A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO EVALUATING VOLUNTARY RURAL COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IS AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND ENSUING RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, AS EVIDENCED IN THE PARTICIPATIVE EVALUATION OF THE SOUTHERN RIVERINA RURAL ADVISORY SERVICE

by

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science (Honours)

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PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.

- Thomas Jefferson
Letter to William Jarvis
September 28, 1820

Go to the people
Live with them.
Learn from them.
Love them.

Start with what they know.
Build on what they have.

But with the best leaders,
When the work is done,
the task accomplished,
the people will say,
"We have done this ourselves"

Lao Tsu (China) 700 B.C.

Evaluation is an investment in people and in progress.
DECLARATION

I, Dale Ernest Williams, certify that the material contained in this document, and the research from which it is derived has not been submitted for a Higher Degree at any other institution. I also certify that this document contains the work of others, only where that work has been referenced as such. The participative evaluation of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service, on which this document is based, was largely carried out as a research team. This document was written by me and is my original work. However, it is based on and indebted to the invaluable contributions of all collaborating research participants.

D. E. WILLIAMS
ABSTRACT

Participation is the prominent theme of this action research-based thesis. The central argument is that participative approaches to evaluating voluntary rural community-based organizations are an effective tool for organizational learning and ensuing rural community development. The context through which the proposition is explored is the evaluation and strategic planning of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service - a semi-voluntary, community-based counselling organization. The Service works with farm families experiencing (or at risk of experiencing) financial hardship and associated stresses. The evaluation was done collaboratively by the rural counsellor and committee members of the Service and a team of staff and students from the University of Western Sydney - Hawkesbury.

The rationale of the thesis is to initially establish the argument and to introduce the evaluation through which it was explored. It then explains why the research was done, including its significance. The evaluation component of the research follows in terms of what was done, by whom and how it was done. Immediate evaluation-related outcomes are noted. The whole participative evaluation experience is then critiqued. The thesis concludes with what further emerged from the research in terms of my wider rural community development learning and professional interests in which the participative evaluation sat.

There were multiple agendas, propositions and research outcomes related to the participative evaluation and strategic planning itself. Each evaluation team member had unique expectations and agendas, as well as our corporate commitment to better understand and improve the Service and learn how to do get better at how we go about doing that. The thesis, in also exploring my agendas, is also multi-faceted. I came to the evaluation with several generic research issues related to my profession as a nurturer of people-centred development - especially rural community development and the role of community-based organizations in that. Generic issues of mine included:
* the importance of commitment by rural communities and rural community-based organizations to creating frameworks for understanding and acting in integrated ways to the diversity, inter-relatedness and at times conflict of issues, wishes and needs of members - in particular, to develop the capacity to transform contexts of dependency-oriented crisis situations to ones of self-responsible, interdependent change

* the need to view contexts through integration of local, regional, national and global perspectives and to developing networks to integrate understanding and action throughout that interrelated system

* as a facilitator of the change process, to continue learning how to better enhance organizational and community-based learning (and staff development within those contexts).

Two contextualized implications are also raised as sub-thesis propositions, albeit briefly. The first is that the organizational learning capacity of voluntary, rural Australian, community-based, development-oriented organizations is, by nature, problematic given their fundamentally reactive culture. The second is that the vision and functional frameworks of the rural counselling programme are inadequate to a necessary link with proactive, holistic, sustainable, rural community development. These are not incorporated in discussion of the central argument. However, they are important convictions of mine reinforced by the evaluation that I believe warrant wider research. These, and some issues raised within the central argument, are established as valid and significant for further research in each of their own rights. The evaluation provided this opportunity of recognizing things which could (and I believe, should) be explored that could lead to community-based learning that further enhances rural community development within the Southern Riverina and beyond. These go beyond the expectation of both this Masters thesis and the initial evaluation on which it is based. But they contribute to the mosaic of related issues so necessary if one is to understand and be involved in any of these or other related issues or contexts in the future.
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ABBREVIATIONS

The Service: the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service.

The University: the University of Western Sydney - Hawkesbury, Richmond, New South Wales. The term “University” is used throughout the thesis in referring either to the University generically or the action research team from the School of Agriculture and Rural Development. The term “School” is only used when its individuality is required, as when referring to its learning paradigm, research requirements and point of University contact by the Service.

The School: the School of Agriculture and Rural Development, University of Western Sydney - Hawkesbury, Richmond, New South Wales. The School was still a designated Faculty, at the time of the participative evaluation of the Service.

DPI&EE: the Department of Primary Industries and Energy, Commonwealth Government, Canberra.
CHAPTER ONE

THE RESEARCH: AN INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about directed change in the face of severe rural hardship. Instability, natural change and crises are intertwined endemic features of rural life the world over (Wilkinson in Pigg, 1991). Australia epitomises this (Poiner, 1990). Significant sections of rural Australia entered a period of prolonged and increasing financial hardship and associated stresses by the mid-1980’s (Lawrence, 1987). As a result, a growing number of community-based groups are coming into being to confront these perceived harmful consequences to individuals, groups and rural communities and regions alike.

This thesis focuses on the evaluation of one such group, the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service. The proposition is that,

\[
\text{a participative approach to evaluating voluntary rural community-based organizations is an effective tool for organizational learning and ensuing rural community development, as evidenced in the participative evaluation of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service.}
\]

The Service and a University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury team from the School of Agriculture and Rural Development collaborated in a research relationship which enabled them to evaluate together in order to better understand and improve the Service and its contribution to struggling farm families of the Southern Riverina. Both parties similarly shared a commitment to utilize the participative evaluation to learn how we could improve such collaborative enquiry better in the future. In addition, I, as a facilitator of rural community development training, used it to consolidate my understanding of working together with others for social change - especially through the tool of action researched participative evaluations.

Chapter One introduces the aims of the research and its dominant thesis. It introduces the nature of facilitating this participative evaluation. It also introduces how the participative evaluation came about and the
participants of the action research team who did it. It concludes with the rationale for the ensuing thesis chapters that describe and analyze the research and explore its implications for the future.

THE AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

Action research presents somewhat of a paradox for thesis writing. As a research paradigm, action research integrates researching, learning and improved action about a problematic situation in some way shared with others. Traditionally, a thesis is seen to have independence in the sense of it being a statement of discoveries and theoretical insights arising through a process of enquiry about a discrete object of study (Lewins on Marx, 1990). However action research may embrace all of this within its inseparable whole, certainly of both its contextual and process learning discoveries and theoretical insights, if not their documentation also. It may thus, though not necessarily, incorporate argued or constructed propositions. In my case I have embraced both action researching's generic objectives as well as a number of theses pursued through it.

I, as an individual within the action researching team, had several complementary themes of enquiry in addition to the research goals I shared with the rest of the participative evaluation team. I have mentioned the over-arching thesis that a participative approach to evaluating voluntary rural community-based organizations is an effective tool for organizational learning and ensuing rural community development, as evidenced in the Service evaluation. The validation of this primary proposition in the thesis is firstly dependent on the interpretation of participants of the effectiveness of the participative evaluation to create beneficial change in the Service and in the learning of Service and University evaluation participants (Altricter, 1988). Philosophical reasons are also raised as to why participative approaches are good. The description, outcomes and critique of the participative evaluation around which the action research-based thesis is written become documentary support of the validation of the thesis.

The notion embedded in the proposition is that participation and emancipation (Friere, 1987; Oakley, 1991; Bhasin, 1982; Shields, 1991) are key ingredients that enhance power to create real directed social change. You will note through the thesis that I largely subsume the notion of
emancipation within the the theme of participation. This is done through commitment to equipping participants to increasingly become effective in all aspects of the collaborative enquiry - with the inherent learning to see their ‘worlds’ in different ways as the basis for enquiry-induced beneficial change. This would include exploring their own agendas and values, as well as ultimately designing, implementing and evaluating process as well as the contextual task at hand.

I did not wish the evaluation to pay lip-service to the now mandatory requisite of participatory phraseology in development circles. Rather, my belief system has for twenty years esteemed interdependent participation in applied enquiry. I have done so for both participation’s ethical desirability and its capacity for bringing about social change, instead of just creating unfulfilled wishlists or expectations. Awa (1988) has well described the distinction between participation and the more practised partial involvement of people in others’ plans for them:

“While participation is broadly recognised as a necessary strategy for intervention programs, many projects, especially those designed by government agencies ... continue to ignore local needs, neglect local resources, and alienate local groups. Practice fails to measure up to rhetoric on participation. This is partially due to the failure to recognize that partial involvement of local people is not the same thing as participation. Participation requires 1) mental and emotional involvement, not just mere physical presence; 2) a motivation to contribute, which requires creative thinking and initiative; and 3) and acceptance of responsibility which seldom occurs when solutions are imposed by outside authorities”.

While the thesis of the effectiveness of participative evaluation approaches was fundamentally mine, it was at least also an implied thesis for all evaluation participants. The Service’s initial commitment was to be evaluated by an agency external to it. This modified quickly over time, through my initiated negotiation, to the Service becoming a true participant of the evaluation process and outcomes. In addition, Service members varyingly became increasingly aware of, and contributing to, my and other University team members’ learning agendas beyond the participative evaluation. I initially discussed my own enquiry themes and emerging theses with the Service evaluation sub-committee and later with
other committee members. However, the theses are mine and I prefer to call the following enquiry themes 'sub-theses', given the understandably lower regard for them by other evaluation participants and also their being subsumed within my prominent theme of 'participation'. The sub-theses are explicitly explored in the Chapter Six as an extension of collaborative Service evaluation learning articulated in the first five chapters.

Sub-thesis One: that action research, as combined enquiry paradigm and methodology, is a desirable and potentially powerful tool of rural social change through community-based organizations and communities. I saw this sub-thesis as a more implicit pervasive one, often synthesised with many of the notions inherent in the primary thesis around participative evaluation.

Sub-thesis Two: that the significance of empowerment is strongly enhanced by people consciously creating the processes of their life-learning endeavours, that is, having processes to create change processes. I am using 'empowerment' here inclusive of the sense of people having the opportunity and capacity to live and fulfill their choices and mutual responsibilities. People articulating what is important to them and why it is important is central to criteria for participation and empowerment in development settings - though, like Friere (Ibid.), I see that with focus of it as a "social act", rather than as "self-liberation". Yet to me, a more significant factor for 'endemic' empowerment is consciously creating how that intent is fulfilled and building learning into that of how to keep improving process creation and enaction.

Empowerment for participants comes from self-creating their way of change, not just becoming self-aware as to what is important to them. If support is needed for that to begin, participant consciousness of and equipping in 'process-creating capacity' is enhanced by facilitators facilitating process-learning by participants rather than teaching 'process' to them. While the complexity of levels or cycles of process seems convoluted, I think recognizing the distinctions and ensuring participative principles throughout each are imperative for real empowerment. The following model (Fig. 1) illustrates:
Sub-thesis Three: that non-Western frameworks of rural community development (based in and originating from Lesser Developed Countries, LDC's) have wide applicability to understanding and working in rural Australian contexts, especially those where hardship is significant.

Sub-thesis Four: that, by nature, the organizational learning capacities of voluntary, rural Australian, community-based, development-oriented organizations is problematic given their fundamentally reactive culture.

Sub-thesis Five: a threefold sub-thesis that the Rural Counselling Programme per se has an inbuilt propensity to be reactive rather than proactive; that this is problematic given the complexity and rapidly changing face of rural Australia; and that individual counselling services need to become ongoing learning organizations to flexibly change to the point of even creating their own futures.

I also desired another outcome. However, it was not a thesis per se. I wanted to improve my capacity to equip others who are, or intend to be,
facilitators of rural community development. That included improving my understanding of the contexts of Australian rural hardship; improving my networks and resources to share with others in their learning; and adjusting and enriching my own frameworks of rural community development that were created in largely non-Western settings.

My own sub-theses are raised indirectly in Chapter Five's critique of the participative evaluation. However, they are raised explicitly in Chapter Six's exploration of my own research, but contextualized to the participative evaluation in aspects enriched, confirmed or challenged by that evaluation.

So research was multi-focused and had multiple approaches. It had both 'event' (the evaluation of the Service) and 'method' (action research as a participative tool of social change) as primary interests. It also had elements of both theory testing and to a lesser extent, theory construction, as expressed through my sub-theses above.

The event was an evaluation sitting within the context of the Australian rural crisis in general, and the rural counselling programme in particular. But I coupled both to my interest in their relationship to rural community development as a broader umbrella of process, method, programme and movement of social change (Sanders in Christenson & Robinson, 1989). That development included significance to me of people in general having appreciation of the wider context in which their 'event' or problematic situation was interpreted and improved. And it included vision for social change that was integrated and strategic - not isolated and merely reactionary.

The complementary primary interest is 'method'. Action research was a School¹ requisite as the way to explore the 'event'. However, I was

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¹ When I began this MSc (Hons) degree, action research was a requisite for research degrees in the School of Agriculture and Rural Development. The combined influence for this requisite came from the compatibility of action research's collaborative, critical, applied learning nature and of the prevailing learning philosophy of the School. That philosophy comprises a number of related facets. Several of these are mentioned below and then explored further in Chapter Two:
committed to exploring action research in itself, given the significance of my twenty year development background and my viewing community development as a process of interdependent learning for change. It matters little whether that learning occurs across the interplay of diverse but collaborating individuals and organizations, or primarily within one organization contributing to wider shared development, as was the case with this research.

The significant element of theory testing came from my overseas background of non-western rural community development and training trainers of that development. I was testing relevance in Australia of understanding, interpretive and strategic frameworks, and possible guidelines for action that had largely been created or refined in those non-Australian contexts. I strongly felt their relevance and their somewhat uniqueness, given the generally recent and limited acknowledgement in Australian agricultural circles of key notions such as 'integrated community development', 'empowerment' and 'participative approaches' to research, extension and development. The pervasiveness and frequency of life-threatening, crisis situations engulfing intended development activities overseas had forced me to wrestle for years with frameworks to understand and work within situations experiencing profound swings of change. Segments of rural Australia were now increasingly experiencing crisis, albeit different in outward form to those of my overseas experience (even if there were many emotional and psychological similarities for those experiencing different crises). I felt my background could provide guidance for local contexts.

1. the belief that learning is an active process of cycling between finding out about things learners experience in their world and taking action to improve them (Bawden, 1986, 1)
2. that the likes of society, family, farm or self are each best understood when seen and explored as complex systems of interacting relationships in flux (Ibid, 2)
3. that research that combines ‘finding out’ about complex, dynamic situations with ‘taking action’ to improve them, is done in a manner so actors and beneficiaries of the ‘action research’ are intimately involved as participants in the whole process (Sriskandarajah, Bawden and Packham, 1991, 4)
Theory construction research behind emergent theses and learning themes primarily centred around the learning capacity of voluntary, rural Australian, community-based, development-oriented, organizations in general and my threefold sub-thesis about the near-future problematic for rural counselling services, because of their largely reactionary organizational cultures.

FACILITATING THE PARTICIPATIVE EVALUATION

I was co-ordinator of the evaluation, on behalf of the Centre for Extension and Rural Development within the School of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, I did not merely see my role in the research as one of 'co-ordinating'. I prefer it to be seen as one where I flavoured this by facilitating increasingly mutually determined process and outcomes by participants from Service and University alike. I initially responded to a request by the Service to provide them with a proposal of what we would do. However I wished to promote a process for the Service to co-create an evaluation process - and in part this was done with the Service evaluation sub-committee. I sought early Service discussion, adaption and ownership of that process. I did so, given its ownership of the evaluation and outcomes, coupled with my conviction that real ownership and empowerment come not merely in true participation in the activity process but in the design of that process i.e. the process of the process. Perhaps my role could be more realistically described early in the evaluation by the term ‘facipulation’ (a mutation combining ‘facilitation’ and ‘manipulation’), given initial expectations and dependency of the Service.

The Service is a community-based, semi-voluntary rural counselling service that belongs to the nation-wide Rural Counselling Programme. It is one of a growing number of services that have recently arisen as a result of Federal Government initiative in response to financial hardship and associated stresses in rural Australia. The Service organization comprises a voluntary committee of fifteen members, a fulltime employed counsellor and (post-evaluation) an administrative assistant supporting the counsellor. The counsellor's primary responsibility is to work with farm families who contact the Service for assistance.
The evaluation took place during 1990 at the request of the Service. The Service's initial aim was to obtain evaluation recommendations which it could use to make improvements to its aid to stressed farming people of the Southern Riverina. But the University's approach was to work participatively 'with' the Service, rather than on its behalf. I suggested and co-ordinated a process where the Service eventually essentially evaluated itself in terms of developing self-awareness and determining and enacting improvements.

The approach involved enabling the Service to see itself from the perspectives of the many people who serve it or who interact with it. Farm client couples were interviewed, as were key individuals within and outside the Service. Groups representing banking, agribusiness, community services, other professionals and Service sponsors were similarly included. This 'mirroring' of perspectives back to the Service was done as a basis for the committee and rural counsellor understanding the Service better in order for them to take informed action to improve it.

The University regularly collaborated with a Service evaluation subcommittee through the evaluation. And it worked with the full committee at three strategic points during the process. Perspective gathering, data assimilating and strategic planning occurred between April and September 1990. Action on that by the Service proceeded from September 1990 and in March 1991, the full committee evaluated the earlier process and also short term post-evaluation changes.

It is important to convey what the evaluation was desired to be. I proposed the evaluation to be an interactive process. I considered it inappropriate to be one where we merely (and from my perspective, unethically) evaluated an observed, passive 'researched' Service. I felt participation by the committee and rural counsellor was necessary, given their ownership (in practice) of the organization. I anticipated that such 'ownership' would enhance necessary commitment to findings and any action they deemed appropriate. Secondly, it would enhance greater relevance of findings. This would lead to the Service taking effective action to improve both its assistance to others and the way it functions internally. So we facilitated they, themselves, ultimately improving the Service. I do not seek to distort the realities of its variable emergence over the evaluation for different Service committee members. Variable committee member appreciation of,
and learning through, the participative evaluation are discussed in Chapter Five.

Rugh (1986) covers such points in his book highlighting the essence of self-evaluation in participatory evaluation. In his key reasons for evaluating, he includes: for decision making; for improving performance; for personal evaluation; for allocating resources; for justifying the programme; and for determining policy. His comments include intermingled strategic aspects. But I sought to raise the profile of these to a higher and more explicit plane again.

So the evaluation, through my negotiations with the evaluation sub-committee, became more than just participatively improving the Service. The evaluation experience became research strongly flavoured by 'process', as well as 'content'. Frequent reflecting on that process became a learning experience itself for an internal Service 'equipping' outcome - affecting firstly its service to clients, and secondly the way it functioned as an organization. It was thus meant to equip it in enacting ongoing evaluation and change, but with a strategic outlook that would enhance it more pro-actively creating its own future. So the evaluation is not finished. It moves into the future through the Service's enhanced awareness; the monitoring it set in place; and its articulated resolve and time allocation to more pro-actively shape its life and role.

There is of course the further aim in any action research. Understanding and improving the way we see, think and act through such collaborative, praxis-oriented enquiry becomes a transferrable learning outcome. In other words, we researched 'researching' in order to improve competency in it. I give significant (though qualified credence) to a pervasive School creed:

As, "What we do in this world is determined by the way we see it",
then, "If we want to change the way we do things, we need to change the way we go about our seeing".

Rawden and Macadam, (1991)

So on one level I set out to facilitate the Service responsively changing, based on it reflecting on how the Service is seen from its own and others' perspectives. But on another level this thesis includes looking at our 'seeing', in order to improve my our collaborative researching. So I
include exploring ontologic and epistemic issues in the midst of the critique and discussions of Chapters Five and Six. This is necessary as one who anticipates co-ordinating future community-based evaluations and intends that to continually be becoming more effective.

HOW THE PARTICIPATIVE EVALUATION CAME ABOUT

A brief history of the Service and its aims is included here. This sets the context for how the evaluation came about and why the University became involved. It is important to understand something further of the nature of the Service in order to better understand what transpired in the evaluation and why. But this will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Three, in the section 'Evaluating Organizations'.

In 1986 the Commonwealth Government (through the Department of Primary Industries and Energy) initiated the Rural Counselling Programme in response to the increasing financial hardship and associated stresses in rural Australia. The Programme was only intended to run for a three year term - although the depth and extent of rural hardship has increased, requiring a continued and expanding programme into the 1990's. The programme's purpose is basically to support and counsel farm families at risk of, or suffering, financial difficulty and stress (Patch, 1989 and McGowan, 1992).

The programme made possible the opportunity for community-based services to be established where local needs and initiative was present. These are functionally (if not financially) 'local' in establishment, direction, maintenance and ownership. The Commonwealth Government provides an ongoing grant of 50% towards the costs of individual counselling services. Each of these groups is responsible to find the remaining 50% in cash or kind. The New South Wales State Government provides half of this (ie. 25% of overall costs) in its state. The remaining 25% is provided locally, in cash or kind. The 'kind' often takes the form of office space, fuel or vehicle for the rural counsellor. It usually comes from local businesses and municipal councils.

The process of establishing a rural counselling service in the Southern Riverina began in earnest with a public meeting in October, 1987. This was in response to farmer requests for help that were taken up by Carl Pethybridge of the Deniliquin Council for Social Development Inc. Service
to clients began with the appointment of a full-time counsellor (Mr. Rendle Hannah) in May, 1988.

The Constitution of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service was adopted in November, 1988. It lists four principal objectives of the Service. These are:

1. To provide a Counselling Service to farm families under the Rural Counselling Programme of the Department of Primary Industry. The Service will be available at no cost, to all farm families involved in agriculture in the Municipality of Deniliquin; the Shires of Berrigan, Conargo, Murray, Windouran, Wakool; and the part of Jerilderie Shire not in the Coleambally Irrigation Area. The Service will provide relief of the distress, suffering and poverty associated with the rural recession by identifying and providing the human, financial and material resources required.

2. To provide an educational role to assist farm families avoid such distress, suffering and poverty.

3. To develop policy directions for rural counselling in the Southern Riverina region and to make recommendations to Government on issues affecting the regional economy.

4. To inform farm families in the Southern Riverina region and the wider community of the problems occurring, some solutions to these problems, and the activities being conducted to help alleviate them.

The evaluation, around which this research is based, was initiated by the Service. They had been operating for nearly two years. As Committee and rural counsellor, they felt the need to know if the Service was effective. It was primarily to be for their internal utilisation and benefit - although they also knew they would have to undertake an evaluation by three years to meet Department of Primary Industry and Energy requirements. The School was contacted in late 1989 and asked if it was interested in evaluating the Service.

There were several reasons for the Service approaching the University. Historically, there had been a previous School of Agriculture and Rural Development senior undergraduate project with the rural counsellor. But the Service specifically approached the University so it would have the
"objective help" of a group outside the rural counselling movement and financial structure. Another reason was the attraction to the counsellor and a committe member to what they understood of the School's philosophy of working 'with' people for change - this being in 'some way' distinct from more traditional consultative approaches of working 'on behalf' of clients. Some committee members were also partially aware that the School's uniqueness included seeing 'agriculture' in more holistic ways than in predominantly or merely 'productivity' terms - that the School was very conscious of the human and environmental facets of agriculture and rural development.

The Service had prior expectations for the evaluation. The evaluation sub-committee requested special focus on the counsellor - particularly his well-being and its efficacy of support for him. The counsellor's priority was for feedback on his effectiveness meeting client needs - particularly feedback from their perspective. More detailed Service questions for the evaluation are discussed in Chapter Two under 'Significance of the Research to the Service'.

With interest from the University confirmed, a meeting was held at Hawkesbury on the 2nd March 1990 between the Service's evaluation sub-committee and five university staff. The sub-committee provided context and discussed their requests and guidelines. University staff, for their part, shared what they felt they could contribute and what they hoped to gain from the interaction.

PARTICIPANTS OF THE RESEARCH

There were many contributors to action researching the evaluation. Some, like farm clients and other non-Service interviewees, could be seen more as contributors to researching - especially so far as enrichening understanding of the Service and its effectiveness, and to a lesser extent to suggesting possible improvements. Others, such as the Service team of counsellor and committee, contributed significantly to both the deciding and enacting of 'action' as well as the researching. In a sense Hawkesbury participants did likewise. However, their dual focus was to primarily facilitate the process of the Service's self-evaluation and to research action researching better. Overall, there were fifty nine participants fulfilling a diversity of interactive roles.
I co-ordinated the evaluation. I was tutoring fulltime in the University. I was also enrolled part-time in the University's Master of Science (Honours) course. And I was using the evaluation as the vehicle for a higher research degree.

There were a number of contributors to the enquiry team from the University. While I co-ordinated and documented the evaluation, Melinda Sargent's contributions were substantial in accomplishing the evaluation. I invited Melinda (a mature-aged final year undergraduate student) to join me as a co-worker. She was integrally involved in most aspects - particularly the six month action phase of the evaluation. Effectively, we made up an inner core team of two while Melinda was involved. I invited two other Hawkesbury staff (Dennis Gamble and Stephen Blunden), an additional post-graduate student (Patten Bridge) and an undergraduate student (Mary Easterling) to join Melinda and I in the July data gathering. Mary also helped with earlier preparation of that activity and with some data assimilation later in July. And staff member, Don Lundie-Jenkins, and Patten Bridge contributed to the September workshop with the Service committee. Undergraduate student Paul Treleaven showed interest in the project throughout and offered suggestions. Stephen Blunden and Dennis Gamble provided periodic critiquing and feedback to me on my design and co-ordination of the evaluation. Similar feedback also came from research supervisors Associate Professors Robert Macadam and Roger Packham and fellow postgraduate students when I occasionally presented my work for further 'public' critiquing. My work was also shared with others outside the University from time to time for informal critiquing.

I sought to create the University component of the active evaluation team in a manner that was appropriate for the range of evaluation participants and the contexts of stress and confidentiality from which some were coming. At different times, there were up to six Hawkesbury people participating in short term activities.

One criteria was that the University component be 'mature-aged'. Staff and students in the School often join together in collaborative community-based enquiries. But in this project, the ages and backgrounds of farm couples and commercial and government professionals comprising wider participants in this enquiry influenced careful selection of our team. It was important to have mature team members who would bring empathy and life experience and who could foster mutual respect and unhindered
participant contribution. The age of University team members spread the predominantly thirty to sixty year old age range of all other evaluation participants. And related to this was ensuring we included members with family experience from both genders. This proved important on several occasions.

Gender was another team criteria. Service clients and professionals from whom we sought perspectives on the Service were of both gender. And the rural counsellor consciously worked with farm clients as couples wherever possible. We were similarly consistent and normally interviewed couples, individuals and groups as female/male pairs ourselves. One reason we did this was to be gender empathic with the expected (and subsequent) personal nature and potential strains coupled to some interviewees’ perspectives and contexts.

My priority to have women in the Hawkesbury team was to firstly recognise and manage potential masculine constructions of agriculture and rural Australia that do not fit with reality (Poiner, 1990 and Waring, 1989). Another reason was to complement feminine and masculine perspectives for us as a process facilitating team. I and other staff involved in the initial discussion with the Service were all male, hence my request to Melinda and Mary for their membership. I appreciate expression of feminine ways of ‘seeing’ and knowing and their oft necessary complementarity to masculine equivalents (Pinn, 1991). And while acknowledging Sangford’s (1980) commitment to expressions of both femininity and masculinity in all humans, the usually stronger ‘feminine’ qualities of genetic biological females would enhance feminine perspective. I wanted that complementarity, because I see women and men are also different, interdependent and contributing different blends of human qualities (Atkins, 1987).

One criteria I did not fully realize was a broad inter-disciplinary base. The University team brought some expertise in areas of agricultural economics, farm management, agriculture and animal husbandry, transfer of the family farm, rural and community development and organizational evaluation and learning. I was unsuccessful in recruiting a healthcare professional to the team. And subsequent to the evaluation, I recognize other desirable areas of expertise for similar evaluations, discussed in my critique of the action research in Chapter Five.
It would have been preferrable to have had 'ownership' and consistent input from a University team where each member could give themselves to the whole process and duration of the research. Such was not the case. Melinda Sargent used this as her main project within her wider graduation programme and so focussed a good proportion of her energy to the evaluation for part (though not all) of that year. Others contributed less amidst their own busy responsibilities. They all contributed on the basis of issue interest, and in two cases, support of me as friend as much as colleague. Issues of improving team make-up and performance are taken up in Chapter Five.

For the Service's part, an evaluation sub-committee of three worked in cooperation with the University team. The three comprised Rendle Hannah (rural counsellor), Greg Gilbert (NSW Agriculture, dairy extension) and initially John Fowler (NSW Agriculture, agronomy extension), though later replaced by Jack Sheldrick (farmer and Service Chairperson). The latter three people were voluntary committee members.

To varying extents, every Service committee member was a part of the team. At strategic points they joined in deeming what emerging issues were important, what would be done about them and in assessing the effectiveness of the evaluation.

Contributions were also sought from people within the general rural counselling sphere - particularly for context building both issues of rural hardship in general and the rural counselling programme in particular. Fran Rowe (rural counsellor), Paul Lukins (a rural counselling service chairperson) and Phillip Prior (bank mediator) were more prominent contributors - especially Fran Rowe and Phillip Prior in an ongoing sense.

Rendle Hannah also contributed much time in his already busy counselling schedule arranging (in consultation with me) the likes of interviewees and interview venues.

And of course, all interviewees were seen as participants of the evaluation, even though most were not involved in evaluation process decisions or workshopping improvements to committee and rural counsellor activities. As local residents, they had knowledge of the Service and the Southern
Riverina context as a minimum. But nearly all had direct involvement with, and interest in, the Service.

There were multiple layers or levels in action researching the participative evaluation. The above people, each with distinct responsibilities, took part in at least one layer. The roles different people played sometimes varied from what was intended. But the reality could be reasonably expressed diagrammatically as follows (Fig. 2):

Fig. 2: Evaluation participant roles

THE 'DREAM'

SERVICE-UNIVERSITY
(TWO LARGELY ASSIMILATED TEAMS COLLABORATING)

THE 'REALITY'

SERVICE

UNIVERSITY

* RC = RURAL COUNSELLOR
* ESC = EVALUATION SUB-COMMITTEE
* CMTE = ALL COMMITTEE MEMBERS
* DC = DIRECT CONTRIBUTORS
  (INTERVIEWEES, ETC)
* IC = INDIRECT CONTRIBUTORS
  (BACKGROUND, RESOURCES)
* EC = EVALUATION CO-ORDINATOR
* CM = CORE MEMBER
* DC = DIRECT CONTRIBUTORS
  (WORKSHOPS, CRITIQUING)
* IC = INDIRECT CONTRIBUTORS
  (PERIODIC FEEDBACK, ETC)
THESIS STRUCTURE AND RATIONALE

I want the shape, rationale and emerging research outcomes explored in this thesis to be a natural extension of the action research itself. This document accepts the paradigm of action research. It does not attempt to justify its validity as 'research' - though it justifies its choice for the context and purpose, both as paradigm and methodology. In one sense the thesis rationale includes providing readers with a critique of a critique. Action researching the participative evaluation and strategic planning had an inbuilt critique in itself. The thesis documents and critiques that as well as highlighting issues for me for further enquiry in the future.

