The Case Study

In order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of family dynamics in relation to decision making in a crisis, the researcher spent eight weeks engaging with the community on the Lower Eyre Peninsula nearly two years after the Wangary fire. Open-ended interviews were conducted with thirty-eight families and couples across the fire affected region: Charlton Gully, Edillilie, Greenpatch, Koppio, Louth Bay, North Shields, Poonindie, Wanilla and White Flat. Within the participants there were variations in age (20s – 90s), occupation, cultural background and socio economic status. Only one participant was a single parent, all the other families (who had children living at home) had two parents. Interviews were conducted on the properties and in the homes of the participants with a few nominating to meet in the town of Port Lincoln. Nine of the families interviewed had their homes destroyed; many others had their homes considerably damaged. The large quantity of rich narratives from the interviews will form the backbone of this case study. Seeking to understand people's lived experience of bushfire through narratives is the primary focus.

Interview material will be used as evidence, in the following section of this paper, to demonstrate the complexity of decision making in a crisis.[4] Due, in part, to the current lack of family focused bushfire research it needs to be emphasised that this case study is exploratory in nature and that it is not the intention of this paper to report on the entire case study.

"A primary way that individuals make sense of experience is by casting it in narrative form. This is especially true of difficult life transitions and trauma: As Isak Dinesen said, 'All sorrows can be borne if we can put them into a story.'" (Riessman, 1993, p. 4).

The data gathered for this project is sensitive in nature. At the core of this case study are relationships and family dynamics. Whilst there is value in knowing that many of the interviewees were exposed to danger by leaving their properties in vehicles either together, alone or in convoy, there is no value in assessing or labelling behaviour as 'right' or 'wrong.' The key motivation

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[3] Haynes (in press: Tibbits, Handmer, Haynes, Lowe and Whittaker) has been analysing the circumstances of each bushfire fatality in Australia over the last 100 years, a total of 566 fatalities (this figure is the lay public, excluding fire fighters) and has concluded that the number of women dying in fires has increased over the past 30 years.

[4] All interviewees have been assigned a pseudonym.

behind the decision to undertake a purely qualitative case study is the recognition of needing to avoid the categorisation of the participant's actions and respecting what the interviewee's have said about their perceptions of their own experience.

"I would have thought he would have discussed all of that with you if a fire ever came through....he's in the fire service."

The presence of children[5]

A significant number of women interviewed for this project were home alone with babies and young children on the day of the Wangary fire. During the interviews the presence of children and how that factor informed their decision on the day of the fire were explored at length. Heavy reliance on volunteer fire fighters (the majority of which are men) translates to a burden on families, in particular women alone with children, during a bushfire.

On the day of the Wangary fire, Kathy was home alone with her baby:

"Basically, I remember going outside and there was just smoke everywhere and I just knew. My head told me: 'you can't get in the car and go anywhere because you know that would just be sealing your fate with Lily.' But my heart was like 'you've got to go you've got to get out of here the fire's coming, you've got to go you don't want to be here' so that was very strange."

"I remember actually thinking, I remember being really angry with myself because she (Lily) was still here. How could you get her in this situation?"

Another woman, Karen, who was home alone with her seven year old child, was critical of herself and the decision she made to flee their property. She said over and over again:

"That day. I regret what I did. I should never ever have gone. I could have saved a lot of things. But I didn't and now I've got to deal with it."

Another female interviewee, Marie, was home alone with three children, a baby and a neighbour's child. Her decision to leave hinged on their welfare:

"I experienced an overwhelming feeling of 'I'm not happy being here on my own.' All I thought was just 'get to the beach and we'll be OK'."

Marie said she was more scared of having a car accident, due to poor visibility, than the fire harming them.

Historic Greenpatch Homestead.

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Despite crashing the car into a tree stump she believes it would have been a worse situation had she not left:

"I would have been worse being stuck in the house and having the front go over the house and be in there with five children and not knowing what to do. Because I had no idea we've never discussed a fire plan. We're on mains but there was no water anyway was there?"

Their home was destroyed.

Sandra had two teenagers with her on the day of the Wangary fire and consulted with them during her decision making process:

"I said to the kids 'Do we go or do we stay?' and they both said 'go' so we came home and let the kangaroos and our chooks out and grabbed the photos, the computer and the dogs and jumped in the car and took off. They were old enough to do as they're told and put in."

Their home was destroyed.

The difficult decision of when is it early enough to remove children from danger and when is it too late to safely leave was explored with each family.

"If you had plenty of warning, I possibly would say, yeah pretty hard, might go but if you had a lot of time, grab what you need and go. If the fire was as intense, but you never bloody know."

Bushfire as a shared experience

Mutual decision making occurred in a number of couples and families:

Vicki was home with her four children on the day of the fire. She anticipated there would be a bad fire on the

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[5] Domestic pets and livestock were also key factors in the decision making process

Tuesday as her husband, Rod, had phoned on Monday evening (he was interstate). He asked her for the weather forecast for the following day. He said to Vicki: "You're up shit creek." He phoned Vicki at 20-minute intervals throughout the Tuesday as he was unable to get home due to the closure of the local airport. His advice to Vicki was comprehensive and practical:

"I was under strict instruction by Rod to stay at home and not to panic. Rod said, Repeat after me, 'I'm not to panic.' He would test me, what did I just say?....do you understand that?...repeat after me."