One aspect of that natural extension of the action research into this thesis is the emerging prominence in the thesis given to change perceived to be beneficial as a result of the action research. The University and Service collaborated to better understand and improve the Service and its contribution to its community. We also sought to incorporate critical reflection of that experience in order to improve how we each enquire collaboratively. And I, as a facilitator of rural community development training, used it to consolidate my understanding of working together with others, especially through the tool of action researching, so I would be better equipped in equipping others for their own roles in facilitating such change.

There are some differences documenting action research compared to some research approaches that focus solely on creating or pursuing an argument on the basis of theory testing or theory constructing. Action research on the other hand also has an uncompromising commitment to the significance of action - action undertaken to create a cyclically improving situation as an integral part of the enquiry and review process. Action, intended and perceived as beneficial, has taken place through the Service evaluation and continues to be taking place after the evaluation as a result of dynamics set in train by it. Therefore, this thesis can not in itself measure up to the significance of the action research as a whole. The thesis by its cognition-orientation is set apart from the context of the real organizational and social change it explores. However, the thesis can enable readers to understand and critique the significance of the action researched evaluation on the basis of the thesis's critique of it.
There are other associated differences in documenting action research. Positivist science makes assumptions around objectifiably measurable outcomes about a definable problem that can be explored in isolation (Hesse in Lincoln and Guber, 1985). Those assumptions and the scientific method arising from them do not easily lend themselves to the emergent nature of action research - emergent in processes, understanding, issues and adjusted actions. Coupled with that emergent property of action research is the need for continually accessing new perspectives and information appropriate to what is emerging. The evaluation task then was to frame the problematic situation, in our case improving the Service and our competency to do that, recognising that there is no discreet solution or end to many aspects. So I have chosen thesis parameters on the basis of what is needed to explore the thesis and sub-theses through documenting the research, a critique of that research and an introduction to some implications for the future.

An introduction of the nature of the research and its context has been described in this chapter, as has the identity and roles of the research team doing the participative evaluation. I now conclude with the structure of following chapters. These chapters describe and analyze the research and explore its implications for the future.

Chapter Two informs and justifies why the research was done. It explores this by noting the significance of rural hardship and associated stresses. It begins with the nature and impact of that hardship in rural Australia and one response to that in the form of the Rural Counselling Programme. It then focusses on the significance of the Southern Riverina community's mandate to the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service as one expression of the Rural Counselling Programme in alleviating and preventing the hardship of Southern Riverina farm families. Significance to participants is then explored in terms of perceived benefits that would flow from action researching the participative evaluation and strategic planning of that Service. And finally, potential intellectual significance is noted.

In Chapter Three I describe the methodology of the researched evaluation. The significance of obtaining perspectives of the Service is explained. This is extended into a detailed example of the perspectives of one group of contributors.
Chapter Four combines emergent 'picture' and issues of the Service, decisions made by the Service and post-evaluation actions taken during 1990.

Chapter Five includes a critique on the participative evaluation through facilitated critical reflection by the Service and another critique by me as evaluation co-ordinator.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis by introducing issues of significance to me that lead me into further future enquiry. In that sense the action research moves on and beyond the action researched participative evaluation and the thesis on which it is based.

The thesis is largely written in the first person. This was a conscious decision on the basis of two related factors. The first was to be consistent with my view of learning as a process of enquiry or discovery that makes a difference in my life - be that a difference in the way I think, believe and value, see my world or act in that world. With learning significant to my living and the learning of this participatory evaluation contributing to my professional development, I want you the reader to sense that significance.

The second related factor is to be consistent with the personalized nature of action research. Action research places high commitment on creating improved understanding and beneficial change of a real situation important to those exploring it - just as it commits those researchers to get better at the way they go about creating change together. First Person Speech is in keeping with personalized change and the strong relational emphasis of the collaboration involved. The research was active rather than passive. First person speech reflects that. Exceptions to first person speech occur where reporting some direct evaluation-related information lends itself to less personal third person speech or where actual interviewee quotes are in another speech.

I now discuss the significance of the research, having introduced the general purpose, context and participants of the action researched participative evaluation.
CHAPTER TWO

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The significance of the research will be viewed from several perspectives. The first is the significance of the problematic context that the research sought to understand and improve. This context included the impact of increasing financial hardship and associated stress in rural Australia in general; of rural counselling as one appropriate response to that; and specifically, the Southern Riverina's mandate for the establishment and continuance of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service.

The second perspective is significance of the research to evaluation participants - namely the Service (and indirectly therefore to its clients), the University and me in particular.

The third perspective is the intellectual significance of the research. This incorporates a number of aspects. The first is the subject and context area of rural counselling and the rural crisis and includes their link to community development. It also incorporates the significance of my coupling action research to community development - not just as a methodology for social change, but also raising issues of philosophy and research paradigm. This is central to the thesis that participative approaches to evaluation enhance real beneficial change. The section also incorporates my refining of several key notions associated with rural community development. Intellectual significance overlaps with the second perspective in terms of it being amongst some benefits participants derived from the research. But it does not stop there. These are intellectual issues of potential interest to others in wider spheres of rural counselling and rural community development.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GENERAL RESEARCH CONTEXT

The depth of current Australian rural financial hardship and associated stresses is significant (Leske, 1992). Present contribution and future potential of the rural counselling programme to help farm families respond to that hardship is likewise significant. I have no illusions about either the evaluation or this thesis having at best more than a cursory,
indirect benefit to the overall well-being of rural Australia. However, the evaluation contributed to one counselling service understanding and improving its contribution to farm families suffering in its region of Australia. What follows is an overview of the context in which, and for which, the Service came into being. The extent and significance of current rural hardship gives credence for the timeliness of research that helps rural counselling, and hopefully, ultimately rural community development.

“Crisis even in crisis counselling”
“Hard year for women”
“Tomorrow's farmers: where will they come from?”
“Stress and the farmer”
“How to safeguard assets in a crisis”

Headings like these have increasingly ‘flavoured’ the rural press during the past decade. But the significance is not lost on the ‘city’:

“Farming '90: waiting for the bank to move”
“Financial stress link to killings”
“Acre-rich and dirt poor, a family banks on wool cheque to survive”.
“Farmers rush aid offer to quit land”

And so ran some headlines of page one to page three articles in mainstream urban-based Australian newspapers during the early 1990's. Since the mid-1980's, the popular press has been frequently informing (and at times sensationalizing) the plight of rural Australia - both of people and the environment. The opening sentences of the Business section of the Sydney Morning Herald (October 6, 1991), when commenting on catastrophic drought exacerbating rural hardship, said,

“National Farmers Federation president Graham Blight has called it the 'worst year in agriculture for 100 years'. Farmer groups and commodity traders agree”.

Television stations often run rural-oriented episodes in current affair programmes like the Australian Broadcasting Commission's young people-oriented 'Attitude'. Its September 29, 1993 programme, 'The Young Rural Identity Crisis', highlighted stress behind issues like increasing
unemployment and suicide, despite youths' appreciation of their rural heritage. Such press, especially considering Australia is the most urbanized country in the Western World, lend validity to the following maxim:

"Change and suffering are enduring qualities of rural life"

(Wilkinson ibid.)

These words that opened my thesis were derived from a quote on rural America. They immediately seemed apt to me on reading them, in describing Australia too, given the constant change during the past one hundred years. Moore (1991) noted that there are those who say there has always been 'crisis' in rural Australia. And those like Anderson (1972) have established that effectively. Yet change in the past decade in particular has been rapid, diverse, often harmful and often seemingly unplanned and uncontrolled. Recent trends indicate growing problems in matters social, economic, environmental and political. This has led others to see the current crisis as unusually significant in nature and longterm impact. Geoffrey Lawrence (1987) unfolds the scenario well:

It may seem alarmist to suggest that the agricultural depression of the 1930's ... has a modern day equivalent in Australia. Yet, ... the (world) market to which over 60 percent of Australia's rural products are destined - is in a state of decay parelleling conditions at the time of the Great Depression. ... There are other important and worrying similarities. The prices of commodities like wheat and sugar have fallen, in real terms, to the levels experienced in the 1930's, lending institutions have begun to foreclose on bankrupt farmers, farmer militancy which reached a peak in 1985 still foments, poverty levels have risen throughout rural and urban communities, and farm numbers have continued to decline. The current crisis is represented in economic terms by low returns to producers, rising input costs, growing farm indebtedness, high interest levels and falling land values. ... The system of advanced agriculture remains crisis-prone, unplanned, and the state's intervention makeshift and often contradictory. ... As the agricultural economy proceeds through its booms and busts farmers are forced off the land. Small towns begin to disappear, rural facilities decline, rural employment opportunities erode, and those
with jobs remain in a decaying economic and social environment. Some farm and rural town dwellers are forced, often reluctantly, to move to the cities. Others, with restricted mobility, remain entrapped in semi-poverty. [Preface] ... figures from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) have indicated that during the past 15 years 19,000 farmers have left agriculture, the farm workforce has declined by 32,000 and the total rural workforce by 100,000, farm costs have risen by 375 per cent - about twice the rate of farm returns - and, while the volume of agricultural production is some 27 per cent higher than it was 15 years ago, gross value of output has risen only 4 per cent. Farmers terms of trade have dropped by nearly 30 per cent in the last seven years to their lowest ever recorded level. Real income levels have dropped by 45 per cent since 1980 and are expected to fall by another 35 per cent by 1991-92 [13,14] ... The environmental costs of modern agriculture have been well documented since the release in the early 1960's of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. ... Unfortunately for the farmer it is impossible consciously to ignore the more productive technologies. Since debts have to be repaid, output must be improved. ... The rural environment is, like the agriculture it supports, in a state of crisis.

Drinan (1992) outlined a similar overview to Lawrence in his keynote address to a national agricultural education, extension and training conference at the University of Western Sydney-Hawkesbury:

As a consequence of all this, we are seeing the decline of rural communities in numbers and services. Rural infrastructure is being abandoned or simply not maintained by governments. With some notable exceptions, there is general malaise in the bush where people see their living standards steadily falling, and wonder whether there is any future in agriculture.

These impacts are understandable when one considers the plight of Australian broadacre farmers around the time of the evaluation. Michael Kirby (Chief Commodity Analyst, ABARE) speaking at the National Agricultural and Resources Outlook Conference 1992, cited Gleeson, Topp and Tucker (1992) noting 1991-92 farm incomes were expected to fall to their lowest values, in real terms, in over thirty years. But it is profitability which provides the more accurate assessment:
Farm business profit declined from an average profit of $6400 per farm in 1989-90 to an average loss of $22 770 per farm in 1990-91\(^1\). This trend is expected to continue, with broadacre farms expected to record an average loss of $32 100 in 1991-92.... Underlying these data, an estimated 84 per cent of broadacre farms are expected to record a farm business loss in 1991-92.

Burdensome and unservicable debt has become the crucial factor of the volatile 1980's and 1990's for many Australian farming families (Ginniven and Lees, 1991) and has led to the hardship that gave rise to the Rural Counselling Programme. It is not the purpose of this thesis to explore the complex reasons for current prevalence and severity of debt (see Pfitzner Ed. 1992 and Lawrence, 1987). I only highlight its significance in why the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service came into being. I refer readers to the Bibliography for additional reading in this area if they wish to pursue the matter further.

As Southwood (1991) noted, when farmers are in trouble, (rural) towns follow the recessionary path - especially agricultural service centres which are not underpinned by large regional institutions like universities or armed forces.

However, highlighting rural hardship does not ignore the complexity of interdependent causes, exacerbating influences and possible solutions to that hardship. While current crisis is more pronounced in rural Australian than urban Australia, it is not peculiar to it - nor to Australia alone, given national and global recessionary features (Korten, 1984). Talking of Australia as a whole, Kelly (1993) noted:

> The 1980's boom had the power of a crazy rollercoaster. ... The Hawke government made two great mistakes in its third term: it allowed the boom to get out of control, and its application of the brakes

\(^1\) Local Southern Riverina average farm business profits in 1990-91 ranged from a loss of $27 600 in the east to a loss of $29 400 in the west according to Monash University's Australian Agri-business Research Unit's study quoted by Johnston in the Australian Farm Journal, February 1993, 15.
through monetary policy caused a sharp recession. ... It is obvious that domestic mistakes occurred but they must be viewed within the context of greater global phenomena...

Dunphy and Stace (1991) similarly highlight the fundamental change in the global economic environment in the 1970's and 1980's that has awakened Australia from its "national stupor". Korten (1984, 1990 & 1992) forcefully outlines an unethical and inappropriate world economic order that globally impacts on people and environment alike. And Burrows, Mayne and Newbury (1991) in their excellent book, 'Into the 21st Century', broaden that to an embracive, integrated picture of a planet under such change that they see it at a crossroads where human survival is threatened.

And while the context of the thesis' is rural hardship, I am not ignorant of positive scenarios within sections of agriculture - agriculture specifically (for example, the beef industry) though not rural development in general. I acknowledge the significance of agriculture to Australia as a whole. Even though the dollar value of Australian agriculture is falling as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product, it is still rising and still contributes significantly to Australia's balance of trade. And publications which analyse purely on 'dollar' criteria can scoff at prophecies of doom and hope for a bright, selective future, at least in monetary terms (Clark, 1990) - even if questions of who gets the 'dollar' and at what cost have to be ignored².

I note too the legendary strength of character of rural people to persevere amidst adversity (Poiner, 1990). I also note thoughtless use of terms like 'crisis' have potential to self-promote chaos, as cautioned by Ian Crafter (The Weekly Times, September 5, 1990). And of the global dimension, I note important positive developments and alternative approaches and solutions

² I'm not going to challenge assumptions, like the appropriateness or otherwise of the capitalistic, technology-based, productivity orientation of Australian agriculture - nor join narrow 'positive' speculation for the remainder of the 1990's that defies reality of widespread hardship such as the exodus in the pastoral Western Division of New South Wales that will see up to 600 farm families leaving between 1992 and 1995 (Davey, 1992).
people like Korten (Ibid.) and Burrows et al (Ibid.) propose. But pursuing complementary optimistic notions other than by acknowledgement is beyond the purpose of the thesis. Perhaps the seeming conflicting scenarios are resolved in Drinan’s exclamation, questions and statement (Ibid.):

There has to be a future for agriculture, but it will take leadership to allow it to be created. Where is that leadership to come from? Surely extension people and educators must play a part. But are we up to it? The potential is there, but it will require a change of perspectives, attitudes and practices, in the same way that farmers are having to change theirs.

As mentioned, the general Australian public are more recently hearing and seeing (if only superficially and sensationally) of increasingly significant rural hardship. It begged the question of me, if there is an extraordinary current 'crisis', what is it? For me, 'rural crisis' is a concept, not something real of itself. I could describe it as a notion that encapsulates a complex set of features comprising the nature of prolonged and profound pressures and changes much of the rural sector currently experiences. Reports utilizing changing financial, health, social and demographic indices receive regular media coverage. And I encourage readers to utilize the Bibliographies to explore the nature, extent and implications of the situation further if they wish to understand and work in it.

But it would be crude to lose sight of the significance of pressures and transformations the 'numbers' in reports represent. The reality on the ground is not 'numbers'. It is 'people' - their aspirations, struggles, anguish, powerlessness, fear, anger and hard choices (Moore Lappe', 1985). I am very conscious of this human dimension. I have lived, worked and travelled widely in rural Africa and in more recent years have included rural New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania in my focus. Personal exposure to people of these situations, rather than statistics, has most sharpened my consciousness.

Rural Australia is hurting. Some would say sections are bleeding to death. Suffice to say, the significance of the general research context imbues this
and similar research with potential significance, when such research understands and improves portion of that context.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONTEXT OF THE RURAL COUNSELLING PROGRAMME

The focus of degree of hardship and longterm change in rural Australia is clearly family farming (Lawrence, 1987) - along with those who depend on it for the relative stability and well-being of associated rural communities with their businesses, services, general social fabric (Ibid.) and environment (Ibid.). Family farming is also the focus for clients of the rural counselling programme created to help farm families in financial difficulty (Ginnivan, 1988).

The significance of the Rural Counselling Programme is profound both in terms of its roles and its positive impact. While counselling services in the programme are run by individual local advisory committees, their expression of functions (with exceptions) is uniform and is predominantly expressed in the following ways (Ibid, 1):

* assessment of the farmer’s current financial position
* cash flow budgetting
* review of contracts with lending institutions
* loan applications
* communication with lenders
* information on government assistance schemes, including the Rural Adjustment Scheme
* information on social security and other welfare benefits
* assistance with other family decision-making and identification of options
* personal or family counselling where required, or referral to appropriate services (Ibid. 1)

In 1989 there were 25 rural counselling services with well over 3000 clients registered (Patch, 1989). As indication that rural hardship in general is not ameliorating (although specific rural industries’ fortunes fluctuate), by mid-1994 there were more than 70 services across Australia. In New South Wales alone, where there were 8 rural counsellors in 1989 (Ibid.), there were 19 in 1992 (Rowe, 1992) and 29 in 1994.
Significance has been established of rural hardship for which the Rural Counselling Programme came into being. The tasks confronting the Programme are immense and numbers of counselling services continue to increase. And it is easy to acknowledge the Programme’s significant accomplishments. The ‘Review of the Rural Counselling Programme’ (Patch, 1988), evaluation reports such as for the Mallee Crisis Committee (Lees et al., 1988) and the Moree Rural and Community Counselling Service (1989) and the six-monthly Rural Development Centre reports on the Programme up to 1992 all attest to these accomplishments.

But there appear to be problematic issues for the Programme which also lean weight to significance of this research given its potential, at least in small degree, to recognize, confirm and/or act on some of these within one service. A number of general related issues started emerging early for me from the combinations of initial discussions with the Service, reading reports such as those mentioned above and discussions with people (not in the Southern Riverina) who were either associated with, or aware of, the Programme. It is important to note though that the autonomy of each individual service breeds diversity that does not always hold true to generalizations. Issues are explored in greater depth in Chapters Five and Six, but they include (among others):

* an apparent lack of vision for the Programme (and Service) in terms of where it fitted in relation to rural community development, in nature and over time
* inadequate networking with others who could complement counselling services for a more holistic approach to the range of tasks in acting on both symptomatic and causal factors of rural hardship
* predominantly reactionary focus both in vision and function
* an oft non-empowering approach with clients by counsellors
* an apparent excessive cloak of confidentiality by rural counsellors
* some perceived relationship impoverishment and difficulties between local advisory groups and their counsellors
* an over-focus on counsellors at the expense of necessarily more significant role by local service committees
* a lack of thought about issues of counselling services’ future sustainability, reorientation or disbandment

29
Of course there are some understandable reasons for why this is the case. The then Minister for Primary Industry and Energy, the Hon. John Kerin brought urgency and needed Cabinet support to the quick creation of the Programme in 1986, when the expanding significance of the crisis became apparent. Yet that speed and the culture of a government bureaucracy were one type of influence behind the problematic issues. Another is the rarity of the concept of rural community development in Australian agriculture circles. And there are noteworthy exceptions to some of these elements such as the Mallee Crisis Committee's commitment to integrating its rural counselling, support and advocacy within the district's wider community development programme. But my perceived need for exploration of the above issues is not diminished by understanding causal factors of the past.

Fran Rowe, National and New South Wales Secretary of the Rural Counsellors Association, elaborates on these and other issues, especially as they relate to, or are seen in light of, rapid expansion of the Programme (Williams, et al., 1992). Rowe has been an integral part of the Programme since its inception and continues to wrestle with issues for improvement, such as those she explored in her talk to the national Agricultural Education, Extension and Training Conference at the University of Western Sydney - Hawkesbury (Sept.30-Oct.2, 1992). But the reason she is concerned is because of her deep commitment to the Programme and its benefit to rural Australia:

The rural counselling service treasures its unique position in rural communities. Its direction must be down that path which ensures its continued relevancy to farm families (Ibid.).

It is within this wider significant rural counselling programme that the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service exists.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SOUTHERN RIVERINA'S MANDATE TO THE SOUTHERN RIVERINA RURAL ADVISORY SERVICE**

The Southern Riverina is located within the Murray and Riverina Region of New South Wales. The region is one of the most productive agricultural regions in Australia. It has thirty shires, over 10 000 agricultural holdings and covers 13.5 million hectares. It spans most of southern New South
Wales from the edge of the Snowy Mountains with its alpine climate to the State's western border, which is low, flat and semi-arid. The Southern Riverina is the lower central portion sitting on the semi-arid Riverine Plain.

More widely spread financial hardship in the Southern Riverina in the early 1980's began with rice growers, but soon incorporated significant numbers in dairy farming and some others representing the full range of farming enterprises, especially those on small soldier settlement irrigation blocks.

This situation led to the 21st October, 1987 public meeting in Deniliquin, with eventual approval of the Service by DPI&E in February, 1988. The significance of the Service can be gauged in part by the response of Southern Riverina farmers during the first two years of its establishment. Mindful of the strong sense of independence and pride, and sometimes ignorance of the dire reality of their situation, farm couples often tended to wait until crisis was upon them before contacting the Service. Even so, the counsellor was consistently working sixty to seventy-hour weeks and dealt with a caseload of 122 clients during the first eighteen months of operation (Rural Counsellor Annual Report, November 1989).

I include some quotes from clients of the Service that reflect the 'crisis' in the Southern Riverina from the perspectives of evaluation participants. They highlight the significance of the action research when it leads to more effective response to the following:

"Things that get to us is that you are trying your damnedest and you get kicked in the teeth. The kids are good, but they are getting sick of secondhand clothes and shoes and no specialities."

"I am happy for people to know my situation. It is important ... we are bankrupt. We owned our farm in the early 70's. In 1984 the bank put pressure on us to diversify ... The banks were far too free with lending, because of competition between them."

"We used to have five machinery agents in town. Now we only have two."

"Costs have overtaken rice farming now."

"Seventeen days after I missed payment I was told to sell the farm ... solicitors wouldn't represent me without upfront money."

"As soon as the land prices are high enough we'll get out. There's too much work and not enough out of it."
SIGNIFICANCE TO PARTICIPANTS UNDERTAKING THE ACTION RESEARCHED PARTICIPATIVE EVALUATION

Significance to the Service

The basic reasons for the Service wanting an evaluation have been described in Chapter One's 'How the Evaluation Came About'. Initial significance to the Service of the 'research' was then more a case of significance of a consultancy-oriented evaluation (despite the assumptions by at least the rural counsellor of some form of collaborative approach if the School was to be involved). The importance of the research (in terms of anticipated needs, process and outcomes) was an emergent property that continued to alter throughout the research. This occurred because of my proposals and discussions with the Service on matters such as purpose and process and because of the very ongoing nature of action researching's iterative finding-out, refining and adjusting that occurred throughout the evaluation.

However, it is important to note questions and evaluation guidelines that the Service put to the University in a letter (13th February, 1990) for discussion at our initial meeting together (2nd. March, 1990). The questions were more around process. The guidelines were what the Service initially wanted as a result of the evaluation. These questions were (Gilbert, correspondence, (1990):

1. Who from the University would be involved and to what extent?
2. How much time would be involved or allowed? And when could this be arranged?
3. How could the Service be evaluated objectively?
4. How could Service clients be accessed (bearing in mind the independence and confidentiality of the service)?
5. Should the rural counsellor be evaluating himself, and if so, how could this be done?
6. Are our objectives clear and achievable?
7. How much would such an evaluation cost? Or could you provide an estimation?
Initial evaluation guidelines were included:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of the Service in achieving its aims and objectives.
2. Determine the degree of credibility of the Service with clients, with agribusiness and with government.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the integration of the Service and the rural counsellor with other services (private and public).
4. Examine the role of the Service committee in supporting the rural counsellor.
5. Suggest possible improvements in the Service's methods of operations.

It is appropriate in this section to note some reasons why I think the Service is worthy of praise. The Department of Primary Industries and Energy requires each of its funded rural counselling services to carry out an acceptable evaluation after three years. Both the committee and counsellor of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service requested an evaluation one year ahead of that requirement. Their concern to ensure caring, effective service to farm clients was obvious - as was the care the committee had for the well-being of its counsellor and his family. They would not wait another year for the evaluation. They purposefully sought an evaluation from an organization outside the rural counselling movement - contrary to some other service evaluations. And they presented themselves with potential risk (particularly the counsellor) in requesting open enquiry that sometimes explored highly personal factors. The Service placed significance on the evaluation. And this was validated by the honorary (and mostly busy) committee members who gave several long periods of time to it.

Significance to the University

The Introduction noted the integral part the notion 'rural development' plays in the identity and commitments of the University's School of Agriculture and Rural Development. The School recognised the appropriateness of the timing and the nature of the Service's request and the context of rural hardship. The School had long moved beyond more traditional views of agriculture and approaches to teaching it. The title change to the prior Faculty of Agriculture and Rural Development
indicated its commitment to viewing and involving itself in the richness, complexity, problematic nature and ethics of rural people's interactions with each other and with their environments. Its only concern in responding in the affirmative to co-ordinating the evaluation was its already busyness, not a lack of empathy or recognition of potential for mutual learning.

The significance of rural development to the School could be briefly described in the following quote by Prof. Richard Bawden when discussing the profile and vision of the School in the campus staff newsletter (Info, 27 May, 1993):

In this School we accept agriculture as the means towards improving the quality of rural life, rather than as an end unto itself. We concentrate on the complex issues of the sustainable and integrated development of rural families and their communities, of rural environments, as well as of the farms themselves.

Many involved in one way or another in the Rural Counselling Programme appear not think much past keeping viable families on their farm and helping non-viable ones adjust off theirs. But Rural Counselling and the complex problematic context it serves are expressions of rural development. So the School had an affinity for, and interest in contributing to and learning from, the Service evaluation.

Phase Two of the School's Bachelor of Applied Science (Systems Agriculture) and Associate Diploma courses focus on the Off Campus Experience. Until 1993, this activity utilized the whole year in extensive exploration of a farming enterprise (Phase Two Manual, 1992). This required long periods both with the farming family and creating thorough description and analysis and situation improvement documents. This collaborative enquiry with the farmer clients viewed farming as a complex human activity system. A wide range of relevant issues on and off the farm, and of necessity often quite personal ones, were explored. One feature challenging some students during the mid-to-late eighties was the increasing number of farm families at risk, or in the throes, of losing their farm. This was coupled with complementary research into intergenerational transfer of the family farm which has involved staff, students, academics from other universities, farm families, Fran Rowe and
solicitors and accountants (Voyce, M. et al., 1989; Blunden, S. et al., 1990; Gamble, D. et al., 1991). So the School saw this research with the Service as opportunity to extend our interest, contribution and networks in the arena of coupled rural hardship and rural development.

Further pertinence for future context-related research, networks and resources for the School emerged out of this research. This is discussed later in Chapter Five’s outcomes of the research.

Significance to me

There are two major influences behind me undertaking this action researched participative evaluation. These are the timing of the opportunity of this research and the centrality for me of ‘learning’ in ‘living’, especially learning in being ‘community’\(^3\). In one sense this thesis began with the latter. It is my broader belief and value framework which gives and creates meaning for me - meaning that influences not only how I see, enquire and act, but even the choice of research in the first place. However, in another sense the research specifically began because the timing was pertinent to my changing professional needs and opportunities, having recently returned from Africa. Fortunately, these personal factors corresponded with those of the Service and the University as well, as outlined in the previous two sections.

My interest in co-ordinating the evaluation was reinforced by other factors. I enrolled in the School’s MSc (Hons) programme because action researching real world problematic contexts was a course expectation. Prior to my Service evaluation involvement, I already appreciated the relevance and practice of action research as a form of collaborative

\(^3\) ‘Learning’, ‘living’ and ‘community’ are inextricably linked for me in the sense that I see learning as discovery I make that creates difference to my life. Yet I recognize that I do not come to that discovery without the influence of and on others through whom I interdependently exist and interact, however seemingly indirect at times. I am both an ‘individual’ and ‘in community’. I cannot be one without the other (Aers, 1989; Peck, 1990; Wright, 1983). Communication, in terms of creating shared meaning (Mackay and Jones, 1987), contributes to the synthesis of the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes of each (Stewart, 1990).
human enquiry for the types of situations I enjoyed in the past and for which I also aimed in future work. The contexts of these situations included one or combinations of community development, programme evaluation, education, and organizational learning and strategic planning - with staff development and training often incorporated within these. In the evaluation, I quickly recognised elements of these arenas that were important to me - as well as the evaluation's potential for action research. It thus appeared to be a good 'bridge'-breasting my past and future.

But significance of the research to me also needs to be understood in light of me, the person behind the action research co-ordination. It will help to know more about me because my life learning is strongly influenced by habitual ways I think and act and the assumptions about life that underlie these. There are several interrelated aspects to note because of their implications to my choice and central role in this research: things important to me by way of beliefs and values; ways that I see and act; and, an historical perspective of my professional experience.

I anticipated significance to life learning in the diverse opportunities I saw in co-ordinating the evaluation. Whatever benefit might arise for the Service, I anticipated assured learning for me. Carl Rogers (1969) said, that "education is not so much a preparation for life, as life itself". This statement carries assumptions of the desirability of equating education with experiential learning and this with living - or in my words, of living the learning through learning the living.

Learning is significant for me, because it is one central expression of my humaness created in the image of a creative God. While life for me can be frustrating and painful, it can also paradoxically be a stimulating and enjoyable learning experience. Given that this learning occurs within, and as part of, a constantly changing environment, it highlights to me why learning is exciting and necessary to living. It is integral with my survival, relevance, appreciation and growth. In that sense, it matters little whether that learning occurs non-formally or more formally as evidenced in this thesis. What does matter is that it occurs - and that I recognise that it will not occur in some vacuum separate from the people, situations and environment with whom I interact or influence. Indeed, while seeing action research in methodological terms, I see it in paradigmatic and even philosophical terms in a manner which equates or
overlays the kind of learning outlined above with either ‘community development’ or ‘learning’ or maturing as a person within maturing as the community\(^4\) of God.

For the purpose of this thesis, I note four foci that make or attribute meaning central to my life. They are not the only foci. However they warrant highlighting, given the nature of this research. They embrace important assumptions of Christian faith, community development, communication and learning. In one sense, I describe myself as a Christian learner and nurturer of rural community development.

I borrow the concept from anthropologist Heibert (1983) in saying any split between Christianity and rural development theory and practice is unfortunate. I and other Christians need frameworks of interactive human understanding and change that constitute the likes of development, communication and learning as professional arenas. While Christians hold the message of the Bible to be supracultural and supradisciplinary, it must be understood and applied in all cultures, times and contexts. This is a necessary contextualizing of the Gospel’s central notion of the restoration, healing and enriching of relationships through Christ. That notion embraces the recreation of harmonious relationships (that we humans marred and broke) between people and their Creator God; within people as individuals; between people; between people and their environment; and within the wider environment itself - though by ‘harmonious’ I mean more the notion of interdependency ... of unity in

\(^4\) Community development has become both an over-arching interpretive and professional framework and a mandate for me. It is strongly so because of my sense of its centrality to God’s intention for his creation. Community is a Scriptural concept enriched through use of multiple analogies like “a body (physical)...with many parts”, “a holy people”, a “nation”. Stott (1979) and Wright (1983) interpreting these both talk of a “society”. The notion of relationships is central to all and links in the significance of communication in corporate maturity through diverse individual expression and responsibility - both community and individuals learning, creating, ‘becoming’ - neither possible at the expense of the ‘becoming’ of the other. “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:15,16).”
diversity, rather than absence of difference or conflict. I understand Scripture views life with an emphasis on our ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ as an integrated whole - as individuals, as community and as creation - a synthesis, whatever the dialectics that also exist [see Appendix 1. for extension of this thought].

The relevance of these comments of awareness of my belief system to my collaborative research and thesis writing is supported by Brookefield (1987):

"When we think critically we become aware of the diversity of values, behaviors, social structures, and artistic forms in the world. Through realizing this diversity, our commitments to our own values, actions and social structures are informed by a sense of humility; we gain awareness that others in the world have the same sense of certainty we do - but about ideas, values and actions that are completely contrary to our own".

This is pertinent to my collaborative research, given my commitment to the dignity, responsibility, privileges and insights of all participants of

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5 I think it important to illuminate. Peck (1990) expresses this well: “Community does not solve the problem of pluralism by obliterating diversity. Instead it seeks out diversity, welcomes other points of view, embraces opposites, desires to see the other side of every issue. It is ‘wholistic’. It integrates us human beings into a functioning mystical body. The word ‘integrity’ comes from the verb ‘to integrate’. Genuine community is always characterized by integrity. ... Integrity is never painless. It requires that we let matters rub up against each other, that we fully experience the tension of conflicting needs, demands, and interests, that we even be emotionally torn apart by them. ... Since integrity is never painless, community is never painless. It also requires itself to be fully open, vulnerable, to the tension of conflicting needs, demands and interests of its members and of the community as a whole. It does not seek to avoid conflict but to reconcile it. And the essence of reconciliation is that painful, sacrificial process of emptying. Community always pushes its members to empty themselves sufficiently to make room for the other point of view, the new and different understanding. Community continually urges both itself and its individual members painfully, yet joyously, into even deeper levels of integrity.
personal and social change. As Blomberg said (1986), in his case referring to the responsible freedom of children, "(they) have a right and a responsibility as God's image bearers to shape the world, to be culturally busy". And when I give that right to others, as God does, then there can be a flow-on effect to me. My own life learning and influence is significantly determined by the degree of my willingness and aptitude to benefit from others' insights of both themselves and me.

Mackay and Jones (1992) say each person is a unique culture in themselves. They describe each person as existing in a 'cage' or 'emotional scaffolding' formed and reinforced over time - a cage made up of our beliefs, values, prejudices, feelings that provide a secure basis for the way we see and live in our world. While that cage provides me with a sense of stability in an ever changing and conflicting world, it also tends to inhibit me seeing and acting in new ways. Other people are important in helping me refine, challenge and even rebuild those frameworks to ensure firstly, that change will really occur when that is appropriate; and secondly, that change is 'developmental' - that there is notion of some direction and improvement.

This does not deny my beliefs. I cannot be a cynic without convictions and commitments. The need is rather my acknowledging their existance and of related values, vision, agendas and assumptions. I unashamedly hold to a need for ethical approaches and outcomes to research (acknowledging the relative and perplexing nature of that). This contrasts to the sometimes supposed unbiased, sanitized accounts of the scientific method (Lewins, 1990 and Lincoln and Guber, 1985). But there can be implications to research, especially collaborative research, if belief systems remain implicit and unrecognized. One implication could be a form of bias that "produces deception, distortion or grossly unreasonable conclusions" (Ibid.).

Another implication is that hidden agendas can hinder collaboration effectiveness (Johnson and Johnson, 1991). Yet another implication is the inhibition of shared meaning between participants that is so necessary for effective collaborative action. Otherwise research participants have little understanding of each other's agendas, worldviews and frameworks that influence what we do with the interactions behind creating our shared feeling, meaning and action. And if that has not occurred (as happened
to varying degrees with some Service committee members, discussed in
Chapter Five) they are unlikely to have recognized the importance of
comprehending the significance of understanding the contexts within
which participants' assumptions and actions springing from them have
occurred.

"When people realize that actions, values, beliefs, and moral codes
can be fully understood only when the context in which they are
framed is appreciated, they become much more contextually aware."
(Brookefield, 1987, ).

Of course the potential benefits of others' diverse beliefs and insights and
mutual enjoyment is also minimized by that lack of self-disclosure. While
that may be seen by some as an irrelevancy to the task of collaborative
research, it is not for me. One reason I appreciate the nature of action
research is exampled in the new friendships I have as a result of the
participative evaluation of the Service. And there is basis in them to
undertake new collaborative endeavours6.

This highlighting of the intertwined nature of my Christian worldview
and development, learning and communication frameworks provides
understanding to you of the significance of my choice and co-ordination
of the participative Service evaluation. It also helps you understand my
rationale for the philosophic reasons of the affirmation of the proposition
of the benefits of participative evaluation approaches. 'Participation' not
only work in terms of enhancing beneficial change, it is also appropriate
because of human ethics and dignity. Aspects are reopened in the final
thesis chapters where action researching the evaluation moves on to some
wider implications of participative approaches to change and for me as an
individual.

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6 See Keltner and Zephyr's notion of the 'spiritual child' for further thoughts with
regards the inextinguishable nature of interpersonal relationships, in Stewart, J.
Intellectual Significance:

Finally, there is intellectual significance in and through the participative evaluation, given the multi-objective nature of action research. I anticipated four areas of intellectual interest in this research. The first three revolve around the informal contribution to public knowledge about rural counselling; contribution to debate about the assertion that participative approaches to evaluation of community-based organizations are a powerful tool for organizational learning and social change; and contribution to discussion about the relationship between severe rural hardship (and its associated crisis management) with broader issues of rural community development. The latter area of intellectual significance is primarily mine, so far as participants in this research were concerned. However, they are of interest to others beyond the research group who are involved as facilitators of rural community development. The fourth area is intellectual significance to all participating members as individuals - particularly in terms of the development of their mental abilities related to learning, and especially interdependent learning within that. The four expressions of research significance are explored in Chapters Five and Six of the thesis, partially as the means to move beyond the research to its implications for me in the future.

New paradigm science tends, in general, to be less descriptive and more active than conventional science. Hence this thesis not only records an active process, but attempts to be an active process (Torbert, 1990).

It is appropriate now to explore in detail the action researched participative evaluation. And this will be done through Chapter Three introducing what was done, how it was done and why it was done that way.
CHAPTER THREE
THE EVALUATION APPROACH

Chapter Three describes how the evaluation was conducted and the action research approach that informed it. The chapter then gives examples of how perspectives and data were gathered and handled. The examples relate to one of the perspectives sought on the Service, that of agribusiness-agriconsultancy, and include: team preparations for the interview; a detailed record of the interview; and early assimilation steps of that record. The description and examples are included to enhance trustworthiness of Chapter Four's overall representation of three factors - how the Service was perceived by interviewees; the emerging issues from that that required considered action by the Service; and, the eventual changes that were set in motion by the evaluation process.

Commitment to an informed, participative, strategic process determined the kind of evaluation designed. As stated, the evaluation had a dual corporate purpose. Firstly it was to benefit struggling Southern Riverina farming families by better understanding and improving the Service created to support them through their experience of hardship. The importance of participation by those involved in the Service was based on the assumption that local knowledge, commitment, priorities and capabilities were essential ingredients to relevant, achievable and sustainable improvement - directly of the Service, and ultimately, socially of the community it served. The second corporate purpose, though somewhat emergent, was for the evaluation team to be getting better - not just at what they were doing, but also how they were doing that.

THE PROCESS

A preamble

There is a clear link between the proposal for the evaluation to be a participative process and my background in rural community development with its people-centred approaches (Chambers, 1983). I desired an activity where Service involvement was fully participative and, hopefully at least in emergence, Service self-empowering - not one where the Service was relatively passive or largely dependent on the School for final recommendations. I wanted to create a facilitated process through
which the Service would equip itself with an enhanced capacity to bring about informed self-directed, self-responsible change. At the same time, we as a School wanted to utilize the collaborative experience with the Service to learn how we could keep getting better at facilitating such activities ... of improving the way we help people cycle between finding out about their focus of interest and their taking action to improve that interest. That learning transaction, after Bawden (1989), is illustrated as Fig. 3 below. Key elements include:

* self in one's world, specifically in relation to the people, events and things that comprise that world of enquiry

* self's window on that world, whose worldview of beliefs or assumptions shapes the way that world is seen and handled

* constructs, maps or concepts (derived from one's seeing or experiencing that world), being explanations, hypotheses or interpretations as 'theories' that are tested (action) using the bag of tricks one has mastered to do that.

Second and third orders of enquiry (Fig. 3a) would be finding out about the way one finds out and finding out what informs the way one finds out about finding out - and correspondingly, taking action to improve how one takes action and taking action on that action taking of improving action taken, as well as the multi-order equivalents of theoretical constructions and issues of one's world (Ibid.).

Fig. 3 The cyclic learning transaction of 'finding out' in order to take improved action

SEE ALSO:
PACKHAM, ROBERTS AND BAWDEN (1990)

MULTI-ORDERS OF ENQUIRY:
MEZIROW (1991)
KITCHENER (1990)
NORMAN (1985)
BALNER (1985)
BAWDEN (1985)
My vision of my responsibility, concerning the Service's learning transaction of finding out more about itself in order to take informed action to improve itself, was to ensure it experienced three outcomes:

* a richer understanding of itself and what would constitute its improvement

* an affirming and encouraging of the resolve of the rural counsellor and other committee members alike in their commitment to improve the Service

* an enhanced competency to create that improvement itself and keep creating it itself.

While these outcomes became significant reality, they had no ultimate completion in themselves. The Service could safely assume there would always be need for ongoing monitoring, evaluation, adjustment and improvement in an ever changing world. I saw my role as helping the Service build more solid foundations to ensure its capacity to strategically manage how it adjusts. This required the Service being able to proactively create what it could of its own future, rather than having it somewhat created for it by inevitable forces of change, within and without. I believed action research was a highly suitable vehicle to fulfill this aim so I negotiated it becoming the overarching methodology. A discussion follows about the nature of action research in general and how it specifically shaped the evaluation.

Action research

Proponents of action research describe it, albeit simplistically, as an activity combining 'acting' and 'researching'. It involves an integrated process that creates understanding and improvement of a 'real world' problematic context while researching how to understand and improve the way that is done so it can be done more effectively in the future. To do this it utilizes iterative cyclic processes that refine 'finding out' and 'taking action'. Kurt Lewin, the first to use the term (Kemmis in Kemmis and McTaggart Ed., 1988), saw it as a means of overcoming the oft dialectic between theory and practice. He saw action research as a spiraling process of ongoing cycles of action, evaluating the action and planning new adjusted action (Fig. 4, Ibid.):
However, defining action research cannot be done precisely without simplifying or curtailing the diverse definitions and manifestations of it. There is a range of descriptions and practices embraced by the phrase 'action research'. Grundy (1982) calls it a "pot-pourri term" used by some to describe any investigative activity in which practitioners in a context are involved. But in being more selective in interpreting it than that, I still acknowledge the helpful breadth of its interpretatations and expressions. I point the reader to the Bibliography for more thorough enquiry, noting the likes of Altricter in Zuber-Skeritt (1990) and Peters and Robinson (1984).
Levels of doing research is one way of viewing differences within 'action research'. Dick (1991) notes that it can be firstly regarded as a research paradigm. At another level it could be regarded as methodology. He notes that a number of alternative methodologies can be utilized, for example, critical action research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986); soft systems methodology (Checkland, 1984); and action science (Argyris, 1985). These would in turn call on a variety of methods for collecting and analysing data and managing action.

I view action research in another complementary manner again, in addition to the paradigmatic and methodological notions above. Like Limerick (Zuber-Skerritt Ed., 1991), I see action research as a strong expression of my worldview. I have assumptions and beliefs about the nature of individuals and community and their engagement in the world around them that shape my research. So, in this sense I also see action researching somewhat approaching a philosophical\(^1\) subset. Indeed, it expresses my commitment to collaboratively experientially pursuing understanding of the day to day world I experience, for the purpose of enjoying and of creating, restoring or enriching ever evolving relationships that comprise that world and give it meaning for me.

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\(^1\) Methodologies and techniques vary within the general essence of action research, depending on the contexts under enquiry. However, action research in its general philosophical and process senses is a School requirement for this course's applied research. I use the term 'philosophical' in the sense of commitment to:

* a collaborative process where those involved in, or influenced by, the problematic situation, enquire together with the desired aim of creating common 'good' or 'improvement'
* a collaborative power-sharing process that acknowledges the dignity, right of involvement, unique nature, perspectives and contribution of each person in the enquiry - enhancing their ownership of the problematic situation and enquiry process alike
* a collaborative process that allows individuals to pursue their own issues and priorities in harmony with the corporate nature of the enquiry
* experiential enquiry not divorced from present realities of life and work
* public scrutiny and benefit by those interested in the research, in terms of transferrable outcomes related to theories, process and improved problematic context.

I use the term 'process' above in the sense of iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting that enhance rigour, flexibility, creativity and relevant improvement.
Such assumptions and beliefs influence what and how I learn and research in "collaborative issue-oriented action" (Limerick in Zuber-Skerritt, 1991). Such action is important to me, as outlined in Chapter Two. This was a significant factor in my choice of context and approach to the research. I was conscious of what I chose to research and why and how.

In my placing the framing and conduct of the evaluation within my perspective of seeing action research as a paradigm of research, I contrast with those who see it merely embracing methodology for problem-solving or social research (Peters and Robinson, 1984). This paradigmatic orientation supports the view of action research by Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1985), Kemmis (Kemmis in Kemmis and McTaggart Ed., 1988) and Bawden, (1989) as a conception of science committed to bringing about social change for the better, as people become active in constructing their social reality (Peters and Robinson, ibid.).

At the time of my enrolment, action research was School-prescribed for Master of Science research degrees. I do not see that prescription as problematic for me. Indeed, I chose the degree and School for that very reason. The diversity that is 'action researching' provides paradigmatic and methodological frameworks relevant to my ongoing professional enquiry contexts of facilitating rural community development and organizational learning within it.

The term 'systemic action research' is sometimes used within the School (Bawden, 1989). The approach recognizes need for holistic approaches when enquiring into complex situations where people are interacting with each other and with their environments in contexts that do not have definitive purposes, problems or solutions - and such was the case involving the complexity of all those interacting with or as part of the Service. Such approaches then, as that with the Service, are characterised by seeking to take interrelationships more fully into account (utilizing soft systems concepts); by fostering interdisciplinary co-operation; and by putting a 'human face' on technical, financial and environmental facets - recognising these do not exist in isolation from the influence of human values, goals, decisions and actions.
I chose Bawden's (1989) five pronged general desired outcomes of action research as a guide for what we wanted from this evaluation, because of their breadth and clarity. I have rephrased them to highlight not just understanding and improving context and process of a research focus, but what could be transferred beyond the specific context in question. The desired outcomes were:

* understanding more of the situation identified (in this case, the need to know how the service was going and what modifications, if any, were desirable).

* improving the situation under research (in this case, the effectiveness of the Service in fulfilling its mandate).

* better understanding the process or practice of exploring and improving that situation (in this case, of action researching organizational participative evaluation and strategic planning - in particular of community-based rural counselling services).

* improving that practice (in this case, not just to future evaluations of the Service, but to improved ways that are transferrable to other related action researching contexts).

* contributing to wider public debate of the research - principally for obtaining a response from a skeptical public whose critique provides an external perspective freer from aspects of potential 'blindness' of close emotional involvement (Luft & Ingham in Staley, 1982). But there is commitment to also contribute the research to 'public knowledge' for potential 'public good'.

So my action research did not just involve the then current Service situation. It also had learning outcomes that, in part, equipped participants with competencies transferrable to ongoing and new situations - that is, getting wiser and better at doing what is done by both the Service and the School. Our University team recognised the strong human element in rural counselling. And it sought to foster increased empowerment of committee and counsellor, with regards expanding their understanding and improving their contributions.

The initial Service request to the University had a high emphasis of 'looking back' (ex poste) - reviewing how closely objectives had been met
during the previous two years. There was also a degree of Service interest as to the implications of that for present planning and activities (ex ante). The rural counsellor's activities were the thrust of that. However, I sought to add (through discussion) a strategic facet that also reviewed vision, processes and structures of the Service i.e. how it would move into the future and why in that direction and manner. This would particularly have implications for the committee.

The process in practice

The evaluation process comprised six (6) stages:

1. background reading and planning: clarification of the Service's basic structure, objectives and evaluation guidelines; general context reading and interviewing on rural counselling and the crises precipitating its establishment; negotiation of the evaluation proposal; networking resources; and creating and equipping the evaluation team.

2. primary data collection: at both state and Southern Riverina district level; this was done during three trips from the University in Richmond. Data was collected through a combination of semistructured face to face interviews, focus-groups, mini-workshops and telephone interviews.

3. assimilation of data by the School team and discussion with the Service's evaluation subcommittee of important emerging themes, issues and possible improvements. Prioritising issues on which the sub-committee wanted further investigation by the UWSH team.

4. facilitating the whole Service (all committee members and rural counsellor) to together explore options and decide improvements to the Service.

5. writing up documents for the Service and sponsors and a separate confidential portfolio for the counsellor.

6. critiquing both the process and outcomes (done at different stages and by different combinations of committee members, counsellor and UWS-H evaluation participants).

Four questions were central in guiding the overall evaluation process. They were: what is there; what does it mean; what is important; and, what will be done. Their prescriptive basis as methodology was derived from a
descriptive process model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). They were also important to mini cycles within that. For instance, we overtly took the committee through the experiential learning cycle during the September workshop. The questions about our process were explicitly asked. This was with the intention of providing a sense of how the Service could immediately begin making decisions and initiating improvement. And it was done to improve ongoing evaluation and planning capability of the committee and rural counsellor through the experience of addressing their immediate evaluation issues. The four prescriptive methodology questions have been added to the outer Kolbian model following:

Fig.5 The experiential learning cycle: a descriptive and prescriptive overlay, after MAPSCI Handbook (1993) & Kolb on Lewin (1984)

Another evaluation feature was that it took people's 'appreciations' into account. We recognised the importance of people's different perceptions, values and beliefs that impact on what they see, feel and do (Checkland and Casar, 1986). We sought to understand and deal with perceptions of the
Service from as many perspectives as possible - realising also the impact of our own on that process and outcomes, as noted in Chapter Two's discussion of my actions and values and the impact of the assumptions and beliefs that underly them. This is why the model of Perspectives Gathering (Fig. 6) includes the University's own 'window' on how it saw interviewees seeing the Service from their perspectives.

Trustworthy representation of mirroring interviewee perspectives and emerging issues to the Service was important to us as the assimilators of perspectives and issues. We sought to minimize distortion by recognizing our individual perceptions and assumptions; by having a second team member or pair check the recorded interview material and assimilated record for soundness of representation; and by sharing the emerging picture of the Service with evaluation sub-committee members to see if there was any matter that seemed outstanding enough from their experience that warranted further confirmation (though this was not deemed necessary).

The process was one of co-enquiry with the Service evaluation sub-committee of three throughout the evaluation. This occurred through six trips (three at Service expense), correspondence and frequent telephoning. Sometimes it occurred with the whole sub-committee. But with 750 kilometres usually separating me from them (and they from each other by lesser but significant distances), at times it had to be with one of the sub-committee who would either discuss with me on their behalf or take the matter to them and recon tact me. This was often the rural counsellor who, along with the support of other evaluation sub-committee members, played a key role in making the process participative. We met with the whole Service committee and rural counsellor at three strategic points over seven months (primary data collection, main decision-making and planning workshop and evaluating the evaluation).

Funding was another factor that affected the outworking of our methodology. Early on, the University team assumed that we would have a budget much higher than the Service's initially available $2,000 (later extended to $2,500). We appreciate the Service's budget limitations. However, this acceptable reality had implications in limiting what was done and how and when things were done - especially within the time-consuming, collaborative, participatory research paradigm to which we were committed. Some options not utilized due to finance and personnel
limitations are discussed later when critiquing the evaluation in Chapter Five.

The implications of the restricted funding from the Service (even with substantial indirect additional costs covered at the time by the University and to an extent by myself, friends of mine in the Riverina and the rural counsellor) meant the time spent by the University team in the Southern Riverina was short and intervals between University and Service interactions was long. Careful consideration was therefore given to which kinds of perspectives were sought on the Service and how many of each.

The make-up of the team of the Service committee and University members was outlined in Chapter One. At this stage it is just noted that the very part-time nature of most members of the team was an important consideration in what was planned and done. The rural counsellor was habitually working in excess of sixty hour weeks. And Service committee members had their ongoing professional, community and personal responsibilities in the Southern Riverina and similarly for University team members in their contexts. Like limited funding, limited time available by team members to be involved required this evaluation's participative approach to space out the time between when members could interact together. This was necessary for the phases creating and negotiating the process; assimilating the data by the University team into useful information issues for utilization by the Service; and, writing the evaluation report and critiquing the whole activity. It was also time-consuming for the rural counsellor in the midst of his demanding counselling responsibilities to make arrangements for interviewing and for committee involvement in the collaborative process.

Other issues influencing the design of the participative evaluation process

My early involvement explored the idea of designing a process for the counsellor and committee doing the evaluation themselves. There were two main reasons for this. The first was to ensure full confidentiality between counsellor and clients, given the virtual exclusion of the committee from such details to that point in time (as was the norm for most of the fledgling rural counselling services). An interstate rural counsellor with whom I discussed such an approach insisted an internal confidential solely counsellor-run evaluation was the only ethical one.
And there was a norm for such emphasis on confidentiality in some wider counselling contexts.

The second reason was to have a process that was dignifying and empowering in terms of ensuring the committee and counsellor could continue the process as an ongoing function of their Service. And self-evaluation would be consistent with that aim, so long as the Service (especially the counsellor) was both willing and able to be critically self-reflexive. However, the desire of the committee, based partly on the practicality of it being an infrequently enjoined voluntary group, determined an external evaluator play a more prominent planning and procedural role. The Service also suspected that sensitive involvement of external facilitators was necessary both for certain required evaluation skills as well as objectivity reasons. So the evaluation approach was adjusted accordingly. They also believed external co-ordination would provide “greater objectivity” to the evaluation and they felt the evaluation would also give greater credibility to the evaluation by DPI&E and other sponsors.

It is neither the intention nor need to justify action research here as a valid form of research behind the participative evaluation of the Service. But one interesting notion that did arise related to action research as research was to what extent should my evaluation involvement have been described as ‘consultancy’ or ‘research’ or both - and to what extent any distinction is important? This issue is explored in Chapter Five.

However, I do wish to briefly comment on my synthesis of traditional ways of viewing consultancy and research. At the heart is my conviction that I would only understand the Service superficially if I was not involved with it. And I anticipated an impoverished understanding and low ‘ownership’ of the evaluation by the Service committee if they were not similarly integrally involved either. The validity of research could be challenged if beneficial change did not occur - and the risk of that would have been heightened if it was seen as ‘mine’ and not their ‘own’. And more significantly, ownership of the evaluation by Service members, and their enabling and envisioning would be put at risk. All these elements have already been mooted earlier in this section as characteristics or desired outcomes of action research. Neither I nor the committee and counsellor called the evaluation ‘consultancy’. We embraced interdependent
learning, action and research. There were benefits for all concerned, as elaborated in Chapter Five, because of commitment to contribute to each other’s effectiveness.

My intention before beginning the action phase of the evaluation was to utilize a soft systems methodological approach within the wider action research methodology. To an extent this eventually occurred, though in a modified way. What this was to entail and how it was modified is explored in my critique in Chapter Five.

PERSPECTIVE GATHERING

The basic intention of our evaluation approach was to aid the Service making informed decisions to improve itself, based on clear understanding of itself. That understanding meant a broad range of perspectives on the Service needed to be sought and integrated for informed Service action. Like individuals (Luft & Ingham in Staley, 1982), I believe groups, organizations and communities have an impoverished understanding of themselves, based partly on ‘self-blindness’ (see Fig. 6, over). There are aspects about oneself seen by others, and often by which others are impacted, of which oneself is not aware. In the Service’s case, commitment to become aware of how others saw it, combined with readiness to share and integrate its own perspectives of itself with these, became crucial to it becoming more effective through critical reflection on this enriched self-knowledge. This notion is important if organizations are to be learning organizations (Normann, 1985).

Fig. 6 Johari Window

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KNOWN TO SELF</th>
<th>UNKNOWN TO SELF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The Public Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I and others know. My own and others’ perceptions are the same. There is no internal conflict here. Area of congruence and growth.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Blind Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour of which I may not be aware, but which others know. I do not see in myself what others see. If this area is large, my control over myself—using my strengths effectively, and overcoming my limitations—will be low.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Secret or Private Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspects of myself that I know but that I keep hidden from others.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Unknown Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This area is not known to me or to other people. Parts of it may be revealed during life but it will never be fully known.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The perspective-dependent process provided the Service with the opportunity to 'remodel the window' (Fig. 7), through increasing the conscious public self. This occurred through a combination of feedback from the perspectives of those beyond the committee and rural counsellor (decreasing the 'blind self') and the self-disclosure about the Service by committee members and the rural counsellor (the 'private self'):

Fig. 7 Johari Window 'remodelled'

The focus of the evaluation, and therefore of perspective gathering, was the Service - not the clients, nor Service contributor aspects or the context of stress and hardship in the rural sector. While these are important aspects in understanding and improving the Service, yet our focus was the Service. All perspectives were to help that end. For strategic planning purposes, we had three focii for perspectives within that that we categorized as the Service, the committee and the rural counsellor. The 'Service' perspective reflected generalizations not specific to the latter two entities within the Service 'whole'. And it included senses of entirety as expressed by the over-riding, combined impact of both the inworkings between the committee and its employed rural counsellor and the outworkings of that relationship to clients, community and sponsors. The 'committee' perspective provided specific understanding of the role and impact of the combined fifteen voluntary, community-based members (exclusive of rural counsellor) who were charged with ongoing responsibility for the Service. And the third perspective focussed on the rural counsellor - a strongly expressed Service priority for exploration when it initiated the evaluation.
Interviews and group discussions

The selection and manner of interviewing was largely determined by the intermediate evaluation objective of mirroring a rich picture of the Service back to the committee. The overall evaluation aim was to use this mirroring to generate issues for participative analysis and informed action by the committee and counsellor — actions that addressed both service to clients and strategic alignment of the Service. The principles of a qualitative research method called rapid rural appraisal were utilised by the School for gathering the greater part of the picture of perspectives on the Service. Rapid rural appraisal can utilize a range of techniques to build an understanding of a complex situation on which action can then be taken (Beebe, 1985). The two main techniques utilized in this participative evaluation to do this were semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with two types of individual-come-couple interviewees - key individuals and clients of the Service. Key individuals were non-client people deemed to provide a unique perspective on the Service and therefore prioritized for their specified Service insight and influence. Client interviewees were selected as representatives of certain categories of people among the over 150 clients (by April, 1990) with files who had utilized the Service. They were selected randomly by the University team in consultation with rural counsellor from within selected combinations of multiple criteria. The criteria included: shire; enterprise(s); over or under 35 years age; farming in the district more or less than 7 years; open or closed client file; continuing in farming or adjusting(ed) off; less than a day/less than a week/more than a week of time given to the client; partnership, family business or single ownership; perceived as satisfied or dissatisfied with the rural counsellor’s contribution; and, area of farm. Sixteen couples were selected for indepth interview along with reserves. Research issues of numbers of clients interviewed, selection criteria and other possible approaches to perspective and data gathering are explored in Chapter Five.

Focus groups were used to articulate a particular perspective from people of related function or occupation deemed relevant to the Service. Two benefits of these groups were enhanced creativity of thought through group interaction and also access to a wider range of individual interviewee perspectives within our context of limited time and finance.
Our University team sought to be well grounded in both theory of social science research tools and the general context and concerns of interviewees. The focus groups were not “ad hoc, atheoretical, or unscientific exercises” (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). We had clear purpose and rationale for the interviews based on capturing interviewee perspectives of the Service. Each interview team member also had a resource pack that I put together to aid their effectiveness. This comprised:

* an introduction to the Service and to the evaluation aims, process and schedule

* aims and objectives of the Service

* list of Service committee members

* timetable for the interview weeks

* quarterly rural counsellor activity reports

* seven resource articles on relevant principles and techniques of social research

* checklists for the various depth interviews and focus groups

* summaries on emerging themes from prior interviews

* several shared reference books including The 1988 Rural Counselling Programme Review (DPI&E) and to evaluation reports from other Services’ evaluations.

The interview process included appropriate theme or question prompts for each category of interviewees - though only that - thoughtful prompts if necessary, though not exclusive of other matters considered relevant by interviewees. It was important for interviewers to be flexible in creating a climate conducive for ‘interviewee’ freedom of contribution yet consistent with evaluation purpose. Interviews were generally about 75 minutes duration. Our experience was that our purpose and approach could not be adequately achieved in less time than that. Several times it went longer when useful and not repetitive.
An example of one the interviewer checklist follows, in this case for the agribusiness-agriconsultancy focus group:

* brief introductions and preliminary clarification of evaluation purpose centring on the Service and an introduction of the interview team and its interview aims and negotiable process

* could you tell us something of your professional history and life in the Southern Riverina?