At his instruction she sent their children into town hours before the fire arrived and then set about defending the home once the fire front had passed.

Alana and Keith were trapped in their home with half a bucket of water during the height of the fire:

"We should have had time to leave but we didn't. This can't be happening, it's not real. We never had the discussion. 'It's here.' The choice was made for us'."

The radiant heat was too much to bear (they were dressed, like most people, in summer clothing) so they couldn't leave. Their house caught fire and they believed they would die in the bathroom.

Alana was pivotal in persuading her husband to remain inside the house. Had Keith been alone he said he would have attempted to make a run for the dam on their property:

"I would have done a runner….and it would have been the wrong thing to do. Alana didn't want me to go outside."

This interview was infused with fear and panic and what could have happened.

"It's quite a harsh environment so you have to learn survival."

Bushfire as an individual experience

There is an expectation that those either active in the fire service or with fire fighting experience have the knowledge necessary to protect life and provide a fire plan for their family. There were a number of couples and families interviewed for this case study where the male, who was a volunteer fire fighter of many years and in some cases decades, did not advocate developing a family bushfire plan, prior to or since the Wangary fire.[6] The absence of a fire plan in these families was striking.

It was quite challenging to question experienced and senior volunteer fire fighters about why they had no plan.

One such couple, Amanda and Peter, discussed their separate roles.

Peter: *"For me I wouldn't be here anyway, so I wouldn't have to evacuate. I'd be fighting the fire approaching."*

Amanda: "*It would be me and that would depend on whether I'm at home or whether I'm not and I guess it would be put down to the day I would have to make that decision as to even if I come home, Is the power on? Can I prepare anything? Or would I just collect my valuables and run?"*

An interesting exchange took place during this interview. Amanda said she would shelter in the house whilst Peter recommended that she shelter in the shed:

Amanda: "*Um, I think I'd basically stay within the house like they recommend."*

Peter: *"I would suggest you go to the big shed, the shed won't burn the house will."*

The more experienced member of the family, usually the man, has more authority and yet, as demonstrated briefly in the exchange above, they do not necessarily subscribe to the recommended advice or possibly have not been made aware of the national policy.

The words of the interviewees, about their experience of a severe bushfire, are grounded in the family unit. How a family functions is informed by the internal roles and dynamics that have established over time. Traditions and stereotypes can contribute to the way a family, and the members of that family, relate and make decisions in a crisis. What is made clear by these interviews is that a number of the female participants who were alone during the crisis had no reference point for making such a critical decision. Traditionally, their role would be to carry out their husband's instruction.

"I wanted my husband's decision. I regret what I did. I should never have gone."

Conclusion

"...policy that recognises heterogeneity is a challenge to create and to deliver." (Stehlik, 2003, p. 88)

There is much to be gained from exploring decision making processes and family dynamics. Interviews (and participant observations) conducted with fire

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[6] The researcher did encounter volunteer fire fighter families that were advocates of a bushfire family plan. There were also families with no prior fire experience who had access to an independent water supply. Each family (and family members within it) had their own unique experience of the Wangary fire.

© Mae Proudley.

Judith Griffith and her grandchildren, Star and Jack Borlase, perished in the fire.

© Mae Proudley.

Tractor on a farm in Greenpatch.

affected families identified that the roles that people have within a family unit play a major part in what family members do, how they behave and respond during a crisis. Pre-existing social relations influence actions taken during a bushfire. The key question that emerges is whether or not that process or pattern changes when a crisis or threat occurs.

In a sector that is dominated by the command and control system there is a very low research emphasis on exploring couple and family decision making in emergencies. The lack of research in this important field, particularly around the influence of roles and traditions, is a major concern.

Using the crisis decision making of families to question the assumptions that underpin the national 'prepare, stay and defend or leave early' policy should be viewed as useful, not judgmental.

The primary aim of this case study is to record and analyse the complexities that need to be acknowledged and addressed if the national policy is to evolve in a constructive and helpful direction. To enrich and enhance education programs, fire agencies need to be receptive and willing to incorporate the real experiences of families who have lived through a bushfire.

One of the major lessons from this case study is that emergency managers and fire agencies need to consider the context within which families are making crucial decisions when they are threatened by bushfire. Currently, the 'prepare, stay and defend or leave early' policy is too narrow in its scope and is individually focused rather than systemically or culturally focused. Moving beyond the narrow emergency management mindset and applying knowledge from relevant fields of study, such as conflict and cohesion within families and family decision making, is the way forward.

In order to reduce, or eliminate, last minute decisions to evacuate at the height of a bushfire, there must be recognition and understanding of how family dynamics and traditions influence behaviour during a crisis. These interviews demonstrate that in a crisis, women are often forced to make decisions alone based purely on survival (and the survival of their children).

Roles people have within a family play a major part in the decision making process. A significant number of women interviewed for this case study were faced with a whole new set of consequences with very little or no experience of making such a vital decision.

The idea that people should conform to the prescriptions of emergency services is futile. This case study is working towards bridging the glaring gap that exists between the Emergency Services attitude, the national policy and the behaviour and decisions of families threatened by fire.

"He's told me for years 'if ever there's a fire we'll stay.' He just reminded me not to panic, not to panic as the fire gets close that's when I'll get frightened, not to get in the car, stay in the house wait until the fire has gone over and then go outside so that's basically what happened, yeah."

Acknowledgements

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