* farming people and rural businesses in the Southern Riverina have a diversity of aspirations and needs. For which of these do you see as your priority?

* how would you describe the state of the Southern Riverina ... how difficult or otherwise do you feel times have been these past three years? What have been the implications for farmers ... and for you?

* of what means in the community are you aware for addressing the hardship of many farming families?

* what is your experience and understanding of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service?

* what do you see the future holds for Southern Riverina farming - the near term, medium term long term?

* what role if any do you see for the Service in that ... how might the Service do that more effectively?

* is there a place for increased co-operation between you and the Service ... any suggestions as to what shape that could take and how it could come about?

* is there anything else that you would like to say or ask?

These aims of evaluation and interviews were shared with interviewees and certain aspects of process were negotiated. An interviewer took responsibility helping the conversations flow in accordance with these. Careful listening, observing and occasional questioning was the norm. Phrasing and timing of prepared enquiry themes were flexible depending on where the interviewee was taking the conversation. Confidentially of
source was assured where appropriate, although the openness of contributors is noted as well as the apparent trust and knowledge across many interviewee and Service relationships.

Interviews were undertaken by University pairs, including an interviewer and an observer/recorder. Whenever possible we arranged mixed-gender interview pairs (the majority of interviews) and included a woman in the pair when women interviewees were involved. The observer recorded the essence of conversations in writing, adding observations worthy of note and a possible outstanding question to put to the interviewee when the interviewer felt the interview was close to achieving its purpose.

In this way, the evaluation differed from those of some other rural counselling services. Researching counselling issues in the cultural context of rural Australia required sensitivity and flexibility. How we gathered 'data' would significantly effect the outcome. We sought to build understanding (or a 'picture') of the Service and of its impact and opportunities, as the basis for action to be taken to improve the Service.

I do not wish to be pedantic when preferring the term 'perspectives' rather than 'data' as the more accurate description of what we sought to capture. I base its use on conviction that the way one sees 'ones' world largely determines the way one acts in that world. We chose to utilize limited time and finances to what we felt was a more indepth, personal and responsive approach to understanding the high human profile of the rural counselling programme. There was no telephone interviewing or questionnaires, though Chapter Five notes that I saw a role for these given additional funding. Wherever possible, clients were interviewed as couples because the counsellor worked with them in that manner. Thirteen of sixteen planned client interviews occurred. This was clearly a higher number of clients interviewed in this thorough manner than other evaluations whose reports I have read - though numbers of interviewees were a small sample of those who have utilized the Service. Single non-client interviews only occurred with key resource people or those with special functions in the Service. We did not interview perceived 'experts' individually (such as individual bankers or community-service workers). Ours was a pluralistic approach that sought breadth of related people, creativity of group interaction, and anonymity - with an outcome of a range of views and issues on the three fociii from that
particular group. Credibility of named 'experts' was not sought, nor breach of confidentiality.

Those individually interviewed in May 1990 during the pilot interviewing and early context building period were:

* the evaluation sub-committee (Finley, April 1990) - on the nature of the Service, its history, member roles and inter-relationships, perceived problematic issues, etc - as distinct from other times focussing on negotiating evaluation purpose and process

* the State Secretary of the Rural Counsellors Association (outside the Southern Riverina)

* the chairman of another counselling service

* three farm couples who were or had been clients of the Service

* a local State Government Department of Agriculture and Fisheries agronomist

* an agribusiness agent

* a bank rural valuer

* a regional banking mediator (between banks and farmers)

Those interviewed during the main data gathering were:

* 10 farming clients of the rural counsellor (usually couples) - three other clients arranged as interviewees apologized at short notice and explained this was due to unexpected farming emergencies. There was no time to arrange for reserve interviewees to contribute

* the Service Chairman

* the rural counsellor and his spouse

* the Service Secretary/counsellor supervisor

* focus groups were held with:

- Service committee members (incorporated within a morning workshop and working lunch)
- bankers
- sponsors
- agribusiness
- solicitor/accountant
- community services

There was ongoing ‘interviewing’ and participant observation and follow-up questioning especially with the rural counsellor and evaluation committee members. While this was not formalised in the manner of the interviews, it was critical for affirmations of the more formal assimilation process and very helpful in recognizing and sensitively dialoguing more confidential issues with individuals within the Service.

Eight depth interviews and focus groups took place in Finley for interviewees located in the east of the Southern Riverina. One couple was interviewed on their Blighty farm. Other immediate Service-related interviews took place in Deniliquin. Limited time, and convenience so far as focus groups were concerned, was the reason for centralizing most interviews. The venues were comfortable, confidential settings. Three other interviews took place out of the region. The eventual perspective gathering process could therefore be modelled (Fig. 8, over) as:
Fig. 8 Perspectives gathering: 'windows' on the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service
A brief review by interview pairs was undertaken immediately after interviews. One partner recorded the other’s immediate key impressions and reactions. Each talked until the point of pausing and having to think about what she wanted to say. The point was usually reached within a couple of minutes. It seemed to effectively capture our ‘window’ on interviewee ‘windows’ through which they saw the Service. Our review comments might relate to the interviewees and their contributions; to sensed emerging themes; to our own feelings, assumptions and perhaps beliefs; or to critiquing interviewer effectiveness and ways to improve that, as well as possible new questions for following interviews.

University interviewing teams met daily to share these post-interview reviews. In April this was Melinda Sargent and myself. In July it was a six-strong team. At these times the team also undertook what ongoing assimilation of data could be handled around the busy interview schedule and it reviewed plans for the next day’s round. It also allowed individuals opportunity to express intuitive and ‘beyond interview’ participant observer-type inklings to be critiqued by the team. The latter of these proved important where specific relational care, concerns and tensions were evident amongst interviewees. More generalized issues of participant observation are taken further in Chapter Five.

**Perspective gathering: an example**

An example is now given of the record of one focus group, that representing agribusiness-agriconsultancy. This is done to illustrate the nature of most of our perspective gathering and to give validity to following chapters’ evaluation-wide assimilation process, issue generation, action and transferrable learning. The focus group was to represent agribusiness perspectives on farming in the Southern Riverina and the role of the Service in that. However, it broadened somewhat to represent agricultural servicing. Four people were involve representing commercial rural financial consulting, insurance, farmer and industry associations, and animal health and regulation. Perspectives from a previous May interview with a branch manager of a rural merchandise and stock and station agency business were considered along with the following account. There was an approved cassette tape recording of the discussion to check the written record if necessary.
The five people concerned all had long association with the region, but had varying exposure to the Service. I list the comments as they came, without distinguishing the author. Virtually all comments were recorded, though not all words within them. I underline highlighted portions done by interviewers after the focus group that were deemed worthy of note in the assimilating (or analyzing) process. Some names, questions and observations in the margin will normally be omitted.

The first question following introductions asked what interviewees saw was happening in agriculture in the district:

"The trend is towards consolidation ... a bit above the national average. There are a number of empty shops. The farm machinery industry dropped from six to two businesses in town in the last couple of years. There are a lot of people not able to meet their water bills in the near future. In the rice industry ... 30 have left farming in recent times.

The average farmer will take a 25% cut in income. Farmers have had two good years after lean years. Farmers have high provisional tax but are now coming into poor years.

The economy is 'stuffed'. Interest rates have to fall. Could lose a farm in four years. Clever, hardworking farmers with good relationships with banks are now getting into trouble and not acting on it.

A lot of people are technically broke but do not realize that they are broke. They have been living off capital.

It is theft by deception - the tax man.

Farmers are relatively naive in many respects. They have allowed themselves to be trapped to what they really want. Even with the best figures, why did they buy the next farm? It only meant harder work. There was no capital gain in fact, only now a capital loss. They have acted like the rest of the community using credit to keep going. They thought of themselves as little (Alan) Bondies.

The whole scene has and is changing. They have been farming and not managing their finances.
They made decisions when interest rates were low. They did not lock this in because of bank advice.

Banks are not communicating interest rates to the farm. Farmers do not know their true rates. Banks are disguising their true interests rates. Farmers think it is 17.5%, but it is really 23 to 24% now.

Overdraft is really hardcore death, not carry-on finance. They are paying up to 28%.

They are capitalizing interest into their overdrafts.

Banks neither know nor care.

Banks are now treating the next couple of months in new review - customers are in big trouble.

People do not know their bank managers. Farmers are loathe to discuss a problem with the bank manager - there is no relationship.

UNE notes a different set of economic rules between country towns and city - Roy Powell. For example, the Leeton steelworks went broke ... empty building ... staff gone out of the Leeton economy. There are different flow-on effects on a rural economy. We are getting him to do a study.

Accountants are not saying whether or not businesses are viable.

Previously one would go to the bank and to an accountant to get an opinion.

With depreciation allowance, capital gains, etc accountants are flat-out keeping up with tax - they have no time to give farmers a view on their financial status.

Our business ... our customers are now realizing they have desperate problems - they have had it for several years, but they are just now realizing it.
Four years ago machinery dealers were financing anyone through hire purchase. This has all stopped now. You cannot get hire purchase loans for farmers. Buying involved prestige, naivety, financial convenience and good machinery salesmanship. Plant was not economic even then at 15%. Prior to 1985, 180 tractors were sold on average each year. But only 180 tractors in total have been sold between 1985 and 1990. Farm scales did not warrant purchasing a header, a common occurrence. The trend is to sharing machinery.

X got out before he had to go down to small scale farming. He could see it coming.

Syndicates and partnerships do not work well with farmers.

Some work very well. I know a number of cases.

Farmers are using older and older machinery. Fencing is not being replaced. They are living off capital. They have been living off capital for a long time. And the recovery time is still to come.

In Finley there are 74 farms listed for sale. There are not many farmers (buyers). Lots of farmers will go broke and leave debt around town. The opportunist farmers can now jump in and buy a cheap farm and cheap sheep and make a profit.

Many good farmers have got into big debt from setting their sons up. Note: farm transfer being a key result of debt and loss of farm.

They should educate their children and tell them to get out of farming ... that there is no future in it.

Things are TOUGH, mainly because of interest rates.

People are now chasing a short-term cycle - and going broke in six months instead of twelve months.

Commodity prices are a problem (their cycles). In five of the last ten years the bottom has fallen out of rice. Millions of dollars have been lost.
But the interest rate continues up and up. There is no respite.

And then in the good year the tax man takes it.

Farmers do not get time to recover like farmers did in earlier years.

750 clients (of wool brokers) are on watch - financial trouble. Berrigan is worse than Deniliquin.

Farms are barely viable. There is a very high turnover of farms in Berrigan.

There are farmers with very old sheep owing a stock firm $30 per head.

* Question: What does all this mean in terms of farm families?

Farmers in big trouble come to us. We cannot wave a magic wand. Our hands are tied. They come too late. Banks are pushing them under through high interest rates. More ‘have nots’ have no future. Nothing can save them. My advice for these is to go to the bank and solicitor and ‘close up shop’ ... to tell them that they have no possibility of being viable.

* Comments sought on perceived social problems:

There are flow-on effects to businesses at this time - walk up Napier Street (Deniliquin) and see it. In the next six months three to four shops will close, yet new shops are still being built. Shops are not being leased because rents are too high. And small business leases are on CPI increases. Business have large stock and small handover and so are in trouble.

* Question: To whom do you refer people in trouble?

I know a third generation farmer. He is very private ... will not get welfare ... is used to having money ... provide private school education. They (farmers) do not know what help is available. Most farmers bury their heads in the sand.

My concern is for my customers who are moving towards getting into trouble. It would take two to three days to budget and help farmers work
out their financial status. Accountants (who most access if access any) do not have this time.

* The place of the Service in all this?

Put meetings in the media. Some people will not help themselves. There is a huge psychological factor - “I am a failure. What have I done wrong.”

It is pointless to refer people to Rendle (the Service’s rural counsellor) - it is too late to save the farm when many eventually seek help.

Because of confidentiality, I do not really know what Rendle does. He is a helping friend (to clients). He gets things going with the banks.

He shares the burden with clients.

I do not know where he is taking my clients or how he is helping them. Rendle said the average debt was $3000,000.

His clients have not had the management ability.

Rendle is the last resort place. (People) see Rendle as the welfare side.

I know there are a lot of repossessed goods in this district.

The shit has not hit the fan. Lock in interest rates are a problem.

Rendle is doing something constructive for the community.

My gut feeling is he is doing the job (well).

There is service to bludgers ... unemployed benefits etc. But Rendle provides a real service to the people who are trying.

The Service needs to develop a team - rendle to do the financial counselling and (more) support to do the other work.

He is thorough and competent on the financial side.
He is finding his way. **He is going in the right direction.** He is doing budgets and seeing whether they are viable.

I feel very sorry for him working by himself. He needs someone to bounce things off.

**He must have a partner to work with.**

There is stigma from working in a social service building. It is not the place to work from to work with farmers.

The Service is better to be with the Dept of Agriculture or C.S.I.R.O.

There is a public perception (problem) going to the council social service building.

The Service needs media coverage.

... what he does ... what other services provide.

If people seeing the Service have the capacity to pay, then have them pay. The Service must be preventative.

**There is a big problem with public perception of the job. There needs to be a broad awareness** - a continuous thing, constantly putting out the same message. People forget you exist if you do not put out a release once a week.

Rendle does not come over as a public relations sort of person. He needs to raise an issue about which one thousand people read. In the longterm it makes one's job easier.

* In response to the last four or five comments the recorder was prompted to note in the margin that the interviewees “they have no idea what Rendle does or how to measure him”.

Rendle gives the banks “a hurry-up”.

But he cannot be seen to be attacking the banks.
The banks will not want what happens advertised in terms of loan write-offs.

The Service could put an extra ten people (counsellors) on. They could expand along John Meadows' (Cobram) line - work with prevention.

The banks have a problem. We are all part of a team (but they are not playing their part in it).

I know of a new tractor bought for $70,000. The debt is now $130,000 and the tractor value is now $30,000. The finance company could be held off with threat of media being notified.

The Dept. of Agriculture is not giving farmers negotiation skills.

The Dept. of Agriculture should be involved in the above (types of) questions, helping farmers connect up with Rendle.

Rendle is a social security service. Good guys do not need help. I would like to gauge what Rendle actually does.

The head organization should do the local promotion.

A more integrated approach is needed (e.g. with the Dept. of Agriculture).

There is need for more networking of all the local community.

The Service could seek money from the service clubs.

* Question: what is it like to live in the area?

It's a challenge to be a financial consultant in this district. I enjoy my job. It is very dynamic. This is a very diverse and productive area. It is well established and wealthy - although the climate in share farming is very gloomy. I like the area.

There is a conflict of interests with bank managers.
There are 2% higher interest rates because of no competition in the district.

Bank managers are paid a commission on their loans - leading to a conflict of interests (of serving the well-being of their farmer clients)

Banks have a great deal to answer for in their conduct in rural communities.

* At this point the recorder rephrased a couple of questions to try and clarify interviewee responses earlier in the interview. At this point the interviewer swapped to the recording role.

* Is the local community prepared to “kick in the can” (to contribute to the suggested expansion of the Service)?

Who is the community?

It will come from farmers’ organizations, like the rice growers.

The public appeal was a fizzle (unsuccessful).

We let them use our fax.

I think it would be a struggle to get $20-30,000 out of the community.

We all want the government to pay for it.

It should be taken out of the welfare budget down the street.

* And on clarifying what interviewees understood Rendle was doing in his role as rural counsellor to financially struggling families:

I would like to gauge what he does.

I could not give you one (example) of where he has gone from ‘A’ to ‘B’.

I know little about it - but you need a more integrated approach to life e.g. (involve) the Dept. of Agriculture advisors (too).
I'm not in a position to know the breakdown (of his activities).

The reverse is true (too). I'm not sure how you, X, fit in (either).

REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERVIEW BY THE TWO INTERVIEW TEAM MEMBERS:

Interviewer 1:

* they do not know what Rendle is doing or how effective he is or how you would measure his effectiveness - confidentiality (by the rural counsellor is a key issue in this).
* some people do not know him.
* he needs to address promotion and education, not just hand holding.
* he is very good on a one to one basis. He helps people come to grips with their situation. He is able to work with financial figures. He is able to learn quickly. And he has developed a good network.
* the Service office location is seen to be very critical. It is too small and with the wrong sort of people (in terms of image for attracting struggling farmers). (Suggestion is to locate with the Dept. of Agriculture and move to integrate the Service

Interviewer 2:

* this and yeaterday's session were the best of the week
* the powerful thing was that people were here for 10 years (7, 15, 20+, 25 years). They had heaps of experience, commitment, and could look at

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2 My response, as co-ordinator, was to slightly qualify Interviewer Two's first comment in my mind in light of the wider knowledge I had of differences within the interviewee group and related emerging issues from other interviews]. This was, from my perspective of accessing all interview records, perhaps one of the lesser useful interviews of the evaluation. A previous pilot interview with an agribusiness agent had been beneficial - both in terms of enriching contextual understanding of financial hardship in the Southern Riverina, as well as useful perspectives on the Service. However, in this case it was not easy to find an appropriate and willing focus group representing agribusiness. The value of individuals' contributions to the group's thematic perspective varied widely from poor and ill-informed to highly useful. Useful points were gleaned, as can be seen from the assimilation notes assembled from the interview record (Chapter Four).
things from (as) the big picture better than Rendle (with his two years in the district)
* there is terrific need and potential ... but interest rates have prevented recovery. And the good years are whacked with tax
* there is a basic attitudinal problem with farmers - they had money and were not seen as failures. This attitudinal problem will need more upfront media
* not sustainable when you cannot share. The pressure is 24 hours a day. There needs to be two guys working together. They are set up for disaster from the beginning
* Rendle is not a PR man but is a good number cruncher
* he needs a different person to complement him
* a new office is needed
* (Rendle) needs a good group, like doctors covering for one another
* build the Service into the community and networking services and raise it on the public agenda
* this is the first time I have heard a Doug Porter-type saying that the banks are culpable - and questionable ethically
* the banks are acting for banks and not for the community
* banks are scared of the media
* they have a major conflict of interest

The following chapter builds an understanding of the Service through representation of how evaluation contributors saw the Service and then articulates the informed action taken by the Service to improve itself, based on those contributor constructions.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE EMERGING PERSPECTIVES, ISSUES AND ENACTION OF THE SERVICE

Interviews, supported by literature review and participative observation, generated a rich diversity of perspectives about the Service as well as some suggestions for improvement. Chapter Four makes sense of that diversity and describes what the Service did with its enriched self-understanding. The chapter is structured into four main sections:

* assimilating data to create a better understanding of the Service and its issues for considered action
  - the assimilation process
  - the process illustrated: assimilating Agribusiness perspectives
  - interim modelling of the emerging picture of the Service

* the integrated picture that emerged from the perspective assimilation process
  - things seen to be going well: the Service, the committee, the rural counsellor
  - a summary of issues arising from the perspective gathering: the Service, the committee, the rural counsellor

* evaluation enaction by the Service:
  - prioritizing the issue categories: the Service, the committee, the rural counsellor
  - exploring ways to respond to problematic issues: the Service, the committee, the rural counsellor
  - planning the action
  - action taken by the Service since the September 1990 workshop
* extrinsic issues:

- additional, unexplored context issues arising out of the evaluation which could aid further understanding of and improvement to the Service

- further immediate process issues arising from participatively evaluating the Service

- a co-ordinator response to original Service evaluation guidelines

The intention was to mirror back an integrated picture of the Service to the committee and rural counsellor in order for them to take informed action. Effectiveness of perspective assimilation was therefore important if an accurate picture of the Service was to be mirrored back. And that was a prerequisite for the ensuing Service ownership of perspective analysis, issue exploration and self-directed action.

The concluding section of Chapter Four records what the Service did with their new, enriched understanding.

**ASSIMILATING DATA TO CREATE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE SERVICE AND ITS ISSUES FOR CONSIDERED ACTION**

**The assimilation process**

The assimilation process had a variety of stages and approaches to achieve the eventualmirroring. Detailed written records of interviews, interview team reflections and cassette recordings of non-client interviews were compiled. These then became the basis for developing an integrated picture for consideration by the Service. Cassette recordings were initially referred to in order to fill in gaps in written interview records where this was thought to be potentially significant or where clarification of perspectives was required or where notes by the interview recorder were unclear.

In general, recorder notes were read and significant points highlighted with textliner - in some cases colour-coded according to a range of themes, later centring on the three foci of ‘Service’, ‘Committee’ and ‘Rural Counsellor’. The initial highlighting was usually done by the interviewer. However, this was repeated later by a second reader to enhance richness
and accuracy of the emerging assimilated picture and issues. The recorded notes from one focus group, 'Agribusiness and Services', were provided in Chapter Three as an example of the perspective gathering. Chapter Four now provides examples of the ensuing assimilation of that perspective in order to validate the evaluation's overall mirroring of the Service and the Service's analyzing, prioritizing and action on the basis of the overall assimilation. Assimilation beyond highlighting key points (as exampled by the underlining in Chapter Three's record of perspective gathering through the agribusiness focus group) occurred in several steps. These are outlined in this chapter for clarity of process.

I tried several assimilation theme approaches. The first approach with the April and May interviews was colour-coding interview notes according to eight emerging themes or foci. This was found to create work that was sometimes unnecessary to our main purpose. By July the number was reduced to three generic foci and several ancillary themes - the number of ancillary themes varied from zero to four depending on the perspectives offered at individual interviews. The central foci had always been the Service, the committee and the rural counsellor. But there had been a desire to complement these with other themes and to discreetly provide assimilated information back to contributor groups where it related to them and was thought to be helpful to their work. This eventuated sparingly to contributors outside of the Service due to constraints of time, finance and personnel and it being beyond initial evaluation parameters.

The ancillary themes offered benefits beyond those derived for the main purpose of exploring 'Service', 'committee' and 'rural counsellor' foci. There are many roles in rural Australia that interact, interdepend and impact with each other. It is difficult to understand one facet without understanding relationships with, and perspectives of, other 'players' - hence the evaluation approach to capture perspectives on the Service. But in so doing, the reverse equally became reality. For example, a perspective on the Service was sought from the banking sector, because of the significant link it has with the farming sector and its perceived influence on rural hardship. It was inevitable that, in the course of researching the Service, an emerging picture of how banks were perceived in all this would also arise from the perspective of farmers, agribusiness, banks themselves, the rural counsellor and so on. And the same could be said for
the emerging, collaboratively captured picture of farmers and other groupings.

These non-Service perspectives were useful for both University and Service team members. They helped create a more informed understanding of the context for which the Service was established and in which it was intimately entwined. They contributed to a richer understanding of the overall, integrated context of Southern Riverina hardship and some of the causal and exacerbating factors behind that. And in the process they clarified the role of particular groups within that whole. And this also had a flow-on effect, at least indirectly, on ensuing decisions and actions by the Service, because of its place and role within Southern Riverina communities. Thus, contextual consciousness informed conscious School facilitation and Service change.

Perspectives on ancillary themes are illustrated in the contributions from the agribusiness focus group. They follow the assimilated group perspectives on the Service, committee and rural counsellor foci. They relate to the context of rural hardship, farmers, banks, accountants, and agribusiness and related farming services. They were then added with ancillary themes from other interviews to the growing pool of understanding in each of these facets. The following model (Fig. 9, over) illustrates the overall assimilation process:
Fig. 9 Process modelling: the overall assimilation process and beyond, through to the participative evaluation conclusion.
The thrust of assimilation involved developing a workable informative written representation for the Service of perspectives and emerging issues around the three foci. An example follows that contributed to that representation.

**The process illustrated: assimilating Agribusiness perspectives**

The following example of assimilation, as derived from interview records, comes from the agribusiness focus group notes\(^1\). The second assimilation stage utilized the highlighted portions to focus on agribusiness perspectives with regards the Service; the rural counsellor (there were none with regards the committee); the context of hardship in the Southern Riverina; and views on themselves, banks, accountants and farmers. So summary notes were compiled by the interview pair as follows below:

**AGRIBUSINESS'S PERSPECTIVE OF THE SERVICE:**

* the Service needs media coverage. Put its meetings in the media, along with what Rendle does and the services provided. [Some people will not help themselves. There is a huge psychological factor around, "I am a failure ... What have I done wrong?" (They need informing and encouraging)].

* the public perception of the job - there needs to be broad awareness, continue advertizing that constantly puts out the same message. People forget the Service exists if it does not put out a release once a week

* you need to raise an issue that one thousand people read. In the long term it makes your job easier

* it is a service to bludgers ... for getting unemployment benefits, et cetera (though also helping real triers)

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\(^1\) Different interviews produced different amounts and emphases of perspectives relevant to the evaluation. The agribusiness group's contribution to enriching the picture of the Service, committee and rural counsellor was limited in comparison to some other interviews. However, its contribution to a better understanding of the context of financial hardship in the Southern Riverina for which the Service was created was quite helpful. The main reason the agribusiness focus group material is utilized here is for example of process, not on the basis of content. No interviewee names, places or occupations are cited. Its choice was discussed with the Service.
* the Service needs to develop a team - Rendle for financial counselling and other(s) to provide complementary support

* there is stigma working in a social service building. It is not the place from which to work with farmers. It is better to be with the Dept. of Agriculture or C.S.I.R.O. where there is a good public perception about entering

* (while it already gives banks the "hurry-up") the Service cannot be seen to be attacking banks

* the Service could put on an extra ten people. It could expand along Cobram's line, working with preventative measures. The Service must be preventative (educating and equipping clients in order to avoid further/future hardship)

* the Service could seek money (further support) from district service clubs

* who would clients see if they have the capacity to pay?

AGRIBUSINESS'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE RURAL COUNSELLOR (RENDLE HANNAH):

* I do not really know what Rendle does because of confidentiality

* I do not know where Rendle is taking my clients or how he is helping them

* it is frequently pointless to refer people to Rendle, because by the time they seek help it is too late to save the farm

* Rendle is the last resort. I see him as the welfare side. He is a social security - good guys do not need help

* Rendle is: a helping friend; gets things going with the banks; shares client burdens; provides a real service to people trying; is thorough and competent on the financial side; he is finding his way (well); he is going in the right direction; he is doing budgets and seeing if clients are viable; he gives the banks a (necessary) hurry-up

* feel sorry for Rendle working by himself. He needs someone to bounce things off. He must have a partner with whom to work
* Rendle does not come over as a public relations person

ANCILLARY THEMES:-

AGRIBUSINESS'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE RURAL CONTEXT OF THE SOUTHERN RIVERINA:

* the trend is towards consolidation. It is (historically) a well established, wealthy, very diverse and productive area. The area is a bit above the national average. But the farming climate is now very gloomy. The whole scene has changed. A lot of farmers will go broke and leave debt around town. The time of reckoning is still to come. A lot of people are technically broke but do not realize it. They have been living off capital. Rendle says the average farm debt is $300,000. Many farmers have got into big debt setting-up their sons. They should tell them to get out of farming, because it has no future.

* commodity prices are a problem with their cycles. The average farmer has taken a 25% cut in income. Farmers had two good years after lean years. They now have a high provisional tax coming into poor years. Taxation is theft by deception. When there is a good year it is taken in tax (so it is difficult to regain losses of poor years). There is no capital gain. In fact it is now capital loss.

* Berrigan is worse than around Deniliquin. There is a very high turnover of farms there. And there are 750 clients being watched (in the area) who are in financial trouble

* "the economy is stuffed - interest rates will have to fall". They are making life tough. High interest rates are deadly - farmers cannot service their debts. Farmers act like the rest of the community ... they use credit to keep going. And there is a 2% increase in rates because of little competition in the district. Interest rates are particularly a problem where they are locked in (to high levels of the last couple of years). And people are going broke in shorter cycles of six months than twelve.

* only two farm machinery dealerships remain of the six that were here a couple of years ago (Deniliquin). Before the mid-eighties around 180 tractors were sold each year. Only that number has been sold during the whole of the last five years. Usual farm sizes do not warrant individual purchases of a header. The trend is towards sharing machinery. We
cannot get a hire purchase loan for farmers. That has all stopped the last four years.

* There are flow-on effects to businesses. Business houses in town are carrying a lot of stock but have a low turnover. There have been a lot of repossessed goods in the district. There are a number of empty shops in town (Deniliquin) - though more are being built all when another three or four will close down in the next six months. Shops are not being leased because rents have remained too high and leases are on C.P.I. increases. There should be a different set of economic rules for country towns compared to the city. There are different flow-on effects on a rural economy (in hardship)

AGRIBUSINESS'S PERSPECTIVE ON FARMERS:

* many (Southern Riverina) farmers are barely viable. Farmers do not get time to recover like farmers of earlier years. There are clever, hard-working farmers who have good relationships with banks who have now found themselves in trouble ... and they are not acting on it. Some farmers are burying their heads in the sand. Others are relatively naive in many respects. They have allowed themselves to be trapped by their wants. they have thought of themselves as little 'Bondies' (failed entrepreneur). Even with the best figures, why did they buy their neighbours farm? It has only meant harder work. They have been farming, not managing their finances - in many cases because they have been lacking the management ability (example of tractor purchase cited, costing $70,000, now worth $30,000 but still owing $130,000 despite repayments). And some do not know what help is available because they have been so used in the past to having money, lifestyles and expectations contrary to hardship. Farmers come to us when they are in big trouble. We cannot wave a magic wand. Our hands are tied, because it is too late. We tell them there is no possibility of being viable and advise them to go to the bank and solicitor and sell the farm

* some have made decisions on low interest rates in the past, but did not lock them in due to bank advice. Farmers do not know true interest rates. They are thinking they are around 17.5% when they are 23 to 24% now. Overdraft is really hardcore debt, not carry-on finance. People are paying up to 28% on it. Interest is being capitalized into the overdrafts
* a common alternative to not going into further debt of the kind above is to live off the capital. Many have been doing that for a long time, and the time of reckoning will come. Farmers are using older and older machinery and they are not replacing fencing. This has fostered a rise in syndicates and partnerships and sharing of machinery. This has worked out okay for some, but has not worked out well for others.

* farmers previously went to the bank or to accountants to get opinions. Farmers do not know their bank managers now. They are loathe to discuss a problem with the manager. There is no relationship.

* while there are many farms up for sale and few capable of buying, opportunistic farmers can now jump in and buy a cheap farm, cheap sheep and make a profit (on the transaction)

AGRIBUSINESS'S PERSPECTIVE ON BANKS AND BANKERS:

* banks neither know nor care (about their harmful impact)

* banks are not communicating interest rates. They are disguising true rates. There are no cycles. Interest rates are just moving up and up, with no respite. Banks are pushing farmers under with the high rates. And rates are 2% higher here, because of limited competition

* banks are treating the next couple of months seriously in new reviews. Customers are in big trouble

* banks will not want advertised what happens in terms of write-off

* banks have a problem. We are all (to be) a part of the (rural) team

* bank managers have a major conflict of interest in being paid commission on loans they approve

* banks have a great deal for which to answer, because of their conduct in rural communities.

AGRIBUSINESS'S PERSPECTIVE ON ACCOUNTANTS:

* accountants are not saying whether farms are viable
* depreciation allowance, capital gains, et cetera are important, but accountants have no time to give farmers a sound view of their financial status, because they are flat-out keeping up with taxation.

Agribusiness's perspective on themselves and related rural services:

* our customers are just now realizing they have desperate problems even though they have had them for several years

* concern for customers who are moving towards trouble. Two or three days budgeting is needed to help farmers work out their financial status. Accountants do not have the time

* the Department of Agriculture needs a more integrated approach to life. They need to be giving farmers negotiating skills and be involved in helping connect farmers with Rendle

* there needs to be more and closer networking of the local community - all the community

* questions if the local community will fund the Service. It will come from farmers' organizations like the Rice Growers' Association. The public appeal was a fizzle. It would be a struggle to get $20 - 30,000 out of the community. Everyone wants the government to pay for it. (Perhaps) it should be taken out of the welfare budget down the street (government offices).

**Interim modelling of the emerging picture of the Service**

One matter is noted before proceeding. Modelling was one tool to help make sense of the emerging Service picture. The University team utilized a range of models. We did so mostly as an 'internal' tool to help clarify our own emerging understanding of the Service. It was also used, to a lesser extent, to help committee and rural counsellor understanding. An example follows (Fig. 10, over) of an early representation of how I saw others seeing the Service at that point in time. It helped summarize my own emerging understanding. However, it was also utilized as an early summary for discussions with the Service evaluation sub-committee at the August mini-workshop of how the Service was being seen.
Other models emerged in interim perspective assimilation. Again, this step consolidated perspectives into a more concentrated understanding of the Service. Some modelling was linked to soft systems methodology. Each of the foci of Service, committee and rural counsellor was initially categorised into four groups (structures, internal organizational 'climate', activities, and purpose). It was a way for the University team to refine our basic emerging understanding of the Service, especially helping us make connections between diverse aspects, until now just grouped under the three foci. It was also prepared in order to be utilized in later working through a modified Checkland soft systems methodology (Checkland, 1984) with Service personnel. The assimilation models prepared toward that end are found in Appendix 1.

It was mentioned in Chapter Three that the intended process was to present the largely assimilated data above and the following lists of appreciations and issues to a combined mini-workshop of the Service evaluation sub-committee and University core group. It was my hope, particularly for
reasons of Service ‘ownership’ of mirrored findings and for their organizational learning competency, that systems models of how the Service was perceived to be and of what would constitute an improved Service would be collaboratively created - the two models then being compared and the desirability and feasibility of the assumed improved Service discussed.

I prepared for this, along with Melinda Sargent, for the August 1990 mini-workshop in Wagga Wagga. But this did not occur. The three committee members and rural counsellor attending the mini-workshop felt uneasy with the perceived complexity and time limitations of the day. Instead we reverted to an easier experiential learning-related methodology. The group chose to review and validate the emerging representation and issues of the Service - to clarify what this Service ‘picture’ was and meant. The evaluation sub-committee then prioritised those issues, deeming what was important. We were then requested to further explore possible avenues of action for several prioritised issues and present these along with the refined assimilated ‘picture’ to the whole committee planning workshop the following month. The mini-workshop became another example of the flexibility and relevance of action research and participative evaluation approaches, where both the process and to an extent the understanding about the Service, adjusted to changing needs.

The detail models also helped in comparing the Service, as presently perceived, with the four Service objectives in its Constitution.

The various stages and forms of assimilation consolidated significant insights and issues related to the three generic foci. This then became the basis for the following segment where appreciations and issues of the Service are listed. They in turn became the basis for the decisions and action articulated later in the chapter.

THE INTEGRATED PICTURE THAT EMERGED FROM THE PERSPECTIVE ASSIMILATION PROCESS

The following two segments express the essence of how the Service was seen, as viewed by interviewees. The first segment notes the level of value interviewees placed with regards the three foci of Service (as a whole), committee and rural counsellor. The second section represents perceived problematic issues and suggestions for consideration by the Service - of
course recognizing that the committee and rural counsellor were contributors themselves to 'interviewee perspectives', given their key place in the Service. These appreciations and issues provided the basis at the main September 1990 workshop for the whole committee and rural counsellor taking confident, informed action to improve the Service.

There were mutually supportive reasons for presenting the mirrored interviewee summary picture of the Service to the committee and rural counsellor in this manner. It was felt that the committee and rural counsellor would be reaffirmed in their strong commitment to improve the Service, if they were firstly encouraged by aspects appreciated by interviewees. But the major reason for that evolved though the evaluation itself. The most significant outcome of the Service-related aspect of the evaluation was the breadth and intensity of appreciation of the Service.

Things seen to be going well: value statements of appreciation of the Service

Interviewee 'appreciations' of the Service were usually positive and predominantly related to the rural counsellor. Most people (especially clients and network folk) only relate to the Service through the counsellor. Thus, committee members (and less directly sponsors and resource people) have right, because of their more covert inputs, to accept general gratitude and praise of the Service given in the counsellor's name. That praise was extensive. The following points are evidence of that. The points for the counsellor are only a sample. More than 160 interviewee perspective points about the counsellor and his work were provided to him in a confidential thematic list.

It must be noted that the points below (and the following 'Issues Arising from the Evaluation') not be seen as 'true or false' nor as the University team's views. They were our attempt to capture perceptions of people interviewed and mirror them back to the Service. They are legitimately included on that basis. The following points are listed according to the priority and significance for interviewees (i.e. how often they were raised and the importance given to them in relation to other issues raised). They are recorded in the present tense as provided to the committee and rural counsellor during the evaluation in 1990.
THE SERVICE:

* there is unanimous appreciation that the Service’s exists and for those responsible for its establishment. There was the oft repeated appreciation within this of the Service’s help to individual farm families to date and for its indirect contribution to the whole community

* the Service’s independence is much appreciated

* the Service is seen as successful

* the Service has credibility

* the Service provides a real service to farm families genuinely trying to cope

* the Service is perceived as a welfare service. This was expressed as an appreciation, although it was also reported a couple of times that some in the community see it as servicing “bludgers”.

THE COMMITTEE:

* the committee is appreciated for its sympathy for, and desire to help farm families struggling in the Southern Riverina

* the committee's concern for its counsellor is recognized

* the committee is trusting and confident of the counsellor working in its name

* the committee is relaxed

* the committee is pragmatic

* the committee is reactionary. It is flexible and responsive to pressing needs - and in a crisis this is an essential element of such a service

* aspects of committee members’ roles are appreciated and individuals and members in general were cited

* the committee is strongly appreciated by its counsellor

THE RURAL COUNSELLOR:
* "the rural counsellor is effective and getting results." Clients, banks, committee, agribusiness and shire interviewees all offered this perspective

* "the service is Rendle" [i.e. the rural counsellor]

* "Rendle offers quality service", "he is friendly", "I feel at ease with him", "he's interested in us"

* "he provides thorough and competent financial analysis"

* "he works hard", "he's busy"

* "we need more 'Rendles'" - "2", "3", "6", "10 of him". These were usually said in praise of Rendle as much about need for an expanded service.

The above six quotes about the rural counsellor were consistently offered throughout the interviews. The following sample quotes were all offered multiple times in the same or similar words:

* "Rendle is good at getting people to realize and understand their problem"

* "he's a good mediator"

* "Rendle gives you what he can"

* "I feel sorry and concerned for him" (spoken with regards to the difficult nature of the rural counsellor's type of work and workload)

* "he is finding his way well"

* "he is going in right direction" (in reference to the type of service to clients)

* "Rendle is motivated"

* "he shares others' burdens", "he is empathetic"

* "Rendle is a helping friend"

* "he is a credible person"

* "he does credible work"
* "(the rural counsellor's contribution is) constructive to the community"

* "Rendle gets things going"

* "he builds you up, never puts you down"

* "he is caring"

* "Rendle is knowledgeable" (offered with regards financial, agricultural, rural crisis context and available help knowledge)

* "Rendle has good recall"

* "he helps you in yourself" (this repeated comment was offered both in regards to work-related client requests and to clients as persons)

* "Rendle is available" - (spoken both about financial counselling and as person)

A summary of issues arising from the perspective gathering

We, as University research team, reminded ourself, the Service and the sponsors, that as each considered criticism of, and improvements to, the Service, that each did not forget the significance of the unanimity of support by Southern Riverina residents for the concept of the Service. It was noted also that grateful appreciation was expressed by all clients. Some clients had improvement suggestions. However the appreciation and support for the Service was the most significant feature of the evaluation from the perspective of the University team.

It was reiterated that the University saw the Service, in the sense of an holistic interdependent interaction of rural counsellor and committee members, as the focus in essence. But it was important to understand the real and potential roles and impacts that the rural counsellor and committee could individually have on that whole - hence the way issues were again grouped according to Service, committee and rural counsellor. However, at this point it is worth noting some thoughts related to this matter. They are mentioned as follows and then further explored in Chapter Five.

The University team acknowledged that the rural counsellor has a high degree of influence on what the Service does and what is its public face.
Yet that happens within bounds either set or allowed by the committee - the source of service establishment, the representation of the community it serves and the holder of overall service legal responsibility. So the team saw the committee both potentially and ethically as the major influence for strategic direction, sustainability and, partly, action of the Service. Any service will significantly reflect the particular rural counsellor's personality, processes, performance and constraints. But community-based rural advisory services will suffer if they are not more than that - as will the rural counsellor. I was convinced that the committee's role could and should be even more significant in the life and direction of this Service and community-based services elsewhere. And this was increasingly discussed with the Service during the evaluation. While that conviction arose as an early assumption due to my rural community development background, it was significantly reinforced in its own right through the contributions of interviewees during the evaluation.

The following issue categories reflect the confluence of whole Service, committee and counsellor foci of the evaluation. The three foci are listed in order of process priority. It is stressed again that the intention was to mirror the issues of people involved in, or with the Service or who were seen to have a useful perspective on it. The summary comes from a detailed listing. Each point represents an issue category with three to twelve related sub-issues within. Some concerns are directly or indirectly linked to largely external constraints on the Service. Examples of external constraints are the large volume of people in crisis requiring help; finances needed for increased administrative help; the unsuitable office setup provided, et cetera. However, other concerns link to the manner of committee and counsellor operation.

It should be noted that no issue exists in isolation from another. For example, it is one thing to suggest that the rural counsellor could be empowering clients more to prevent or better manage their future difficulties. It is another matter for the rural counsellor to have the luxury to do that, given financial and time constraints and the current and potential demands to meet more immediate crises.

THE SERVICE

One group of issue areas relates to the Service's context - the Southern Riverina, administration, and general constraints on services to clients.
The other group of issues is more strategic - relating to the type of Service and its direction.

Of the former group, one feature is that the Service is relatively unknown and poorly understood by the farming community. A number of clients regretted not knowing about the Service before they did. And there is common conviction that many more people need help. There are also firm indications that numbers of farm families in 'crisis' or at 'risk' will rise dramatically during the current and following financial years.

This leaves the Service in a quandary. Even with a low community profile (combined with the impact of external constraints), the Service already has more clients than it can ideally serve. And this is occurring while it really only addresses one of four stated Service objectives (that of 'crisis' counselling) - and, this in the midst of concerns about rural counsellor workload, well-being and professional development.

There has been strong support outside the committee for expansion of present counselling services - and equal support for establishing educative activities. And in the eastern portion of the Southern Riverina, notably Oaklands and Urana through to the Snowy Mountains, there are unmet needs beyond the capacity of the Service to meet - although several clients have been helped.²

Two administrative issues need immediate attention. One is need for administrative assistance that carries a higher level of responsibility, confidentiality and workload. This would free the rural counsellor to concentrate more on counselling-related functions. Present receptionist help is of limited time and scope. The second issue is the office situation. This relates to image and approachability, efficiency, and confidentiality. Other administration issues are an enhanced team approach (through a more pro-active committee and greater role for 'externals') and extra funding if the Service is to expand.

The second group of issues is more strategic - relating to the type of Service and its direction. The first aspect is the need for the Service to be

² Rural counselling services have been established both in the Eastern Riverina and Western Riverina since the evaluation. This has taken away some of the concern and potential excess workload away from the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service and other neighbouring Victorian services.
more pro-active in the way its vision and plans evolve - and not be
dependent on largely reacting to changes in Southern Riverina context as
they occur. Related to this is the need for ongoing monitoring, evaluation
and processes for change set in place that consider all Service
relationships with the Southern Riverina community, sponsors, clients,
and its own internal workings.

And in appreciation with the type of Service, people urged its character be
maintained. They cited independence, confidentiality, and the relevance
and sustainability of its community base being important.

THE COMMITTEE

Prioritising committee related issues by interviewees outside the
committee differed in one marked aspect from those of the committee and
rural counsellor themselves. The committee is counsellor-focused. It
reacts effectively in response to needs brought to it by the rural
counsellor. However, it is seen to lack strategic responsibility for the
Service. It is not adequately proactive in establishing monitoring,
planning and evaluating - either for itself, its counsellor, or what is
occurring in the Southern Riverina.

This affects fulfilling Service objectives. As previously mentioned, only
'crisis' counselling is really addressed. The committee could explore the
suitability of Service objectives - either re-affirming and implementing
them, or considering abolishing those deemed inappropriate. The
committee also needs to explore the widespread call for expansion of
services mentioned in 'The Service' section above.

This strategic creating of its future direction and process is affected by
related issues. These involve re-exploring committee purpose, functions,
roles and sustainability; establishing better monitoring of, and
communication with, the Southern Riverina and beyond - sponsors,
community needs and wishes, advocacy and the like; and its own ongoing
evaluation of its work and group health to support that work.

There are two major counsellor-focused issues for the committee to address.
The first is to reassess what constitutes appropriate confidentiality.
Committee and receptionist support of their rural counsellor is severely
restricted by present practice. The second issue is related and surrounds
pro-actively ensuring the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of
its rural counsellor. Specific issues to explore with him are cited in the Service document.

This section shares a valued and challenging role for the committee. As outwardly 'low profiled' and part-time the committee is (though highly committed), others see it as more important and influential than it appears to see itself. The Faculty supports the encouragement that the committee give itself the good attention it gives to its rural counsellor.

THE RURAL COUNSELLOR

The major issue areas for the rural counsellor revolve around an unsustainable workload; a perceived inadequate support network; his professional development; and need for a means of on-going self-evaluation of relationships - especially client, but also committee, professional and personal.

Concern for rural counsellor workload has been expressed across the spectrum of interviews. Significant external issues relating rural sector difficulties and resource constraints impact on the rural counsellor. However there are other issues within the power of either, or both, the rural counsellor and committee to improve the present situation. A number of rural counsellor issues have been raised with them.

One important issue is the rigid confidentiality of all counsellor-client aspects. This can become a barrier to a more effective service to and networking of the client. It especially restricts committee support and guidance to its rural counsellor and also greater administrative support by a secretary/assistant.

Several aspects of professional development are also important. One need is for the rural counsellor to utilize regular time out to see the 'big picture' and issues - of the Service and the Southern Riverina; of rural counselling; and of his own professional direction and development.

Three other issue areas relate to performance, improving services to clients, and personal development - the latter requested and shared personally.

An early expectation of the Service evaluation sub-committee was that a document focusing on the rural counsellor would be given to him. This
was in addition to the document written for the Service as a whole and another for sponsors. What the rural counsellor eventually received was a combination of a portfolio and spoken feedback and discussion. The portfolio comprised the Service Report, a confidential organised record of all comments made about the counsellor (confidential also with regards sources), and some resource material.

EVALUATION ENACTION BY THE SERVICE

The previous section mirrored a picture to the Service of how it is seen, as well as what issues emerged in that picture that require consideration of amelioration. This section explores what the Service affirmed and deemed important in it, what it decided to do about it to improve the Service and some enaction on it by the Service to date.

Action research reflects my adopted definition of learning in Chapter Two. It is not enquiry for enquiry sake, but rather collaborative research committed to making a difference to the way people think and act together. This section records the nature and extent of the difference that the action researched participative evaluation made to the Service, in terms of the Service's task-oriented and process-oriented learning outcomes linked to this evaluation. I firstly detail how issues were prioritized; how ways were explored to respond to individual issues; what improvements were being made and how; and, what evaluation context and process issues had arisen that were not addressed in the evaluation. The chapter then concludes by reflecting on the degree of effectiveness of the participative evaluation to that point with regards the initial evaluation expectations of the Service.

Prioritizing the issue categories

On the 6th September 1990, twelve committee members and the rural counsellor met with our University team of four for a one day workshop. The purpose of the day was to move towards developing an action plan to explore and act on major issues. Our team began by introducing the committee to a methodology to do that. We also stepped out of the immediate evaluation activities to explicitly reflect on our process of that at points during the day. This was done to provide a learning experience through which the committee could improve the way it goes about understanding and improving the Service. That simple methodology is cited in the
questions marked on the model of the experiential learning cycle in Chapter Three's section 'Evaluation Process'.

The morning session addressed two questions. The first 'what is there' involved mirroring back to the whole Service an integrated, largely perspective-based picture of itself and a measure of the context of financial hardship and associated stresses and implications in the Southern Riverina. The second question, 'what does it mean', shared the issues that arose from this. The detailed picture that informed both questions was elucidated in the previous chapter. This then led onto afternoon session questions 'what is important' (for the Service in that) and 'what will be done' (by the Service in response to what it deems as important). An account follows of the response to both questions. It starts firstly with what was important to the Service in terms of what considered action was paramount for an improved and strategic-oriented Service.

Issues had been categorised under three headings: the Service, the committee, and the rural counsellor. Participants divided into three small groups to discuss and rank the issues. The University at this stage initially assumed it best for just Service members to do this in two groups. It did so convinced that true ownership of the issues rested with the Service, as did the related responsibility to do something about those and also with enhancing capacity for future self-evaluation. The conscious approach to the whole evaluation had been intended to offer a more relevant and empowering process with inbuilt informed improvement by, and equipping of, the Service. This contrasts with more traditional 'expert-centred', detached recommendation-based evaluation approaches where organizations like the Service may or may not choose to accept someone else's recommendations or on which they may or may not be able to act.

However, the Service strongly wanted the University to contribute also, because of the value they placed on its privileged position of detailed knowledge of the Service from its broader exposure to many perspectives of the Service. We did not wish to overly impinge on Service members' rankings, so it was agreed that we would participate but as our own group. We also quickly noted to ourselves at the time that this could give an interesting comparison to the impact to date of shared understandings of the collaborative nature of the action research. So there were two Service groups comprised of the rural counsellor and committee members (S1 and S2) and one group of four University evaluation team members (U).
The small groups allowed plenty of discussion. Each of the three groups at some stage equally ranked a couple of issues within their group rankings. The whole working group then discussed the rankings below and the reasons for them. We, as the University team, took a facilitating role in integrating the ranking and prioritizing of issues. The participative approach meant consecutive stages were consensually 'owned' by the Service leading up to further consideration and prioritised action. The Service thus utilized perceptions of significant issues that the University had at its disposal for that process, but owned the outcomes itself. These prioritized issues follow each of the foci rankings below. The details behind each of the points were described in the previous chapter. And as with the previous chapter, these are recorded in the present tense, just as they were when presented to the Service.

**Fig. 11 THE SERVICE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>* the relationship between the Service and wider community is underutilized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>* there are existing constraints on services to potential clients who are already in crisis or at risk of it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>* there is need for vision and forward planning for the Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>* the character of Service needs to be sustained (in terms of its independence, rurality, localism, discreetness, et cetera)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>* there are administrative issues needing exploring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>* there is need for ongoing monitoring, evaluation and change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In discussing these Service-oriented ratings, the committee and rural counsellor recognized three priority areas for enquiry and potential action in the short to medium term. While each would be explored, they placed first importance at that point in time on the need for the Service to be more proactive in terms of clarifying its vision (or mandate) and creating the way for it to make that become reality. The second problematic area was addressing the administrative-related issues raised in
the mirroring. And thirdly was the need to create the Service's own process of ongoing self-monitoring, evaluating and adjusting.

**Fig. 12 THE COMMITTEE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SI</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>* needs to provide more conscious leadership and responsibility for the future direction of the Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>* needs to look at why and how it functions as a committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>* should develop better understanding of community needs and better public relations and promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>* to develop more appropriate ways to handle issues related to confidentiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>* to strengthen both support for the rural counsellor and supervision of his effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>* developing process and structure for ongoing evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting to note that there was a good deal of consistency between the rankings by Service and University groups for both Service and rural counsellor-related issues. But there were significant differences in ranking committee-related issues. These differences are discussed later in the chapter when process issues are raised and later in Chapter Five, too. But at this point the Service ranked the following three issue areas for further attention. Their first priority was to improve committee support and supervision of their rural counsellor. The second was to take responsibility to develop processes and structure for ongoing evaluation - for the rural counsellor, committee and overall Service (author noting priority within that given for evaluating the rural counsellor). The third issue area was confidentiality. Confidentiality facets related to rural counsellor and client relationships, rural counsellor and committee relationships, and to Service and wider community relationships.
Fig. 13: THE RURAL COUNSELLOR

S1 S2 U      ISSUES

6 3 4      * is not adequately utilizing some people, particularly his support and referral networks

1 1 1      * is carrying an unsustainable workload with present and perceived imminent implications to self, clients and Service in general

5 4 5      * can improve his service to clients

4 6 3      * needs feedback on his performance

2 1 2      * needs to have opportunity of, and to plan for, his ongoing professional development

6 1 -      * personal development (the University abstaining public comment)

3 5 3      * ongoing evaluation

The committee took a strong, proactive stand in response to evaluation feedback in its stating concerns about the rural counsellor’s potential well-being and capacity to cope and develop professionally in his then current, stressful and time-consuming role. The group’s rural counsellor-related rankings reflect that in the highest importance being given to immediately acting to reduce the unsustainable workload of the rural counsellor. This redress was given precedence over all other issues evolving out of the evaluation. And University members strongly supported the committee in this priority. The second issue area was commitment to the rural counsellor’s further professional development. The third area was to create appropriate multi-faceted evaluation that would help the rural counsellor maintain effective service to clients and ensure informed adjustments to improve that, as well as enhance personal well-being and professional development and necessary support and network relationships.
Exploring ways to respond to problematic issues

In preparing to address the fourth workshop process question, 'what will be done' by the Service, the Service generated a number of aspects to explore within each of the above prioritised foci issue categories. It was recognized that the issue areas were in many instances quite complex, involving multiple aspects and assumed multiple ways of potentially responding to them. The time available in the one day workshop was pressed. As mentioned, the purpose was to achieve an effective mirroring of how the Service was seen; the Service deeming what was most important in that for considered action; and in the Service committing itself to act on this and take steps to create ways to do that. So at this point the combined University and Service team brainstormed the following points involved in each prioritized issue and then discussed them briefly, as much for concensual clarification as affirmation. They included things to be done, either in terms of aspects into which the Service would enquire further before acting or suggested improvements on which to begin planning to address.

THE SERVICE

(1) Vision and forward planning for the Service:

* can the Service cope with increasing numbers of potential clients in crisis?

* will preventive and promotive roles be added to the current curative-oriented client activities?

* will an additional rural counsellor be needed?

* setting goals and putting an achievement strategy in place

* finance - particularly for any additional or altered costs as a result of the evaluation, as well as questions of longterm viability of the Service if government grants cease or diminish

* set 'sunset clauses' for clear termination of responsibility and services to clients.
(2) Administrative issues needing exploring:

* changes to office character and location

* public relations - particularly in terms of potential clients throughout the district being aware of the existence and role of the Service. Relationship with sponsors was also an issue

* review being under the umbrella of the Local Government's Deniliquin Council for Social Development (DCSD), becoming its own limited liability company

* notions and degrees of confidentiality

* fund raising

(3) Ongoing monitoring, evaluating and, where necessary, improving:

* review feedback process from the rural counsellor

* review the current programme with regards:
  - issues of 'how' to do that
  - re-evaluate the Constitution, especially the Service goals
  - clarify what constitutes the 'success' and rate of success of clients serviced
  - monitoring
  - develop suitable evaluation slips for client feedback.

THE COMMITTEE

(1) Supporting the rural counsellor and supervising his effectiveness:

* counsellor work and personal issues become inextricably linked, requiring:
  - creating a sensitive mix of supervision, listening and support
  - re-appraising the roles of committee in this for work-related issues and personal support by its rural counsellor supervisor provision
* what are appropriate expressions of confidentiality within the dialectic of work and personal-related roles with the counsellor?

* technical support - more particularly with regards production agriculture than business management

* guidelines and directives for the rural counsellor reviewed 'across the board', exampled by matters like ensuring full annual leave is taken

* support networks within and beyond the Service

* provide overall leadership for the Service

(2) process and structure for ongoing evaluation is required:

* develop the processes and structures for inbuilt monitoring, evaluating and improving

* explore issues related to this task:

  - current committee goals and functions

  - group effectiveness: how can a local advisory group establish and maintain the necessity of both efficient internal functions and healthy relationships

  - implications being under the Deniliquin Council for Social Development

(3) guidelines and protocol to handle the interplay of the committee's responsibility for supporting and supervising its counsellor and the Service maintaining appropriate client confidentiality.

THE RURAL COUNSELLOR

In seeking to address what should be done, the Service (though at times clearly expressed through a higher profiled committee than rural counsellor) noted the following aspects to explore for their potential relevance in improving the counsellor's situation:

(I) the rural counsellor is carrying an unsustainable workload:

- networking: overcoming the present problematic of suitable referral options, especially related to personal counselling beyond the current shape of activities
- working guideline: in nature, job-sharing, et cetera

- the rural counsellor's workstyle: expressed many ways as previously elaborated, such as wide time access to clients

- provide a relief counsellor during periods of holidays, professional development, etc.

- ongoing work management training

- streamlined packages for aspects of client work

- client service 'cut-off' points after initial guidance and recommendations

(2) the rural counsellor needs to plan and have opportunity for professional development:

- time to look and reflect on past, current and anticipated contexts and issues

- to know where he is going with respect to his own goals within that

- to recognize and undertake training in aspects appropriate to above needs and goals

(3) Ongoing evaluation:

- evaluation slips for client feedback on rural counsellor service

- work performance planning

- the supervisor's role be reviewed and adjusted.

Planning the action

Finances for evaluation activities ended with the workshop on the 6th September 1990 - although it is noted there was later reviewing of draft evaluation reports with members of the Service evaluation sub-committee and evaluating the evaluation with the whole Service in February 1991. During the September workshop afternoon the committee expressed their desire, will and responsibility to address, on their own, the fourth process question 'what will we do'. That commitment was resolute. The Service had a proven empathy for struggling farm families of the Southern Riverina. The committee and their rural counsellor had an enviable mutual respect.
and loyal working relationship. Their commitment to act on what they now owned as important to improve the Service was a strong affirmation of the participative purposes behind the University's evaluation approach.

A process of action research would continue, though perhaps in a more implicit sense methodologically. Improvements were going to be made and the Service was committed to reflecting on how they were doing that, with the view to enhancing relevant adjustment and improvement. At the Service's Annual General Meeting that night, they committed themselves to discuss and act on one of the prioritised issues at each of their future bimonthly committee meetings. That was not a small commitment, given the nature of some of the issues and the voluntary nature of an organization made up of already busy people.

**Action taken by the Service since the workshop**

A number of issues were discussed at the Annual General Meeting and two ensuing meetings. The Service made three important changes that it considered top priority, among other adjustments. The major changes while distinct from each other, are also inter-related.

The first change was to employ the Service's own part-time administrative assistant, instead of the then current part-time, shared receptionist. This position was soon expanded to full-time employment. The effectiveness of the assistant (with resulting benefits to the Service and community) and the then current workload made this a welcomed inevitability. Assistant responsibilities have expanded into selected aspects that the rural counsellor previously did on his own, or which could not be effectively covered. So the new role addressed several issues - principlely, sustainability-related issues around the well-being and optimal capabilities of the rural counsellor, and therefore his work effectiveness; one aspect of confidentiality; and an improved range and amount of administrative functions that would otherwise been problematic without this new Service staffmember.

The second change related to two coupled issues. These were counsellor confidentiality and the committee's guidance and support to its counsellor. A prudent 'supervisor' arrangement (hyphenated because of the mutuality of feedback and support characterizing this service's rural counsellor - committee relationships) has been made involving the counsellor and two
committee members. This resource and support triad allows discreet exploration of client-related agricultural aspects to aid financial counselling and rural counsellor business management and professional and personal dialogue. The two committee members were appointed consensually through committee - rural counsellor dialogue. It was noted that there are precedents for similar situations outside of the rural counselling programme. This changed both the previous supervisor structure and the assigned committee member (effective and supportive, but very busy himself with other then present responsibilities).

At the time, for various reasons the pattern was for some rural counsellors in other services to keep far more information from committees than many deemed appropriate. A variety of reasons for this withholding included the likes of well-intentioned complete protection of any client matter exposed beyond the rural counsellor (even undesignated); issues of power bound in the priviledged information control of the rural counsellor; strained rural counsellor - committee relationships; and assumptions by multiple parties that that was the way it had been created and that it was culturally sensitive to independent, 'private' farmers. The impact of the combination of this new arrangement with the Southern Riverina Advisory Service and employing the new assistant has improved the counsellor's well being and the service to clients. It also provides an improved partial feedback link from rural counsellor to committee, ensuring greater mutual responsibility and trust without obvious compromise to client confidentiality.

The third major urgent issue addressed was that the Service moved its office soon after the evaluation. The Service was confident that this would be a more suitable arrangement so far as service-oriented confidentiality, approachability, size and effectiveness were concerned and also in terms of personal rural counsellor family considerations. Several options were explored. But the decision was made to relocate to a new section being built by the rural counsellor at his house in Deniliquin (the Service and district's centre). The sizeable two room annex would be rented by the Service. The wisdom of the move has been validated in the ensuing three years.

Another significant change relates to the committee. Several newer committee members feel they now understand what the Service is. But in particular, a number of committee members have expressed a change of
attitude that has led to greater commitment to their role in the Service. This was not lacking before. But a greater understanding of the importance and potential role of the committee has improved their contribution - particularly the emerging understanding that the community base of the Service, as expressed by its committee representation is *a priori* in its 'community' ownership, relevance, sustainability, and strategic positioning.

As co-ordinator, I had been open from the start about my assumptions and values about the high significance of community-based committees in community-based organizations with paid employees. In saying that, I recognized that I was, in part, a "reality shaper rather than mere discoverer", as well as a "change agent" by influence (Guber and Lincoln, 1989) - both were inevitable if I was to take an ethical facilitating role. My openness was rather to ensure I did not manipulate change. I was true to making values explicit so Service-owned decisions were enhanced and I was making useful contributions to aid it doing so.

It had been inevitable that the Service would come to recognize perspectives about its nearly solely reactive nature that had, until then, been characterized by a committee largely responding (very effectively) to leads given it by its counsellor. This was understandable given the reactive nature and structure of the programme established by the Department of Primary Industry and Energy in 1986 and by the semi-voluntary nature of pressured community-based organizations such as the Service. But committee outlook is changing in terms its increased awareness of the richness and crucialness of its potential role, especially for its strategic responsibilities.

Other changes have continued to happen from 1991 onwards. I particularly draw your attention to discussion in Chapter Five on strategic planning, where it is noted that in 1993 the Service expressed their priority that the next evaluation will focus on strategic elements of it as an organization (rather than on aspects of client service and rural counsellor well-being that it feels are well in hand). Issues are being slowly but surely addressed, usually through bi-monthly committee meetings. The changes described in the paragraphs above occurred between the September 1990 final workshop and the February 1991 evaluation review and thus included in this chapter. That was the end of the 'formal'
evaluation relationship between the Service and the University, although I have since maintained some contact with the Service. Some other issues follow for potential considered action by the Service, University and others interested in working with struggling farming families and rural communities.

EXTRINSIC ISSUES

There were issues that arose during the participative evaluation that did not become an immediate part of the participative process for improving Service understanding and action. The following matters were not extraneous to the evaluation. They were relevant to the general contexts of the evaluation, the Service and its Southern Riverina context or rural hardship. However, the tight time, personnel and financial parameters, along with the negotiated purpose of the evaluation, did not allow the 'luxury' of exploring these additional issues not directly contributing to the three foci of Service, committee and rural counsellor. The issues were presented to the Service for their consideration of further enquiry in the future. Two basic areas of extrinsic issues are raised. They relate firstly to the context of the Service and rural hardship and secondly to issues of evaluation process.

The section concludes with a response by me to the original Service-given evaluation guidelines (since re-negotiated).

Further context issues arising out of the evaluation which could aid understanding and improving the Service

The University team considered there to be important issues worthy of consideration for further exploration by the Service or other relevant groups. They are matters relating to this particular action researched participative evaluation of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service or to individuals and groups who participated in it. They are not the learning outcomes explored in the final thesis chapter that are transferrable for other situations and times, although some issues listed below have implications beyond the Southern Riverina and are thus mentioned in chapter six such as general rural banking issues. Rather those below are additional areas of possible enquiry that have the potential to directly enrichen the Service and those with whom it interacts. It had
hoped some issues could be a part of the evaluation, in terms of complementing what the Service wanted with aspects that the University assumed could be helpful to one, both or additional parties. Other issues arose during the course of the evaluation. Yet others were known but were never going to be explored within that evaluation. All of them fell outside the parameters of the evaluation because of the evaluation focus, priorities, or limitations due to finances, time and/or personnel. They all impact on the Service's existence or effectiveness. The issues were included in the evaluation report to the Service for their awareness.

The four areas included below involve: the future of the rural counselling programme, and of the Service in particular; bank-related issues; Southern Riverina regional issues; and, issues of learning by segments of Southern Riverina communities.

The first contextual issue area involves the future financial sustainability of the Service and rural counselling services in general - remembering that the Federal and State governments between them fund three-quarters of services' budgets. The Department of Primary Industry and Energy established the Rural Counselling Programme in 1986 for an initial period of three years. There was no intention that the programme last any longer than the immediate, burgeoning period of rural hardship. The programme until 1994 has been continuing indefinitely given ongoing hardship, and in some rural industry and localities (such as marginal cropping districts), increasing hardship - although it is noted that there is now a 'sunset' termination set in 1994 by the Department of Primary Industry and Energy for the programme to end by the end of the decade. Autonomy of individual services and maintenance of current levels of government financial support are not assured.

It would seem a prudent expression of the Service's growing awareness of strategic outlook to at least explore contingencies given expected significant ongoing levels of hardship. Options could include proactively becoming part of the Federal Government bureaucracy; becoming a paying rural services co-operative (NSW Business and Consumer Affairs Co-operative Society expressed interested in exploring such an idea with me); fees for existing services or for certain new complementary, pre and post-crisis services; etc.
I considered this issue to have strategic significance and to have been an important potential enquiry aspect of the evaluation. It was discussed with evaluation committee members several times and mentioned to the whole committee. However, the Service did not wish to explore it at that time. It was not collaboratively pursued further, because of the participative principles behind the evaluation that meant no imposition on the Service would be accepted.

A number of bank-related issues affect farmer stress and financial hardship and/or bank corporation effectiveness and thus call for further exploration. Criticism of banks was a common feature of interviews. This came from a range of professional backgrounds. It is noted that these times could not be termed merely 'bank bashing' sessions. Interviewees were not unaware of factors such as frequent poor farmer financial record keeping and management. However, broad concerns about banks and bankers was clearly and persuasively articulated. The following factors were raised with regards local Southern Riverina banks, though some were viewed less critically than others. However they were equally seen as more generically relevant and worthy of further enquiry. The concensus was that it would behove banks to consider the following more seriously and publically:

* gathering perceptions of the role of banks in the rural sector, and the reasons for these perceptions as a basis for informed decision-making by banks, rural counsellors, the Rural Adjustment Scheme, et cetera.

* attitudes, principles and practices by banks: staff can be inexperienced, ill-trained and lacking empathy in farming and rural ethos; rural bank staff are now more often 'detached' from local rural communities (not the perception by bankers, but certainly by the range of other interviewees); bank staff move frequently, with implications to both work effectiveness, client relationships and banker family well-being; the traditional two-way relationship of trust and loyalty between banks and farmers is largely eroded from the view of all non-bank interviewees, not only farming clients; banks are usually a poor link between the Rural Assistance Authority and farmers; et cetera

* local bank managers are supportive of the rural counselling service and desire to work more effectively with it. A client advocacy role by rural
counsellors to banks, compared to a bank-client intermediary role by the rural counsellors, was not challenged in that expression

* ethical issues: responsibility, accountability and culpability in bank-farm relationships was expressed. While interview comments were more often tied to criticism of the banks, the issues hold equally for all rural 'players'

* a State Department of Agriculture employee stated access to bank data for updated information and forecasts could be helpful to a range of rural service personnel, including the Service

More generalized bank-related research arose for the School of Agriculture and Rural Development during 1991, that emerged largely as a result of issues and contacts from the participative evaluation. It is explored in Chapter Five.

The third area of context-related issues worthy for consideration of future enquiry relate to the Southern Riverina as a region. Issues include:

* the difficulty of clearly knowing the nature and extent of the 'rural crisis' in the Southern Riverina. Clarifying this would aid Service strategic planning of the size and scope of its activities and also have implications for the roles and well-being of its employees and for appropriate networking. The strong indications of the evaluation are that despite the Service's highly effective work, there is more that could be done that is beyond knowledge of many struggling farming families and the Service and beyond the existing capacity of the Service to handle.

* the difficulty of understanding the impact of farm-related stress on the wider Southern Riverina community: socially (individual, family and group relationships - mindful of rising incidence of relational breakdowns, suicide and social withdrawal); health-wise (physically, emotionally, spiritually); employment; productivity; education (cessation of existing studies, reduced opportunities and adjustment re-education); recreationally; environmentally; changing mores and the like.

* having an up to date profile of Southern Riverina community services.

* a perceived low integration (as distinct from contact) by the Service with other community services.
* exploring the types, or more likely contexts, of farm clients seeking or needing Service help - as well as understanding the reasons for those

The fourth possible context-related enquiry area is learning by sectors of the Southern Riverina:

* what will, process and criteria is there for ongoing monitoring, self-evaluation and strategic planning in the Service - by each of the rural counsellor, committee and Service as a whole?

* are farming clients now better prepared to prevent and/or deal with potential future crises? That is, is the Service empowering clients to prevent repeated future hardship or is it fostering dependent relationships or largely providing 'bandaid' solutions? If it is not seriously addressing promotive and preventive aspects of client farm (and other) management, why not? And if not, can something be done? I remind readers that the evaluation found that the Service was only significantly addressing one of its four aims, that of helping farm families in present financial trouble

* and related to the previous point, what educative services (both promotive and preventative) exist or should exist for Southern Riverina farm families in general? What role should the Service play, if any - now and in the future?

So elements related to above points that are taken further in a generic sense in Chapter Six include the sustainability, modification or cessation of the Rural Counselling Programme; general rural banking related issues; and the diverse impact of hardship in rural Australia - locally, regionally, nationally and even globally.

**Further immediate process issues arising from participatively evaluating the Service**

As with the preceding context issues for suggested further exploration, these process issues did not or could not occur within the limitations of the evaluation. The first process issue group for possible enquiry is rural counsellor-based:

* assessment and guidance by an appropriate resource person of the rural counsellor's administrative and financial management. The July
University team included economic and farm management expertise, but not of the background to take the rural counsellor further in areas he seeks input, such as alternative computer programmes. This is not an area of concern to University members involved in the participative evaluation. Feedback from recipients (farmers), collaborators (banks) and observers (professionals) has been unanimous with regards quality client-based service by the rural counsellor. We include this matter as a staff development and training issue, particularly with regards client and office management.

* another staff development and training issue is stress management and 'burnout' for the rural counsellor to explore with appropriate resource people. I accessed counsellors from different Sydney work settings (anonymous to the Service) to help him and the Service understand this issue more fully. Some resources and insights have been shared with the rural counsellor to aid this exploration. This is an important need given the nature of the work and worsening rural crises and a process in which the committee's rural counsellor 'supervisory' pair should be involved.

Another possible process enquiry area is evaluation data and perspective collecting:

* a random telephone questionnaire of both farmers and general public in the Southern Riverina with regards awareness and understanding of the Service. The Service felt it has promoted itself widely, particularly through farming industry groups. However feedback from clients regularly suggested the Service should have a higher profile and more frequent use of local media. The issue is taken up in Chapter Five.

* a survey-based appraisal of the general economic situation and trends in the Southern Riverina - again to help the Service with informed strategic planning

* clarifying and updating services existing for the rural sector of the Southern Riverina; how can these be integrated into the Service's networking; and noting any gaps or weaknesses in current services and seeing what might be done to rectify these

* follow up designated people who could not attend interviews or workshops - although it was not felt that the evaluation was significantly
disadvantaged by the three client couples and the State MLC Service committee member not attending the participatory evaluation

* access the Rural Assistance Authority for its general perspectives as they relate to the Service and its context. Contacts obtained during the evaluation began to be utilized during the latter stages of the evaluation. However, they became of greater benefit during following years, so far as the School and University was concerned

* more time with committee members - especially those few who missed July and/or September sessions. Their perspectives would have been appreciated, but the potential beneficial impact to them (rather than from them) was in their increased understanding of the Service and their increased capacity to improve it. But greater time with all committee members would have enhanced quicker Service-wide organizational learning, particularly its strategic component.

* associated with the previous point is properly workshopping what to do with the committee- prioritised issues of the 6th September workshop. Extra time on the day would have allowed the group to explore at least one of the prioritized issues in terms of the what, why, how, whom, when type questions and the important component then of reflecting how that was done, explicitly outlining the learning process in order to build organizational learning capacity.

* working with or accessing regional resource people (rural counsellors, key bankers, etc) and taking out to State and Federal levels.

A response to original Service evaluation guidelines

The following five guidelines were enunciated by the Service before contact with the University had occurred. Our discussion with committee members soon revealed a strong emphasis by the committee to focus the evaluation on the effectiveness and well-being of its rural counsellor. From the beginning, I discussed my interest in three other important aspects being added to what the Service requested. The first was that the evaluation be a participative activity, with the committee and rural counsellor being the ones determining what was important on which to act for Service improvement at that point in time.
The second aspect was that the evaluation entail strategic planning as an integral component. I appreciated the appropriateness of looking back in time to see if aims and objectives had been fulfilled the previous two years - and also of looking around to see what immediate improvements to service of clients and rural counsellor well-being could be improved. But I was concerned that these be complemented by the Service looking at how and why it does what it does so it could consciously get better at getting better.

The third aspect was that the committee itself be included as an equal overt emphasis of enquiry along with the high interest in client service and the rural counsellor. I felt that this was a more holistic approach to creating substantial and ongoing Service improvement.

What preceded in Chapters Three and Four addressed the original guidelines and factors such as those above in detail. But I felt it helpful to specifically highlight to the Service outcomes with regards their original evaluation guidelines. This was to affirm that their original intentions were not lost in the ensuing evaluation which turned out quite differently to the early expectations of many committee members outside the Service evaluation sub-committee group.

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of the Service in achieving aims and objectives.

It has already been stated that for various reasons the Service is only really addressing the first of its four stated objectives. That provision of counselling to families suffering financial hardship and stress is well delivered to, and appreciated by, those receiving it. And this was affirmed by others observing its effectiveness. Reviewing whether the Service should either remove other objectives from its Constitution or consider acting on them in ways it has not done to date were put to the Service and became an issue for future Service bi-monthly meetings. At this stage Service feeling was that it was busy enough coping with existing activities and there were perhaps benefits leaving the Constitution as it was.

2. Determine the degree of credibility of the Service with clients, with agribusiness, with government departments.

The credibility of the Service with those with whom it interacts is very high. This is due overtly in large part to both the rural counsellor's
effective work and him as a person. The committee's influence is real but more covert. Overall credibility with farm clients is high, as it is with bankers and others interviewed. Some involved in the community services focus group provided the only credibility concern and these have been contextualized and discussed between the Service and University team.

3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the integration of the Service and the Rural Counsellor with other services, both private and public.

Credibility was high but banking, agribusiness, accountant/solicitor, and district sponsor groups all desired closer co-operation between the Service and themselves. There is need for communication initiatives by all concerned. The greatest concern expressed by interviewees about lack of integration came from community service personnel, particularly with regards support and referral networks of the rural counsellor. There are some historical reasons for that that affect committee and rural counsellor actions.

4. Examine the role of the Service committee in supporting the rural counsellor.

The committee strongly desires to support its rural counsellor. A number of committee members found this difficult because many counsellor related aspects were unknown to them due to an inappropriate level of confidentiality. The difficulty for the University team was that the committee was initially committed to one half of this equation - that of counsellor focused issues. Over ensuing evaluation months, a strong awareness has grown that the way the committee sees, makes decisions and acts has a profound impact on the well being and effectiveness of its rural counsellor. The committee's proactive addressing of this matter has evidenced positive outcomes for the rural counselling services and rural counsellor well-being.

5. Suggest possible improvements in the Service's methods of operation.

This matter has been partly dealt with above. The only major aspect not mentioned is that Service methods of operation could be more positively monitored, evaluated, and improved if structural and philosophical issues of the Service were re-evaluated. The Service is quickly responding to evaluation-raised context issues. However, it is more slowly responding to structural and strategic issues that affect what and how the Service sees
itself and context - and what it 'is' and working towards or not working towards that that affect what the Service does and how effective it does it.

Overall the committee members and rural counsellor embraced the evaluation as their own. Attitudes have changed amongst them and knowledge increased. A deeper more proactive commitment to the Service by the committee is quite evident. My statement of that is only supportive to the more important expression of it by the committee and counsellor themselves. Evidence of that follows in the the first section of Chapter Five, where the Service's critique is recorded of the effectiveness of the participative evaluation.
CHAPTER FIVE
CRITIQUING THE PARTICIPATIVE EVALUATION

Multi-faceted improved understanding and action provides the basis of validation of the action researched participative evaluation. Such improvements are the real 'success indicators' and are established on the basis of critical reflection. Critiquing is an essential assumption of both participative evaluation processes (Rugh, 1986) and of action research as a research approach (Bawden, 1989) - hence critiquing's place in this Thesis. As co-ordinator, I would deem participative evaluation ineffective if there was no affirmation and satisfaction by participants of their improved understanding and action - in our case, firstly in terms of 'external' Service support of clients and 'internal' ways of Service thinking and operating that affect that support, but also of the way the process of participative evaluation was facilitated by the University.

Critical reflection, then, provided the following summaries of evaluative evaluation perspectives. This was the same essential approach on which the initial participative evaluation was also based. Like the initial 'action' phase of carrying out the participative evaluation, this critiquing was based on a number of features as noted of Guba and Lincoln (1989) in Chapter Three. I just highlight several features again here:

* reflections represented meaningful constructions (not 'truth' or 'facts') that participants as individuals and as a group formed to make sense in evaluating the evaluation in which they had participated

* the stakeholders who had been enfranchised by the initial evaluation were not going to now be disenfranchised at the point of evaluating the evaluation. Co-ordinator consistency respecting Service participant dignity and integrity were just as important at this later stage as earlier

* that this reflective process is also emergent, because its key too is the dynamic of dialogue through which evaluative constructions are created - so even the critiques below are points for further review and learning

The first summary is from the perspective of the Service (comprising the committee members and the rural counsellor) and the second longer critique from the perspective of me as co-ordinator.
Critique by the whole Service came largely through University facilitated reflection generated at the Service's February 1991 bi-monthly meeting. Other feedback came regularly through evaluation sub-committee members and a brief evaluation at the end of the September workshop. Significance was attributed either by frequency or emphasis. The points arose from assimilating reflection data. These points are often expressed as quotes recorded at that time - others are summary points or composites of related things said by members to be significant. The section from the committee and rural counsellor is set out in the manner questions were put to them at the February 1991 meeting. Their pattern was consistent with the first four of five features of action research proposed by Bawden (1989), noted in Chapter Three.

CRITIQUIING THE PARTICIPATIVE EVALUATION: THE SERVICE'S PERSPECTIVE

Has understanding of the Service increased?

* "the Service is now more aware of the seriousness of the crisis in the community"

* the rich range of perceptions from clients and other interviewees was appreciated. Committee members noted many evaluation insights were unknown to the committee before the evaluation. New committee members and a staff member said the evaluation provided a good introduction to the Service. To some other committee members, things suspected were confirmed and things known were reinforced

* the committee is now more aware of its role and the impact of its decisions on others - particularly its past short-term emphasis and the resulting need now to plan its future

* "it provided me with valuable feedback from banks and clients about my work that really encourages me" (the rural counsellor).

Has practice of the Service improved?

* it has certainly improved over time since the September workshop. The committee has a priority list of issues and the will and a plan to act on them
* "the evaluation approach encompassed a wider range of issues than the committee expected - with resulting wider range of avenues to explore these"

* "suggestions came at the right time to address certain one-off issues"

* several key inter-related improvements were cited: the full-time assistant; the technical support and supervision group; several facets related to confidentiality; counsellor stress management; and shifting the office location.

**Has understanding of participative evaluation and strategic planning by the Service increased?**

* "yes, but to quantify that is difficult. A big difference is the broadening of past narrow vision. The evaluation has opened out issues, possible activities, and widened ways of seeing. We wanted to know how the clients and counsellor were going, but we got a lot more"

* "the weight put on understanding of process was greater than (we) expected. The process on reporting findings changed people by expanding understanding of how people learn, and improve situations"

* "the nature of co-enquiry between the committee and the Faculty needed better communication earlier on"

**Has practice of participative evaluation and strategic planning by the Service improved?**

* "Yes. The committee found reflecting initially frustrating compared to having Hawkesbury (the University) make recommendations (instead). The committee now sees the importance of it making decisions - of deciding what is important, rather than have an outsider provide this"

* "the way the committee now functions and addresses issues has changed. It is more prepared to take an active and leading role"

* "some committee members have been helped in how they evaluate themselves better in their committee role"
CRITIQUING THE PARTICIPATIVE EVALUATION: MY PERSPECTIVE
AS CO-ORDINATING EVALUATOR

The following are critical reflections by me. For the large part, they have
passed through Bawden’s fifth action research outcome of public debate.
The points, along with the planning, process and action researched
evaluation outcomes were regularly critiqued. This most often occurred
with a small group of staff colleagues in the then Faculty of Agriculture
and Rural Development at the University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury.
It also occurred periodically with staff and students at their weekly
postgraduate project clinic days. It was also discussed during the course of
the participative evaluation with folk associated with rural counselling
and rural hardship, both within the Southern Riverina and beyond.

As co-ordinator, I took some issues into the evaluation because of their
perceived relevance. Other matters arose as a result of the collaborative
evaluation by the Service and University. These matters of general and
corporate concern are distinguished from Chapter Six’s discussion of
uniquely co-ordinator enquiry-based issues.

In one sense the whole thesis is a critique. But some key features follow,
particularly reflections and self-assessment about the effectiveness of the
participative evaluation and about improving the way this evaluation
could have been action researched. The points were put together to
complement Service critique and promote discussion as part of the process
of evaluating the evaluation. I have structured the critical reflection
similar to that for the Service above, that is, the objectives of action
research. I have maintained the separation of the first two objectives
related to the context at hand. I have grouped the last two together that
focus around issues of process related to action researching participative
evaluations. Grouping the two seemed to better fit the nature of my
reflections this way, because thoughts often merged across the
delineations of ‘understanding’ and ‘improving’. The reflections include
comments about learning that are potentially transferrable to better
inform future action research facilitation, either with the Service or
elsewhere.

I observed, and often explored, many issues related to the Service
evaluation experience. However, I have been selective in issues raised in
my critique. I affirm all the points in the Service’s evaluation of the
evaluation as my own. In some cases I do not readdress their points. In others, I do so for further critique. Other aspects that I have not included in this critique, but on which learning has been explored and documented include: documentation inhibitions on increased understanding of non-Service interviewees, Service members and sponsors; the impact of funding constraints on the evaluation; two transferrable process issues that worked well; the implications of variable team member availability and commitment; and, team member equipping in rural sociology;

Has understanding about the evaluation context increased?

The thoughts I have grouped in this section include those related to the Service, to its evaluation, to rural counselling and to the general context of rural hardship. Two factors have influenced choice of inclusion here rather than in the following section. Firstly, I earlier described that I see learning as the discovery that makes a beneficial difference in my life - be that difference a matter of belief, value, attitude, technical knowledge and skill or overall competence. However, given the breadth of reflections across such a wide range of learning expressions, I now separate critique of evaluation aspects to aid readability. Secondly, while delineating learning can be tenuous, I have attempted here to focus more on propositional learning (learning for knowing) and to a lesser extent intuitive learning (learning for feeling), rather than experiential learning (learning for being) and practical learning (learning for doing).

This section critiques five general areas of propositional learning that I particularly noticed during the participative evaluation. They are:

* Service committee learning

* rural counsellor encouragement

* the nature and future of this and other rural counselling services

* and, implications of the evaluation for the School and University.
SERVICE COMMITTEE LEARNING

**Observations**: for me, the most significant changes have been with the Service committee. The committee has greater understanding of the role of their counsellor and more specific informed support of him. There are also changes to perceptions of their role and the importance of it in developing a more effective Service.

**Reflections**: in Chapter Four, it was noted that rural counsellors have a strong influence on how their communities' counselling services are shaped and perceived by others, but that this occurs within parameters either set or allowed by their committee. But it is committees who are the source of service establishment, the representation of the communities they serve and the significant holders of overall service legal responsibility. So the University team saw the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service committee as having, both potentially and ethically, the major responsibility and influence for strategic direction, sustainability and partly, action, of the Service. This should not diminish the significant contribution of the rural counsellor. This Service strongly reflects the rural counsellor's personality, processes and performance in highly appreciated ways that have been articulated in this and the preceding chapters. But community-based rural advisory services will suffer if they are not complemented more than that by more proactive committee leadership. I was convinced that the committee's role could and should be even more significant in the life and direction of this Service and that has begun to happen through the participative evaluation, as substantiated by committee reflections recorded earlier in the chapter. I have observed similar needs elsewhere and suspect that it is a widespread issue of significance. These matters were increasingly discussed by the Service during the evaluation. While my conviction about these matters arose as an early assumption due to my rural community development background, it was significantly reinforced in its own right through the contributions of non-Service interviewees, other University team members and eventually the committee.

While speaking of the committee in largely corporate terms, I was conscious that new learning experiences cause different reactions for different individuals. My background in inter-cultural communications recognized the importance as a facilitator to be sensitive to when
participants felt their experience was moving them beyond their exploring comfort zone, or adapting Mayers (1974), their "zone of experimentation". There was no evidence of deprivation of norm. However, one or two committee members indicated at times that our shared process took them "in excess of norm", resulting in them wanting to retreat to a somewhat more comfortable dependent learning/evaluator situation [see Appendix 3 models on 'norms' and 'teacher-directed and autonomous learning'].

In retrospect, it is an encouragement to me that while my relationship with the Southern Riverina service is lately largely dormant (other than my contact and periodic discussions with the rural counsellor), the matter has a present profile in how the Service looks at itself. I have ongoing research interests in the role and impact on rural community development by committees of community-based groups. They are raised in Chapter Six.

RURAL COUNSELLOR ENCOURAGEMENT

I'm more than comfortable to include a feeling of 'encouragement' in this section on learning for knowing. It must be included somewhere in the critique. The equally most encouraging aspect of the evaluation for me was the strong affirmation of the caring and effective contribution of the rural counsellor across a range of aspects. Affirmation of what is going well is just as important as recognizing what needs changing. That the affirmation was important encouragement to him, as evidenced by his comment to the same earlier in this chapter, was important to me. It was important, firstly, given my enjoyment and respect for Rendle as a person; secondly, because of my empathy for the physically, emotionally and professionally taxing role of rural counsellors; and, thirdly because of my responsibility in enhancing the participative evaluation to create real benefit.

THE NATURE AND FUTURE OF THIS AND OTHER RURAL COUNSELLING SERVICES

Observations: my rural community development background meant two particular linkages of the rural counselling programme exercised my thinking from my earliest involvement with the programme. The first of these was my perception of a vacuum in the relationship of such a
reactionary, crisis-serving, curative-oriented endeavour to broader issues and engagement of rural community development. These are taken a little further in the next Chapter. The second linkage is interdependent with this and involves the future shape and sustainability of such community-based services.

Reflection: such an activity may continue, be scaled down, be modified, or be complemented as changing contexts determine. Or it may be terminated. But in the latter case the capacity, networks and contingency plans should be maintained to be able to be reactivated if future crises necessitate that. Whatever happens, strategic preparation for that is preferrable in the present, especially before the present becomes embroiled in overwhelming crisis that prevents activity or resource allocation other than of a rescue nature.

I raised issues of both linkages with committee members and the rural counsellor on a number of occasions. It was one of the more perplexing aspects to me of my whole interaction with the Service that this was not perceived as an important issue for then current exploration. I raised it but felt I could not impose it as a major issue, because at the time it only appeared significant in a strategic sense to me. I acknowledge that the immediacy was not apparent with regards funding. New rural counselling services were being established Australia-wide, despite the initially stated three year Federal funding limit that was to have lasted until 1989. And funding is still occurring five years on, though not increasing and with a conclusion before the end of the decade. However, the strategic outlook of the Service was really only beginning to emerge by the end of the participative evaluation, as evidenced in the Service's own critical reflection comments earlier in the Chapter.

I took a sideways initiative and raised the idea of 'rural service co-operatives' with the Co-operatives Branch of the then State Government's Department of Business and Consumer Affairs. I was interested in the matter as one longterm possibility to contribute to a variety of management and professional type issues of all those in ‘family’ farming, not just with regards crisis management such as required by clients of rural counselling services. I thought it was worth at least exploring as a longterm community self-funded option that may enable some continuing form of support to struggling farm families, among other activities. I
raised the matter with the evaluation sub-committee. I have not taken it further at this stage but a Co-operatives Branch officer expressed interest in substantial funding to pursue this new kind of initiative. I had been wondering if something like farming and rural professional service co-operatives could be modelled as a variation on farmer produce co-operatives.

Government funding for rural counselling programmes will eventually cease (at this stage planned for June 1998). What is important, as Tasmanian Rural Counselling Service Chairperson John Dunbevan said (personal conversation August 1994) is that services are not totally disbanded. I agree with him that it is preferrable that services are rather only reduced and/or modified so that it will be able to enlargen them or to change them over time according to changing situations, needs and goals. An option the Tasmanian service is presently pursuing is a particular corporate sponsorship of their service. This may be an option for some rural counselling services on the mainland, too, although it is hard to imagine there are enough corporations willing to sponsor the eighty services that now exist Australia-wide. I have not argued against the cessation of rural counselling services where their local advisory groups determine that. I am only encouraging strategic thought as to the future of services - either for longterm sustainabilty where that is advisable or to cessation or modification of activities that will enable services to quickly reactivate or expand in the future if needed.

EVALUATION IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY

Observations: the participative evaluation has contributed to better School understanding of the rural counselling programme. This includes clarification of its unique nature; the context for which it was created (including local, regional, national and global aspects); its relationship with wider rural Australia; the roles and competencies of rural counsellors and local advisory committees; extended information resources for students and staff; and better informed servicing by staff of students with rural crisis and counselling interests.
Is practice related to the evaluation context improved and improving?

Again, aspects in this section include those related to the Service, to its evaluation, to rural counselling and to the general context of rural hardship. However, the learning emphases are experiential and practical, even given the oft artificiality of delineating them from propositional and intuitive learning. Various issues for critical reflection are grouped into four sections:

* the performance of the Service evaluation
* organizational learning of the Service
* the impact of funding constraints on the evaluation
* evaluation implications for the School and University.

THE PERFORMANCE OF THE SERVICE EVALUATION

Factors explored are: the size of evaluation activity attempted; the extent evaluation goals have been met; how well was the basis informing evaluation decisions and action; and participative action research approaches.

Observations: Shumacher’s 1974 book, ‘Small is Beautiful’, duly impressed me in the 1970’s with the humility and commonsense of its development message. But it was my first four years of development experience in Africa, 1979 to 1982, that influenced me to articulate the significance of the principle that a small effective work is more preferrable than broad and superficial work, in terms of sustainable development that both perseveres and in time expands. This became an underpinning principle in my development practice and development training and evaluation activities. It flowed into influencing what I proposed to be the nature of the participative evaluation of the Service.

Reflections: because my vision was for the evaluation to bring about real improvement in the Service, there were implications for that in the choice of ‘small, effective work’. We were exploring collaboratively for beneficial change, not just getting as much data as possible about something and writing a report about it. So if real improvement could not
be compromised, the scope and methodology needed to be able to ensure that.

The first implication was described in Chapter Three. The basis for change would be a combination of three main features. The first was to have a methodology that would make a difference to the way the Service acts. Recursive action research cycles utilized experiential learning methodology to do that. The second feature involved working mainly with perspectives of how relevant people saw the Service. The reason was to understand how people saw or made sense of their world ('what is') in order to explore 'what could be' in terms of possible improvement to the Service. The third feature was that those who did that work should include those who have responsibility to enact any change. And in this case that was the Service, comprising committee and rural counsellor. Interaction was the key both to understanding what would constitute improvement and to the will and capacity to create the improvement. So people and their interactions were the centre of the enquiry, given that improvement was both about what the Service was doing in the community and 'why', as well as how the Service could sustain effectiveness.

Other implications followed on that basis. Semi-structured interviews of individuals and couples and larger focus groups were utilized instead of questionnaires or surveys. Funding, time and others parameters always influence choice and extent of research approaches. I was aware that our understanding of the Service depended on with whom we spoke (Wilson and Morren, 1990). Given our aim of action research, I felt a smaller number of face to face in-depth interviews would serve our purpose better, than a large number of less personal data portfolios that also involved several risks. These risks included superficiality; difficulty in clarifying and perhaps validating data or perspectives; and missing nuances of interviewee responses - both verbal ad non-verbal.

In hindsight, future similar situations may benefit from complementary broader constituency based surveys. But Service and University team members felt the richness of the 'fewer', highly personalized interviews was an important contributor to real, relevant change.

Observation: Service evaluation expectations have been met.
Reflections: the participative evaluation not only met original Service evaluation guidelines (see Chapter One), but encompassed more than the Service initially requested in them. This was confirmed both in Service reflections recorded earlier in this chapter and in University team discussions.

Within that overall performance, the quality of perspective gathering and the effectiveness in identifying issues were major contributions. The openness and relevance of the constructions interviewees provided on the Service were a feature behind evaluation diverging and assimilation activities. However, selection of a reasonably experienced, competent and prepared University team meant we were able to utilize that in supporting informed Service decisions and actions to improve themselves. Team members had prior semi-structured interview and focus group facilitation experience. We also prepared ourselves well in terms of interview background preparation and interviewed/recorded well. But we kept improving each others' performance in that. We did so through immediate post-interview reflection statements, constructive feedback to each other on individual performance (remembering we interviewed in pairs) and then feedback to the whole team for our shared understanding and adjustments in matters affecting all.

It has been mentioned earlier that we did not interview three of sixteen client couples selected. The interviewees had accepted the invitation to contribute to the evaluation, but apologized at short notice due to explained unexpected farming emergencies. I could not programme any more clients to make up a mythical minimum number, given the full main interview week. And more importantly, the University team noted that there was a consistency in major feedback themes in the appraisal and suggestions from the thirteen client couples interviewed. So while we could have sought to interview more clients, I do not believe we should have done so. Another alternative to interview more clients was to use focus groups. However, while confidentiality aspects would not prevent that in some other rural counselling services, it did in the Southern Riverina.

As a generalization, the suitability of the University's participative action research approach to achieve fundamental change to Service thinking and acting was validated by Service feedback and the University's own
critical self-evaluation. The Service is also now aware about the nature and benefits of a participative approach to its learning.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING OF THE SERVICE

A preamble: the Collins English Dictionary (1983) defines an organization as, “a business or administrative concern united or constructed for a particular end”. But achieving that end has been becoming more and more problematic for many. Organizational management and development is a field of enquiry marked by urgency and expansion:

There has probably never been a time in our history when members, managers, and students of organizations were so united on the importance of organizational learning ... our organizations live in economic, political, and technological environments which are predictably unstable. The requirement for organizational learning is not occassional, sporadic phenomenon, but is continuous and endemic to our society (Argyris & Schon, 1980).

As mentioned in the introductory comments, this thesis has not been just a learning about the organization called the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service. I strongly saw the evaluation of the Service as an experience of collaborative learning that would create beneficial change of and by itself - both for the Service and for others participating in its research, such as the University. I saw an opportunity in co-ordinating the participative evaluation to influence, even in a small way, the Service being more effective through becoming a better learning organization¹. Drucker’s stated purpose of organizations (1974) did not seem amiss when he said, it “is to enable ordinary human beings to do extraordinary things ... to make ordinary people perform better than they seem capable of, to bring out whatever strength there is in members, and to use each person’s strength to help all the other members perform”. Only I added that they should be explicitly equipped and encouraged to go on doing that themselves.

¹ I use the term ‘organization’ (rather than ‘group’ or ‘association’) as a classification for the Service, as in: “a business or administrative concern united and constructed for a particular end” (Collins Dictionary, 1982). And the Service describes itself as ‘organization’ in its Constitution, even though counsellor and committee members only total sixteen.
I looked to Mondusu's three forms of review commonly used to evaluate organizations (1989) as a guide to help clarify what the Service could achieve through its evaluation:

* _Ex poste_ (looking back): reviewing the extent to which particular pre-set missions or targets have been achieved over time.
* _Ex-ante_ (looking around): reviewing the situation as it exists, in relation to the level of achievement of current objectives and/or preparedness to meet its stated future objectives.
* _Strategic_ (looking forward): reviewing the processes and mechanisms used by the organization to create its own future by linking its forward direction to the movement of historical forces in the environment.

Eventually, the evaluation of the Service synthesized all three forms of review. That was my intention, having considered this synthesis prior to contacting the Service. However, others involved in the Service had more narrow agendas and expectations for this evaluation, at least initially. The evaluation sub-committee indicated informally that government and local sponsors were primarily interested in an assurance that funds had been spent in an effective manner consistent with stated objectives (i.e. _Ex post_). On the other hand, the committee and counsellor wished to complement _Ex post_ with dual _Ex ante_ outcomes - clarifying the present state of the Service and pinpointing possible improvements to then current service to clients and to counsellor well-being. These expectations were outlined in Chapter One.

My expectations had the strategic orientation as well. And this was negotiated with the evaluation sub-committee to be an emerging component. I hoped the evaluation would equip the Service in improving how it goes about that process of evaluating and improving the Service - of developing its capacity to pro-actively create its own future. I was aware of the rich complexity of factors potentially involved in such an endeavour (see Appendix 4) so I was predisposed to recognize emerging facets of strategic planning.
Four strategic issues emerged as the most significant through the evaluation:

* the Service corporate needing to either redefine or re-affirm and act on its objectives, given it largely addresses only one of four in its Constitution, that of 'crisis' counselling. Coupled with that is the need to consider if the Service should be maintained in the future and how that can be financially done if it is desirable that the Service should continue in some form when current finances cease.

* the Committee be more proactive as the force that sets the direction of the Service and maintains its effectiveness and sustainability

* the Rural Counsellor take action to build and maintain himself and all his support relationships (professionally and personally) in the midst of the pressures of a potentially unsustainable job

* further equipping and encouraging in organizational learning appears necessary to enable the first three issues to be addressed.

Their eventual recognition contributed to and was indicative of emerging organizational learning of and by the Service. However, I noted that the protracted duration of the organizational learning of this voluntary community-based group was not unlike the time-consuming emergent nature of learning as communities from my rural community development experience overseas. The active phase of the participative evaluation of the Service spanned five months, although the whole period from initial discussions to evaluating the evaluation spanned twelve months. Yet interaction was short in terms of the time each of us had available for this purpose during the period. As with other aspects of the collaborative nature of action researching, participants had different agendas - not only of what they wanted, but of how much they could give. Most Service committee members had understandably limited time and agendas, given their voluntary contributions to the Service. The rural counsellor continued to be overburdened by needs and numbers of struggling clients. And University participants felt varying pressure of other responsibilities which usually or often took precedence over this research.

Observations: my original aim of combining learning, research and action in a participative manner and learning how to be getting better at doing
that has not occurred equally amongst committee members and the rural counsellor. There was widely variable ‘learning to learn’ by individuals, especially the earlier comparisons were made to each other during the evaluation. Yet corporately, there was an observable trend of overall learning. It can be illustrated by critiquing learning utilizing a combination of Salner's three levels of cognition (1986) and Bawden (1989).

Reflections: the committee initially saw us largely working on their behalf, rather than with them. However, with successive interactions this changed into growing appreciation and active ownership of the evaluation (with the exception of strongly qualified support of one member by the February 1991 evaluation of the evaluation). It intrigued me that some committee members seemed to early understand and be committed to the 'new' approach, while others found it confusing and in one case against what was wanted - hence the need for the above negotiated, mutual orientation and equipping early in the collaborative relationship.

But it is important to note that action learning by the Service is continuing after the University withdrew from active facilitation. I use the phrase action learning rather than action research only in the sense that their ongoing learning and critique is internal, not public. I say so on the basis that I have maintained contact with a committee member and the rural counsellor. This learning is perhaps in a more implicit way. The Service recognizes learning is developmental, that it is cyclic and that it is iterative in terms of acting, observing, reflecting, planning and adjusting action.

The following are models of 'realities' of the shape of the collaborative learning over the course of the evaluation in terms of cognition levels in play. I use thick, thin and dotted lines and absence of lines to represent strong, partial, marginal and no engagement respectively by different participants, with regards different cognition levels in the collaborative enqury process. The models are relative in that every individual had different expectations, agendas and levels of commitment and understanding about the action researched participative evaluation. And these were changing during the course of the evaluation. Given that, I think it is possible and profitable to provide the generalized models, based on the feedback of participants and my own observation. It is useful to do
so because they provide visual indicators of the 'success' of the participative action research approach.

A discussion of multi-level cognition enquiry, after Salner (1986), Bawden (1989) and Mezirow (1991), was provided in Chapter Three of what I was aiming for by way of action researching the participative evaluation and strategic planning of the Service. I now provide three models indicating changes over time in engagement of Service team members in the multi-level learning process. The periods are firstly, the early interactions between the Service and the University including the July 1990 perspective gathering (Fig. 14); secondly, the end of the participative evaluation at the February 1991 reflection (Fig. 15); and thirdly, the October 1993 Bi-monthly Service Meeting (Fig. 16).

Fig 14: Early collaborative learning between the Service and the University.
On the side of the University, all team members, whatever their level of time involvement, were engaged together in acting and critiquing both primary and meta-cognitive levels. I provided the stronger epistemic enquiry, because of my commitment to use evaluation learning in improving theoretical frameworks of my facilitating the evaluation and wider rural community development and equipping others in that, and because of my particular interest in empowerment of people out of crisis-oriented situations to ones of dignified, self-responsible action.

For the Service, the evaluation sub-committee was actively engaged in the primary cognition level through their committed collaboration with the University team members. And they were playing a role of increasing significance with the University in terms of what was being done, by whom and how - that is, the meta-cognition level. As co-ordinator, I was committed to this increasing interdependency for the purpose of mutual informing and equipping because of what we had to offer each other in a complementary sense. Non-evaluation sub-committee members could be represented anything from that shown for the evaluation subcommittee to only a dotted line of the primary cognitive level, where there was not a lot of early understanding or involvement in the participatory approach.

To a large extent, the lines in the following model (Fig. 15, over) representing Service members have more uniformity than in the first model. All members by this point in the interaction had participated actively and effectively in the primary task of better understanding and improving what the Service basically does for struggling farm families in the Southern Riverina. They began participating in meta-cognitive learning by explicitly looking at how they go about doing that, utilizing the likes of the experiential learning process to equip them in becoming better learners in the first process. And they have at least acknowledged that there are issues of epistemic nature that need exploring in the near future, such as reconsidering how the Service knows what it is and what is important to it. That in turn would have possible implications to the Service mandate, the future existence of the Service and the relationship to broader issues of rural development.
In 1993, the Service stated that it wanted organizational learning issues as the desirable focus of its next evaluation. The Service felt that while there would always be ways of improving its basic service to struggling farm clients, that this was proceeding well and was not the issue for its next evaluation. It recognized a combination of need to reconsider its vision in light of a context of changing times and of improving its effectiveness in process competency in being more proactive in its affairs than largely only reactive. For that to happen, it recognized that it had to be prepared to start considering how it goes about its learning as an organization, if fundamental change was to be included as a possibility. This growing shift in focus, even in its infancy, (illustrated in Fig. 16, over) marked one of
the most important affirmations of the strength of the former participative approach to create real and emergent change in the way the Service views itself and operates.

Fig. 16: Future interactions between the Service and the University or other 'outside' facilitator

Understanding and improving how the Service learns and adjusts as an organization

Future evaluation commitment is a focus on how the Service adjusts to changes in its environment and mandate, recognizing the need to explore what influences how it learns, for that strategic adjustment to be effective.

Ultimate learning goal

This new priority, from my perspective, has been one of the most significant points of Service learning during my relationship with it. Between April 1990 and February 1991, I had raised issues with the rural counsellor, evaluation sub-committee and sparingly with other committee members to the degree of their willingness at the time to consider them. These included processes of organizational learning and what informs
that, strategic positioning, group well-being and group skills. Now in 1993 I had opportunity to spent an hour with the Service group going through the triple loop learning model and supportive models and notions. The Service now anticipated that reduced crisis management support would require them to start giving more attention to other possible endeavours. It stated its unanimous commitment to addressing (when it could in the future) changes to the Service shape and ways of building internal and external organizational fit.

I asked how members felt about facilitating the new process themselves, on the basis of them using the experiential learning-oriented methodology utilized during the first evaluation. However, the Service still felt that that was beyond its capacity to accomplish on its own, so would require an outside facilitator(s) for such a process. I suggested one approach could be a process being facilitated for the Service creating its own process of strategic management, but that they do the ‘action’ phase of that themselves. This could be supported by explicit Service equipping during the evaluation process-creating phase in aspects that would help self-strategic evaluation. These could include the likes of interpersonal communicating (especially with regards group skills) and multi-level organizational learning (after Kitchener, 1983; Normann, 1985; Salner, 1986). I modelled and discussed the relationship between cognition, metacognition and epistemic levels of learning - each within the context of the Service. We highlighted the significance of the latter two levels to strategic fit, exploring issues relating to how the Service goes about doing what it does and why and the importance of maintaining the relevance of both. The awareness and significance of these had only been tentatively emerging for some by the end of the 1990 evaluation, so it was encouraging to see the growing awareness of issues expanding beyond beyond those of the rural counsellor and his clients.

**Observation:** the evaluation is not finished. It moved into the post-evaluation future through enhanced awareness and new monitoring and evaluation structures and procedures the committee and rural counsellor set in place (along with other kinds of Service improvements outlined earlier in this chapter and in Chapter Four).

**Reflections:** these in ways minimize need for some changes to the Service for some time to come, in terms of allocative and operational management.
However, in another sense the Service was only beginning to become aware of the group of major issues above, about which feedback by the our team had been given to the Service during the participative evaluation - that of greater strategic fit (Arogyaswamy and Byles, 1987) and complementary organizational culture and leadership style (Hames, 1991). There was new and growing recognition by the Service committee and rural counsellor of the relevance of these aspects by the end of the evaluation and the emerging desire over time to begin exploring them.

THE IMPACT OF FUNDING CONSTRAINTS ON THE EVALUATION

Observations: in Chapter Three it was briefly mentioned that funding affected methodology and outcomes. The reality of the $2500 Service allocation towards the action researched evaluation had implications in limiting the options for what was done and how and when things were done.

Reflections: a question I put to myself and to the collaborative team, both before, during and after the evaluation, was should perspectives and suggestions of more clients of the Service have been accessed - either more than the thirteen couples interviewed or all of the then more than 130 past and present clients? I had thought about utilizing questionnaires to all clients or telephone interviewing additional clients. But this was only ever considered as a complement to my commitment to in-depth interviews, not instead of them.

An additional possibility was telephone interviewing a random cross-sample of the Southern Riverina farming community for their level of awareness of the Service - of its existence and purpose and its potential range and availability of support for struggling families. I asked an undergraduate collaborator if she would like to take responsibility for either this or the previous additional client interviewing as her own separate, though evaluation-linked, project. However, like other team members, she did not have the time. And the necessary finances were always going to be problematic too. I would have liked to have undertaken the additional data gathering if it had of been possible. The benefits of accessing more clients were twofold. Firstly, more data may have added validity to the existing clients' perspective of the Service - although the combination of the careful selection of client interviewees, the consistency of their perspectives and the appropriateness of the data
gathering techniques for the nature of the research suggests that this would not have been a significant advantage. Only one committee member at the evaluation of the evaluation suggested less emphasis on their process as participating committee and more on accessing the views of more Service clients. The greater benefit from my perspective would have been for ongoing research competency purposes. I could have improved my research competency through critically reflecting on the effectiveness of a greater variety of research methods and techniques utilized had we had the luxury of more finance, time and personnel.

Funding to allow longer time for me and/or a research assistant to remain in the Riverina would have enhanced the evaluation in two ways. Ease and quickness of data assimilation and its validation with the full spectrum of interviewees would have been helped by funding for a portion of the School research facilitating team remaining in Deniliquin for a further week or so immediately following the main July data gathering. The second principal benefit of more funding would have been the opportunity for longer time in the Riverina for Faculty to interact with the whole committee at key points in the process for purposes of enhanced emancipatory research. This may have aided more profound strategic equipping of the Service in terms of how and why it goes about doing what it does.

Quicker completion of the evaluation would also have been enhanced by funding for a research assistant who could give three months full attention to the data gathering, data assimilation and strategic planning phases. But contextual realities of finance, size and significance of the evaluation meant this might only be a consideration for future, larger evaluations elsewhere.

I had also hoped to incorporate perspectives from two neighbouring rural counselling services for different reasons. The first was the rural counsellor in Cobram (Victoria) for his somewhat regular interaction with the Service from its formation onwards. The second was from the then Mallee Crisis Committee (Northwestern Victoria) because I appreciated what I had read of their more integrated community development approach in working with struggling farm families. However, limited funding curbed this desirable but lower priority involvement.
Participative and emancipative action research approaches are time-consuming and require high people input. Where there is choice for such approaches based on commitment to bringing about real situation improvement as an incorporated element of collaborative enquiry, funding may become somewhat problematic if extensive living expenses are required. I made a strong effort to minimize such University team costs and some legitimate expenses and sacrifices were carried by several members personally (both Service and myself).

It is worth considering possible funding sources for future rural counselling service evaluations. Such help could enhance the quality and speed of approaches with participatory commitment, thus addressing some of the impacts above related to limited funding. Local business houses or farmers’ associations or large non-local corporations could be approached to contribute. To date that would have been problematic because of the struggling economic climate for sections of rural Australia. All rural counselling services have to find twenty five percent local funding of their total expenses. This has not been easy for most services. And there were those who were approached as obviously relevant ongoing contributors in the Southern Riverina, who were significantly impacted by rural hardship, who would not contribute to its running, let alone to an ‘extra’ cost like an evaluation. So this was not a possibility for the evaluation behind this thesis. And it would probably be difficult for the Service in the future, because of no local regional centre with its large businesses. However, I would search out this option elsewhere in the future. Funding groups concerned could be provided with an appropriate executive summary of process and outcomes and also with kudos through a local newspaper article mentioning the evaluation and their support of it.

In concluding, there have been significant financial restraints that affected the richness and quick conclusion of the evaluation. The two major evaluation expenses incurred were overall travelling and the living expenses for the University team during the main interview week. Shortening the overall duration of such an activity to less than six months is desirable, even with part-time participation. Faced with that aim and with commitment to people-centred and learning and action-oriented processes and outcomes, I would adopt a different approach if faced with similar funding limitations in the future. I would maintain a pilot interviewing period, but combine it with orientation and process
equipping of participating organizational members. And I would maintain an evaluation of the whole action research activity several months after the activity action phase concluded. However, I would reduce the number of individual interviews; raise the number of focus group-type interviews; perhaps reduce the size of the interviewing team (if a self-evaluation by the organization itself was not being facilitated by one or two ‘outsiders’); allow more time for perspective and data assimilation at interview time; reduce the thoroughness of the second validating assimilation process; and workshop emerging issues and decisions for action at the end of the main interview period, not return a further time after leaving for a long assimilation period. Such changes would reinforce the importance of careful consideration of which kinds of perspectives and how many were sought and with how they were utilized for short-term action and learning. The changes would also mean sacrificing a degree of richness and validation for the expedient concluding.

EVALUATION IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY

Observation: there were several outcomes that the participative evaluation indirectly contributed to the School around rural counselling, rural hardship and rural development in general.

Reflection: the School had one prior involvement with the rural counsellor of the Service (through a final year undergraduate’s project) and with rural counselling and related issues elsewhere in Central Western New South Wales. Yet the pertinence of this evaluation to the School has increased over time with a number of interactions, research with banks and the Rural Adjustment Authority and opportunities for collaborative enquiry opening up over time as a result of the evaluation. They follow.

It has expanded the School’s outreach and research network for staff and students, not just in the Southern Riverina, but through the enquiry to others elsewhere within or close to the Rural Counselling Programme.

It has enhanced new learning endeavours by undergraduates and postgraduates through courses I provide. This has included supervising Honours theses related to rural counselling, as well as my co-ordination of
three related Coursework Masters Subjects - especially 'Crisis, Adjustment and Development'.

We now have relationships with several rural finance corporations. As a result of the evaluation experience and contacts built through it with a regional banking mediator and the NSW Rural Adjustment Authority, I created the way for collaborative research into issues of rural hardship by a range of people. After several months of my preliminary negotiations and also co-initiating creation of a student/staff interest group around issues of rural hardship, twelve final year undergraduates undertook 1991 research. It involved three related themes funded by and in association with the Rural Adjustment Authority and the New South Wales-based banking corporations of State, National Australia and Westpac - and for which the students produced substantial reports.

It has provided me (and, to varying degrees, other team members) with improved ways of evaluating other rural counselling services, if the opportunity arises.

I have drawn community-based resource personnel into contributing to School of Agriculture and Rural Development's activities. Our School learning paradigm sees all students in collaborative, client-based learning. And our student assessment similarly incorporates such outsiders in validating project work, assessing graduation documents and presentations and in providing the School with necessary feedback on our performance in equipping students with competency relevant to work contexts. In this line, I have introduced multiple staff from the Rural Adjustment Authority, three banking corporations and NSW Agriculture (State Government) into the School's activities. So in all, the implications flowing-on from the evaluation for the School and University have significance.

**Has understanding of participative evaluation and strategic planning increased and has practice of participative evaluation and strategic planning improved?**

While the context of reflections in this section is the participative evaluation of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service, the following perspectives use that to also move on to more generic issues of participative evaluation - of critique and learning outcomes whose
benefits can be transferred to other times and contexts where people enquire together for informed change. The issues are explored in four sections:

* maintaining confidentiality: a transferrable process issues that worked well in the evaluation

* the participative action research team

* matters that constrained and matters that may have enhanced the evaluation

* participative action research - is it research or consultancy?  

MAINTAINING CONFIDENTIALITY: A TRANSFERRABLE PROCESS ISSUES THAT WORKED WELL IN THE EVALUATION

Observation: confidentiality between different combinations of evaluation participants (interviewees, committee, rural counsellor and University) has been appropriately maintained in the Service evaluation. Client confidentiality had been stressed to our University team. Only the rural counsellor knew those clients interviewed and only the University team knew the source of particular client contributions to the evaluation. And several other sessions upheld confidentiality where tactful sharing and action was required of University members. However, the team felt that this did not impede the effectiveness of the evaluation as a participative process, so far as the committee and rural counsellor taking self-responsible action to improve the Service. It raises a question of participative approaches if confidentiality is potentially an issue for any immediate participants or perspective contributors.

Reflections: perspective gathering and assimilation by process participants external to the evaluated organization is necessary where requirements of confidentiality of interviewee identification and contribution to any in that organization exist (as was the case with interviewed clients of the Service). I believe equipping for, and full participation in, every aspect of an evaluation by an organization's members is desirable, whenever confidentiality is not an issue to preclude such full participation. I believe this should be the case, even if an external facilitator is utilized, in cases of evaluations of more introspective nature such as for strategic planning and organizational learning.
capacity, as desired by the Service for its next evaluation. Yet that requires the presence of trust, respect and acceptance of participants one to another.

Developing and maintaining trust throughout the organization was hardly even mentioned in discussions of leadership until the late 1980's. The leader's function is not to develop trust in themselves, but to increase the level of trust throughout the organization. *Organizations cannot have empowerment without trust;* trust is the soil in which empowerment can bloom. And both are necessary if employees are to align themselves with organizational goals.

World Vision Australia (Draft Paper), 1994

THE RESEARCH TEAM AS A TEAM

A variety of issues around improving team make-up, team building and team performance have already been raised during the course of the thesis. What follows is several related observations and reflections, with suggestions for future improvements included in the latter.

**Observation:** participative team effectiveness or performance is inseparable from team make-up. One of the outstanding process lessons of the workshop was affirmation that all enquiry team participants need to be at least aware and agreeing of enquiry purpose, aims and process early in the formation of a participative evaluation, if not desirably participating in creating those.

**Reflection:** the factor of the semi-voluntary nature of the Service and its appointment of an evaluation sub-committee of three, when combined with the expectation by some other committee members of a somewhat traditional consultative-type evaluation process, resulted in early misunderstandings for some committee members about the nature and outcomes of the evaluation in which they eventually fully participated. We were committed to regular adjustments of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on the basis of collaboration between University and Service sub-committee (or even portions thereof) around ongoing process and evaluation ‘content’. There were understandable limitations as to how much of this participation the sub-committee shared with the whole
committee in between times when the whole University and Service team participated together. The approach of using a sub-committee was a pragmatic reality. However, in future when at all possible, I would see it as crucial that the whole of an enquiry team shares that initial creation, even if they then only participate at selected critical points of the task thereafter (with suitable orientation at those times linking all aspects).

That initial establishing period should equally involve, if at all possible, explicit equipping of participants in competency areas necessary for team members to both participate fully in the task at hand, as well as learn how to do that better. The latter, especially, is vital for the dignity and empowerment or transformation of each person. My beliefs and values and the principles of community development demand such consistency. Orientation of University team members was sound, as detailed in Chapter Three. However, greater orientation and participation together by all Service committee members in the early stages of the evaluation would have enhanced all outcomes. This was rectified in the second half of the evaluation, with beneficial impact, as confirmed early in this chapter in the Service's own critique.

Observation: I noted that awareness or ignorance of team member beliefs and values, both of self and others, impacted on relationships and evaluation effectiveness.

Reflections: personal beliefs and values are important because of their influence on how members see and act in their ‘worlds’. Firstly members need to be revisiting the assumptions that lie behind their own thoughts and actions if they are going to be able to explore new ways of understanding and improving the situation being action researched. And secondly, an awareness of what significantly influences colleagues aids potential team openness and creativity, rather than confuses or hinders it (Johnson and Johnson, 1991). And it can allow helping each other fulfill individual agendas. It is important that one neither denies nor is unconscious of ones own beliefs. The need is acknowledging their existance and of related values, vision, agendas and assumptions. I found this a little problematic in the evaluation of the Service. Historically, Australian rural culture, as noted earlier through Poiner (1990) has been reticent to share important beliefs with others, in part because it could not see the ‘pragmatic’ relevance to the task at hand.
Related to this is the inhibition of shared meaning through inter-participant communication that is so necessary for effective collaborative action. Otherwise research participants have little understanding of each other's agendas, worldviews and frameworks that influence what we do with the interactions behind creating our shared feeling, meaning and action. And if that has not occurred they are unlikely to have recognized the importance of comprehending the significance of understanding the contexts within which participants' assumptions and actions springing from them have occurred (as is noted by Brookefield in Chapter Two).

Observation: team cohesion, that "sense of caring for and commitment to other group members" (Johnson and Johnson, 1991), is important to effective collaboration. Perhaps an easily overlooked factor that contributes to team cohesion is being able enjoy spending even a little time with each other beyond the task itself.

Reflection: mutual enjoyment would be less important in non-participative approaches and ones not given to beneficial change as an integral part of the enquiry process. However, for University team members, relationship development was inevitable, given the participative approach, the shared travelling, accommodation and eating arrangements for the evaluation and also our ongoing interactions through University and personal links. And the shared July meal between the Service and University team members contributed to greater mutual awareness, trust and enjoyment. I was conscious of more formerly recognized steps for building cohesion, as noted in group dynamic books like Bormann and Bormann (1976), such as highlighting group identity and goals, recognizing and 'rewarding' contributions, seeing members as people not machines and building tradition. These were featured in most University team member relationships. In the future I will be more conscious of these with regards any team members who only participate periodically, such as occurred with the majority of committee members.

Correspondingly, it is equally important to be effective in beneficially managing diversity and conflict within the team. This was an issue at times. A level of personal commitment and professional integrity shared by University team members, informed by course-related theoretical frameworks of interpersonal communication, allowed a number of tension
points and differences to become useful points for learning. A couple of tools to that end were also shared with the Service for small 'equipping' ends. The Johari Window (Luft & Ingham in Staley, 1982) was shared during the evaluation and notions of the Mackay and Jones model of communication (1992) shared in the October 1993 Service Bi-monthly meeting. Several references I found useful have been included in the Bibliography for further suggested reading.

THE IMPACT OF BELIEFS, VALUES AND AGENDAS

**Observation:** I was conscious that my philosophy and methodologies should not inappropriately drive the evaluation action rather than have the situation itself determine or at least strongly influence it (while acknowledging the influence of me as reality shaper and change agent as per Guber and Lincoln, 1989).

**Reflections:** a query on this was raised during one of the my research progress presentations at University postgraduate programme critiquing sessions. Points relevant to this on which had been prior reflection were firstly, that thinking critically impels folk to be aware of underlying beliefs, values and assumptions that inform thinking and acting (Brookfield, 1987). This is necessary if one is to be able to think and act in anything but habitual ways, or at least in critically affirmed previous ones.

Secondly, I believed it important that collaborators were aware of how each saw their world and sought, to the degree of readiness and interest of Service folk, to share this - in my case, particularly my conviction of the significance to view crisis and rural counselling in terms of their relationship to rural community development. And related to this is the third point of awareness and openness of individual agendas. Action research normally entails corporately shared agenda in terms of commitment to improve a situation that is in some way mutually owned or of common interest. But in another sense individuals also have unique agendas based on their roles, beliefs, professional goals and the like. Sharing what these are is important because of its impact on corporate owned and enacted improvement, but also so collaborators can help each other to achieve their individual aspirations.
I found this has not been unlike other experiences where folk were hesitant to explore what were seen as personal matters and unnecessary to a collaborative task. I explored ways to facilitate overcoming that reticence that I heard from several committee members. Staley (1982) provides one technique of sequential questions. I have also utilized photolanguage with willing non-Service folk to develop this competency in other activities during the evaluation period and feel it should at least be considered for utilization in future evaluations.

MATTERS THAT CONSTRAINED THE EVALUATION AND CRITICALLY REFLECTED ALTERNATIVES THAT MAY HAVE ENHANCED IT

I have explored a number of perceived constraints related to how we went about the participative evaluation. I did so with the view to learning how I might improve such aspects in future enquiry. The format is to simply raise the issues one after the other in a format of 'observation' and 'reflection'.

Observations: two observations were made of significant constraints to the participative approach and about which alternative considerations would have to be given in any future collaboration between either me individually and the University and others beyond the University. Firstly, there have been constraints for University and Service committee alike with regards the limited amount of time available that was desirable for effective participative action research (given the time required for its experiential learning and interpersonal relationships). Secondly, there was lack of initial understanding of the University's participative approach to the evaluation by 'non-evaluation sub-committee' committee members.

Reflections: this point led several committee members thinking University evaluation team members were too process-oriented, though understanding and valuing the nature and purposes of that has changed through and since the evaluation for those who did not begin appreciating it early during the evaluation.

It can be hard attaining a meeting of minds between others and the University when the University proposes co-enquiry, even when proposals for co-enquiry have been put forward for dialogue and resulting adjustments. People 'outside' the University, both in the wider community
in general and within academia not inclined towards experiential learning, can be expectedly limited in exposure to concepts and academic aspects of the co-enquiry and 'real world' improvement nature of action research. Time is needed to develop relationships to alleviate contrary assumptions and purposes.

Despite beneficial Service-oriented evaluation outcomes, the most striking action research process-related learning outcome was the need to ensure that the whole participating evaluation ownership team (in this case especially all committee members) were equally aware and owning of the process early in the facilitation relationship. Sharing creating process enhances empowerment of all 'owners'. In hindsight, I should not have assumed the Service evaluation sub-committee would inform and orient the wider committee early on adjustments to initial Service assumptions and guidelines about the evaluation purpose and shape.

Notions of empowerment explored in Chapter Six are linked with above notions - firstly of sequentially creating processes of process and secondly of the integration of 'internal' awareness, will and competency and 'external' networking, support and advocacy as two essential ingredients of social change, or more particularly rural community-based organizational learning and rural community development.

The importance is more fully realized of orientating and equipping all members (partial or full enquiry term, voluntary or paid) to the point where the team is interdependent. Each team member needs a suitable understanding of the nature and process of the research project. They also need to know something of the assumptions, learning styles, experience and expertise each one brings to the team. And they need the emerging competence to each play their part in that - especially by way of interpersonal communication and group skills; collaborative learning and researching; and the ability to work with complex, unsolvable situations.

Observation: important research lessons included improving assimilation of perspectives and data and consciously focussing sufficient priority to assimilating in proportion to that given to collecting the perspectives and data and facilitating Service decision-making and action.

Reflections: more time in July for on-the-spot assimilation of data would have improved and quickened the evaluation considerably. This could
have been achieved by one or both of either lengthening the perspective gathering period to allow more immediate time allocated for assimilation after each interview or alternatively some University team members staying on in the Southern Riverina for some assimilation after the perspective gathering. In hindsight, a combination of both would have been preferrable.

An assumption of a minimum time allocation of one-for-three or four in gathering perspectives and data compared to then assimilating it, is a guide for the kind of collaborative, community-based, action-oriented enquiry commonly undertaken in our School by both students and staff. There appears a tendency for assumptions of significance, energy and perhaps glamour being attributed to ‘gathering’ social research data, compared to then working with that data. However, I have observed that preparation for, significance given to, and thoroughness in ‘assimilating’ provides the effectiveness and validity necessary in perspective or construction-based improved understanding and change (Guber and Lincoln, 1989).

Observations: there are methodology options that I did not utilize with the Service that could be considered for future evaluations. Soft systems methodology (SSM), after Checkland (1984) was an initially planned way of working participatively with the committee and rural counsellor to bring about understanding and improvement amidst the ill-defined complexity of multiple perspectives, issues and possible ways of improving the Service. As mentioned in Chapter Three, there was to be an initial overlaying or entwining of two related explicit methodologies - experiential learning and soft systems - within a paradigm of action research committed to critiqued, cyclic collaborative enquiry and action phases.

Reflections: the use of SSM did not clearly emerge. That statement in itself could be seen as problematic. Perhaps it was in part indicative of a methodological vagueness mid-evaluation by me as co-ordinator, as was seen by one contributing University member. I feel what was important about thinking systemmmically was my commitment from the beginning to notions of seeing and acting holistically that related to both my rural community development background and my belief system. A brief introduction to soft systems methodology was shared with the evaluation sub-committee for their equipping during the August 1990 mini-workshop with the evaluation sub-committee. However, they felt uneasy with this
option and preferred to pursue the manageable option for them of following the simpler methodology based on the experiential learning cycle (at that stage addressing 'what does it mean' in terms of the evaluation-created picture of the Service). I am still not convinced that the lack of pre-resolved soft-systems methodology was problematic. I am comfortable that the way the collaborative methodology emerged was both ultimately effective (in terms of an improving Service) and consistent with participative principles (with its enhanced evaluation direction and ownership by the Service and its emerging equipping in organizational learning). I have utilized both SSM and a prescriptive methodological use of the experiential learning cycle (ELCM) individually with groups. In hindsight I feel that the use of the ELCM is more readily understood and utilized in community groups, especially with voluntary groups where there are rarely working blocks of time beyond one day.

I explored one other matter related to methodology. I wanted to explore possibilities of whether I could enhance rigour in quantifiably measuring aspects of performance. I have begun to look at what Total Quality Management has to offer and refer you to Appendix 5.

IMPROVING DURATION OPTIONS FOR FUTURE PARTICIPATIVE EVALUATIONS

Observation: regular critical dialogue with different participants through the evaluation helped me learn potential ways of improving similar types of evaluations in the future. One learning aspect of evaluation design related to duration.

Reflections: there were a couple of occasions where individuals in the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service indicated that they would have appreciated speedier evaluation outcomes. Yet that was tempered with their understanding of some of the constraints we were under and that our participative approach was demanding different, emerging assumptions and expectations than the Service initially indicated. So this section makes some suggestions on designing more streamlined participative evaluations. In saying that, I'm neither presuming nor wanting participants in any new evaluation to accept what I suggest. I am rather putting forward suggestions that I suspect could better meet emergent expectations of participants of voluntary, rural, community-based groups. I would not abrogate my commitment to the genuine participation of evaluation stakeholders in any aspect - especially in the early process of evaluation.
design and participant orientation and equipping. That would not constitute good facilitation (Shields, 1991; Chinchén, 1992).

I would never envisage myself (or others with similar commitment to participative evaluation) attempting an evaluation on others' behalf. The reasons for that have been established throughout the thesis. However, there are options about which I am motivated to be involved. I will delineate them as poles of a participative spectrum, realizing that differences are relative in that each context is unique and requires dialogue to establish appropriate guidelines. The first option is where stakeholders of a group, issue or activity desire facilitation of their participation in at least 'minimal' essential elements of the evaluation process, that enables them to say the evaluation process and outcomes are essentially their own. The second option towards the other end of the spectrum is where stakeholders desire facilitation to help them ultimately self-create a recursively improving self-evaluation capacity ... to be strategically managing their own internal and external 'fit' (see Appendix 3 for a similar comparison of teacher-directed and self-directed learning). Yet I still suggest that there is a place for externally sharing aspects for external critiquing and mutual sharing of learning, networking and resources of such sustainable, triple-loop learning-based, self-evaluation.

The participative evaluation of the Service began more externally dependent than even the first option. However, through negotiation it quickly moved to the first option and over time began initial movement along the spectrum towards the second option. I see the minimal essential points of involvement of the first option that could justify the claim of being participative, being:

* stakeholders recognizing or accepting "constructive discontent" (Koberg and Bagnall, 1974) that creates reason for an evaluation/enquiry

* stakeholders negotiating with facilitators about their basic understanding, adjustment and acceptance of the proposed process

* stakeholders contributing to the articulation of how all those providing perspectives construct or see the context or issue under evaluation

* stakeholders hearing, clarifying and owning the assimilated picture of the context or issue and of the emerging issues for informed debate
* stakeholders affirming what is going well and deciding what is important about the emerging picture and issues that requires informed action, including prioritizing issues for action

* stakeholders deciding how they will act on the issues, including what will be done, by whom, how, when, et cetera.

* stakeholders evaluating the effectiveness of the evaluation.

External facilitation would be responsible for activity in between stakeholder participation (such as perspective gathering and assimilation) and also in facilitating that participation to make the above possible. However, you will appreciate for me, that I would make every effort early in negotiations to at least make stakeholders desiring an evaluation being aware of the potential and significance of developing self-evaluation competency.

PARTICIPATIVE ACTION RESEARCH - IS IT RESEARCH OR CONSULTANCY?

In Chapter Three I raised the issue of whether the participative evaluation should be described as consultancy or research. This may be a dilemma depending of how one defines research. As stated, I have not attempted to defend action research as an acceptable research paradigm. That has been done more than adequately by those noted in Chapter Three’s discussion on this thesis’s research approach. But I still wish to briefly discuss the evaluation in terms of whether there was any significance to it being an activity of consultancy rather than a community-based organizational research activity. It is necessary to clarify this matter given my emphasis on the primacy of action research in the evaluation. McGivern and Fineman (1980) note that traditionally 'scientists' produce theory and consultants solve practical problems. They go on to note increasing criticism of the distinction, based on the proposition of the reality of their inseparableness in the context of human behaviour:

for example, theories derived from research can only be validated in action, and that action - expressed in terms of changed behaviour - can only be promoted effectively through the use of valid theories of intervention (Argyris, 1970) and action (Argyris and Schon, 1974).
They go on to add to their argument, when talking of study and behavioural change, the importance to such critics of also enhancing human dignity and ensuring knowledge is not sterile but of practical benefit. But,

one of the consequences of pursuing these arguments is that the differences in practice between research and consultancy become unclear (Ibid.).

I mentioned in Chapter Three how McGiven and Fineman discuss a research-consultancy continuum; of the middle ground on it that such critics occupy; and that action researchers are included among those holding such middle ground. I only utilized their work to highlight my synthesis of traditional ways of viewing consultancy and research. I mentioned earlier that my conviction was that I could only understand the Service superficially if I was not closely engaged with it. Similarly I anticipated impoverished understanding and low 'ownership' of the evaluation by the Service committee and rural counsellor if they were not integrally involved as well. I recognize in that that the validity of the research could be challenged if beneficial change did not occur. And more significantly, ownership of the evaluation by Service members, and their enabling and envisioning would be put at risk.

All these elements have already been mooted earlier as characteristics or desired outcomes of action research. And they have been achieved - not in a quantifiable sense, but in ways participants have affirmed changes, noted earlier in the chapter, to how they individually and corporately think and act in ways they perceive as beneficial. Neither I nor the committee and rural counsellor now call the evaluation 'consultancy'. It certainly never could have in terms of the Service paying others to do their work. There was a net cost in reality to the University team. But even in nature, it was still not others doing work on behalf of the Service. As Service and University together, we increasingly embraced interdependent learning, action and research.

Some committee members saw the relationship as more consultative, rather than action research - especially early in the evaluation. The reason this happened is explained further below. However, I did not see
the enquiry as consultative. Desirably, I wanted a merging of participative and emancipatory action research in the Service evaluation - with an increasing emphasis of the latter over time in the blend. My longterm desire for the Service (shared with the Service) was eventual self-evaluation and capacity to effectively keep creating its own future in the complex, rapidly changing and at times unsupportive and even combative context enmeshing rural Australia. As a minimum, short-term realities such as distance and funding for our combined Richmond and Southern Riverina-based team (as well as different team member agendas, commitment and collaborative enquiry skills between and within the organizations) meant creating our own collaborative process and relationship and influencing of outcomes. If a consensual model could be developed representing a composite of all Service and University team members’ perspectives of the evaluation from beginning to end (considering their different and changing expectations and appreciations), it may look something like:

Fig. 17: A consensual model of the changing shape of the collaborative enquiry:

![Diagram]

Lessons have been learned as to how participative evaluation could have been more effective and principles were extracted that may be helpful for other times and contexts. However, it highlights how every action-research situation is unique and needs to be treated that way. There is no generic ‘fit all’ approach or outcome. But I am convinced thoughtful convictions about vision are a necessary complement to bring about desirable and feasible rural community and organizational transformation. And it was my goal to in some small way contribute towards that long process - hence my commitment, as one member of the
team (albeit as co-ordinator), to participatory and even emancipatory action research.

My action research is multi-purposed and interlinked in those purposes. I have interest in action researching as methodology (for the purpose of interpretive frameworks) and paradigm - but with a purpose of understanding and facilitating rural organizations and communities exploring issues of their development. But what of the context in which my action researching has taken place? More specifically, what are the implications of researching a task context of a participative evaluation within a structural context of a rural, community-based organization? This raised questions for me about semi-voluntary organizational and community learning in rural contexts where severe hardship is the experience of many; of how that is transformed to where people experiencing such hardship have the dignity and capacity to choose what they do about that; and of the role of facilitators in that empowering of organizations and communities.

Such issues are taken a little further in Chapter Six, because they were significantly my explicit interest and my explicit learning and issues for further research - not explicit interest of all who participated in the evaluation. To that latter end, I now conclude, but introduce you further to the personalized realities that is action research ... to matters I saw or suspected were issues and on which I subsequently explored for my own benefit.
CHAPTER SIX

TRANSEVALUATION RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The focus of this thesis has been articulating the action research of the participative evaluation and strategic planning of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service. It could have concluded at the end of Chapter Five if I chose to limit research outcomes to that immediate collaborative activity. That in itself challenged me substantially because of the multiplicity of its commitments. The thesis differed from the more traditional arguing a proposition on the basis of either theory testing or theory constructing. Instead, as noted in Chapter Three, it embraced this different research paradigm, called action research. The paradigm involved recursive cycles of entwined finding out and taking action in a real situation where improvement was desired. It did so to achieve five corporate research team objectives, whose explanation and fulfillment have been documented in the first five thesis chapters. The objectives were:

* to understand more about the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service
* to improve the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service
* to understand more about how to create that better understanding and improving of the Service, both by the Service and the University team in their facilitating role
* to get better at creating that improved understanding and improvement
* to promote public debate about the outcomes of the preceding four objectives. The first reason for this debate was for public critiquing of the action research (albeit informally because it was audible, not published) and any further learning associated with that with regards those objectives. The second reason was to contribute to wider public knowledge, both about the Service and the manner in which the University facilitated the participative evaluation process.

But the complexity behind this action research context extended further on several different themes of enquiry of my own. There was learning going on for me as an individual for which the Service evaluation provided context and reason, but which fell outside the collaborative evaluation objectives shared corporately by the Service and University. Many possibilities confronted me of relevant themes I could and wanted to
pursue, given the 'real-life' and personalised nature of action research. Some of the themes related to rural sociology; communication, particularly for those suffering stress; counsellor 'burnout'; organizational learning and change, especially enhancing triple loop learning; issues unique to rural semi-voluntary organizations; notions related to empowerment; various themes of rural community development as noted in Chapter Two; and others. It is the purpose of this chapter to at least recognize and briefly discuss the more compelling themes of my own enquiry. I will explore them by means of five sub-theses that I outlined early in Chapter One.

MY LEARNING BEYOND THE PARTICIPATIVE EVALUATION OF THE SOUTHERN RIVERINA RURAL AVISORY SERVICE

These 'additional' thesis themes principally related to propositions and issues on which I as an individual desired a degree of research outcome. They were issues of enquiry that, bar the last on the nature of the rural counselling programme, exercised me professionally long before the evaluation. The evaluation provided further opportunity to apply and explore them. Yet they shall continue to exercise me into the future. In a sense they could be viewed as an addendum to both the collaborative research and its documentation. As an individual within the research team, I had unique expectations and agendas from the collaborative research, besides the corporate commitment to improving the Service and the way that was done. I came to the evaluation with a number of generic research issues related to my profession as a nurturer of people-centred rural development. And this chapter records those - firstly because of evaluation affirming and learning, and secondly as a forerunner of further research into them or publication beyond this thesis. The sub-theses are:

* that action research is a desirable and potentially powerful tool for creating rural social change through community-based organizations and communities

* that significant empowerment of individuals, organizations and communities is strongly enhanced by people having processes to create the processes of their life-learning endeavours
* that non-Western theoretical frameworks of rural community development (based on the South World) have wide applicability to understanding and working in Australian rural contexts, especially those where hardship and crisis are significant.

* that the organizational learning capacity of voluntary, rural Australian, community-based, development-oriented organizations is, by nature, problematic given its fundamentally reactive culture

* a threefold sub-thesis that the Rural Counselling Programme per se has an inbuilt propensity to be reactive rather than proactive; that this is problematic given the complexity and rapidly changing face of rural Australia; and that individual counselling services who comprise the programme need to become ongoing learning organizations to flexibly change to the point of creating their own futures

The first three sub-theses were theory testing, based on development theory I had pursued for my overseas development interests. The last two sub-theses were theory constructed largely from participant observation in the participative evaluation in the Service, although their learning also contributed to further understanding of past and present overseas development interests.

**Sub-thesis One**: that action research is a desirable and potentially powerful tool for creating rural social change through community-based organizations and communities

One research theme I individually explored and also considered as the main thesis approach was the proposition that action research’s collaborative manner is a potentially powerful tool for sustainable community development and social research. At one stage I considered writing a purely theory-testing based thesis. The intention was to explore and validate this proposition through a methodology of experientially validated participative action research - validation established on specific ‘success’ or effectiveness criteria of improving the Service through the evaluation and improving how such improving is done. However, I chose instead to focus on participative evaluation, utilizing action research as paradigm and philosophy, as well as methodology, and to document it all accordingly.
I hence viewed the proposition of action research's potential for creating change as important, yet one that was already implied. It was imbedded in assumptions of action research's definition incorporating collaborative commitment to 'real world' change. The credentials of action research have been well established by others, as cited in Chapter Three. And in Chapter Two I explained why action research was significant to me on the basis of my beliefs, values and actions expressed through the interdependent facets of rural community development, learning, designing and communicating. I did not seek to justify action research in the thesis as a valid paradigm of research. I just utilized and stated it and assumed the validated benefit to the Southern Riverina brought about through the participative evaluation was self-evidence of action research's potential to create social change, thus validating the proposition.

The second aspect of the proposition was that social change induced by action research enhances sustainable rural community development. Community development by definition implies directed beneficial change by and of people self-responsibly acting together for their shared and individual well-being (Christenson and Robinson, 1989; Oakley, 1991; Chambers, 1986). The dignity of people having that right and opportunity to self-responsible, empowered living is, I might add, the reason I see for action research's 'desirability' in the proposition. 'Sustainability' implies that beneficial change will persevere. Action research, effectively done, enhances both. Because of its collaborative, cyclic, critically-informed adjusted action, it creates and supports communities becoming learning communities proactively creating their own futures in a present continuous sense. Effective action research is developmental and sustainable by nature. I see that as its purpose and process. It is one reason why I see the terms 'action research' and 'community development' synonymously, when the action research is community-oriented contexts of people working together for learned change that benefits all - the foundations of which are interpersonal processes of ongoing publically critiqued, multi-cognition levelled, experiential learning.

Beneficial change of the Service by the Service has and is occurring and through that change contributing, in its clients and in member
contributions beyond the Service, to the well-being of the Southern Riverina. The role of the action researched-based participative evaluation in that benefit affirms that action research is a desirable and potentially powerful tool for creating rural social change through community-based organizations and communities.

Sub-thesis Two: that significant empowerment of individuals, organizations and communities is strongly enhanced by people having processes to create the processes of their life-learning endeavours

People taking self-responsibility for their own development and the empowerment\(^1\) behind that that enhances capacity to be able to be self-responsible is a pervasive theme of the overall thesis. To me, such capacity requires integrating the interplay of awareness, understanding and acceptance of the present context and its roots in the past; a vision for what could or should be in the future (which might well be process and relationship-oriented in an ongoing sense, rather than for some future 'end' in mind); the ability and equipping to create that future from the present onwards; the will to do it; and, if necessary, the invited contributions of external partners' support, advocacy and networking.

Creating inter-related processes of change is one aspect of that capacity whose significance emerged in stages in my thinking from the mid-seventies to mid-eighties through reflecting on my overseas development experiences. I perceived the notion to be filling a void in much development literature. I noted in Chapters One and Two why I think 'participation' and 'empowerment' are important and how they are linked. I noted that Awa's sense of participation incorporates people's mental and emotional involvement, motivation to contribute and acceptance of responsibility coupled with their involvement in community action. However, I mentioned that for me, as part of capacity inherent in empowerment, that it was also important that participants consciously create **how** that intent is fulfilled and **how** they can keep improving

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\(^1\) I use 'empowerment' inclusive of the affirming sense of people having the opportunity and capacity to live and fulfill their choices and mutual responsibilities - although I might add the disaffirming complement - without the indignity, hopelessness, fear and untenable choices created through exploitation by others. See Rappaport (1987).
process creation and enaction on which that fulfillment is based. In that way, participants can take full responsibility for discovering and creating their emerging futures and not be continually dependent on others to help them make that happen. I see the ‘process of process’ factor as perhaps the most common missing factor of empowerment - and that this is not just so for ‘participants’, but for those invited to help facilitate initiating that process.

Facilitation is reality in most circumstances for that self-capacity to begin to catalyze into action. However, facilitators will need to consciously create their own processes for helping others create their own process for creating the task process - and to do so in a manner that does not abuse principles of participation. My observations around the world when ‘outside’ consultants or facilitators have been involved is that they have still inevitably created the process of change for folk to explore, even when they have been committed to participatory processes for the community or organizational activity at hand. Intent for participation, not mere partial involvement, has been there as evidenced by the open agenda for participants to decide what is important to them on which to act. Unfortunately, even that has been influenced by the assumptions and decisions made by the consultant on her unconscious ‘imposition’ of process (and often general agenda). This is a particular risk when the facilitator has power over finances and personnel appointments. However, I strongly believe participation that is really empowering is more linked to supporting participants begin consciously learning how to learn to create their own learning (or development) processes.

This involves articulation of different types of linked processes, as well as different roles for different players participating in any of those types. The Service’s participative evaluation is a case in point, though one with inbuilt modifiers to my principle of creating conscious processes of process. I’m not suggesting a prearranged, imposed process. I previously described my initial desire to work with the Service to help the committee and rural counsellor create their own process for them to self-evaluate their Service. There were to be four entwined processes at work. However, several ‘realities’ meant adjusting my early aspirations.

Initially the Service had an expectation of a somewhat traditional consultancy-type evaluation, where the evaluation would be largely done
for it. I accept that where the Service was at the time, in terms of its organizational learning competency and its constraints as a semi-voluntary rural organization, meant calling on others to co-ordinate the evaluation. The committee fully comprised honourary members who infrequently met together as a group for several hours every two months. Fortunately my relationship with the evaluation sub-committee allowed some discussion of process-related matters. My aspirations for an increasingly participative, self-equipping evaluation process did take shape over time and the committee and rural counsellor have a clearer idea of a multi-process approach (as do I!). So my vision of the approach remains.

When situations of variable dependency like that of the Service occur that require facilitation, an approach such as that outlined in Chapter Five's 'Improving Duration Option's' is relevant - and relevant whether establishing a new activity or programme or strategically evaluating an existing one for improvement. It firstly includes an invited facilitator creating a process for participating 'owners' of the activity to create their process for creating the process of the task at hand, while building in a longer-term review process for strategic fit - in other words, a process of a process of a process! This would include negotiating early relevant equipping of participants in competencies necessary for them to accomplish their overall process - with this equipping in itself also having to occur consistent with participation's androgy. Key competency areas would relate to collaborative experiential enquiry and include notions of:

* learning: multi-cognition processes (after Salner, 1986; Normann, 1985; Bawden, 1989; & Mezirow, 1991); cultures of learning organizations and/or communities; interdependency (e.g. the Johari Window, learning styles, consensus)
* communicating: the process of interpersonal communication; healthy group relationships and task effectiveness; consensus
* designing: especially ex poste-, ex ante- and strategic evaluation; traits of, and hindrances, to creative 'problem solving'
* thinking: initially creatively and critically, perhaps followed by other ways of thinking, like systematically and ecologically
* collaborative enquiry: action learning/action research; specific interviewing, recording and data assimilation skills
* development frameworks: principles; historical perspectives; theories and models.

I have experienced and witnessed two other aspects of 'process of process' issues. The first is where organizations or departments espouse participatory principles in their community-based activities, and train staff in process-equipping to that end, but whose effectiveness is largely lost through supervisors acting in highly unparticipative ways in 'internal' organizational processes with those staff fieldworkers. Effective participation 'outside' organizations occurs best where it is consistently learned and witnessed experientially 'within'. Such consistency is echoed in Gibson's words (1979):

The real conflict is not about what people say they believe in - 'freedom', 'democracy', 'the rights of the individual', 'the public interest', 'social justice', 'the rule of law' - but what they do about it.

The second situation is where different organizations, each espousing participative principles, take on responsibility for different processes of an activity (or project) process sequence. There are commonly different people performing different roles related to funding, contracted facilitation, community organization and community participation. My experience in Australia and overseas has inevitably been either the facilitating or funding organization stipulates overall processes. This risks creating Awa's (1988) partial involvement by community participants or at best their participation in only the action phase of the activity. Unfortunately, empowerment in terms of enhancing community participants' capacity to increasingly take responsibility for creating their own self-directed learning is not enhanced. Indeed, structures of disempowerment are reinforced. There are examples in my mind for Africa and elsewhere (that will remain anonymous), where a development consultancy group utilized bilateral government or transnational company aid funding to collaborate with an in-country government department or organization to improve a community-based context. Fundamental design of process was done for participants (especially at the community level if not all in-country levels) thus limiting the process-oriented learning that lies behind increasing local participant capacity to more fully create their own futures.
A similar situation occurred recently with the manner of the 1994 Department of Primary Industries and Energy’s (DPI&E) national review of the rural counselling programme. In that case, one of the state rural counselling associations responded by requesting DPI&E agreement for the association to create an alternative rigorous, largely peer-evaluation based approach for both rural counsellors and service committees (local advisory groups). This would be done with initial facilitated experiential evaluation equipping in the first couple of years. This would be provided by a composite of resource organizations with complementary disciplinary and transdisciplinary expertise. The association perceived greater relevance, ownership and learning would result with an explicit process and skills-equipping approach ultimately done by themselves. I note that this would be consistent with some principles laid down by DPI&E itself for rural counselling service dealings with clients. DPI&E emphasis is for rural counsellors to help clients reach an understanding of their situation, have choices for self-direction and action and appropriate support to enable them to take their own remedial action. It is hoped that the same principle of supported self-direction will be encouraged with the rural counselling services in their own learning and evaluation too.

Reaction by others over the past five years to my sub-thesis of has been mixed. I am, as a result, open to modify the strength of my conviction of the significance of empowering participants’ competency in creating processes for creating processes of change. I must state that the participative evaluation of the Service and interactions with rural community-based groups since then has affirmed that conviction - as has the feedback of community development practitioners whose theoretical frameworks embrace understanding and commitment to emancipatory principles of self-determination and responsibility. In the process, I believe it has validated the sub-thesis. Criticism by way of the impracticality and unnecessarily philosophic orientation of my sub-thesis has tended to come from organizers of rural change who either do not see rural change in terms of the holism of rural community development or who strongly organize the way people ‘participate’ in their development. However, for now I will rest validation of the sub-thesis on the expressed emerging desire of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service to focus more of its attention on its own organizational learning capacity (see Chapter Five, ‘Organizational Learning of the Service’).
I do recognize several factors that temper my practice of the sub-thesis. I aspire to all participants having the opportunity to develop their 'process of process' competency. I regularly experience different degrees and time scales of significance, as well as perspectives, that participants give to my thesis. Yet I acknowledge people's integrity and right to take no interest in such matters. Where I am concerned is if there is not at least the capacity in someone or some people within organizations and communities who are recognised as a process of process provider for the rest of willing 'action' participants - even if all do not aspire to the competency. Another issue of potential self-creation and self-evaluation development activities is where it is perceived it is externally beneficial if people have the credibility and perhaps prestige of having an external evaluator or facilitator linked with them. External funding and perceived funding accountability may otherwise be the more common issue at stake.

A closing thought on empowerment is that it can have a mutuality about it like the synthesis and dialectic of the individual and community in community development (Aers, 1989; Banks, 1988; Peck, 1990). I as an individual am not developing as a personality or being culturally busy or contributing to my environment in a vacuum separate from the relationships and environment in which that takes part. My life and those around me are inextricably entwined, even with those on the other side of the world. I believe empowerment should be an ever evolving experience of all humans and that it usually does entail giving, receiving and sharing in social change situations. Freire highlighted this, as critiqued by McGinn in Srinivasan (1977) in his principles of 'conscientization' that:

-no one can teach anyone else
-no one learns alone
-people learn together, acting in and on their world.

Others should and can be empowered through my empowerment - whatever the degree of my own will, competency and choices involved. One example could be the arbitrary distinction between 'participant' and 'facilitator' in the sense that there is potentially interdependent learning for all around multi-levels of collaborative learning, be that learning associated with context and task or the process to understand and improve it. Each have something to offer the other in helping each other improve their respective professional praxis. This is one notion that I read into a
well-known statement attributed to an Australian aboriginal woman who said to a social change person entering her community to support the struggles of aboriginal people:

If you have come to help me, you can go home again. But if you see my struggle as part of your own liberation, then perhaps we can work together (anonymous)

... to which I would add,

and be empowered to grow together, if we help each other learn how.

Sub-thesis Three: that non-Western theoretical frameworks of rural community development (based on the South World) have wide applicability to understanding and working in Australian rural contexts, especially those where hardship and crisis are significant.

I accepted involvement in the Service evaluation predominantly to coordinate its collaborative execution on behalf of the Service and my University. However, I did so also with a strong individual agenda to test transferrability to Australian settings of key aspects of my non-Western-oriented contextual, paradigmatic and methodological frameworks of facilitating rural community development.

In 1972 I began work as a rural development officer in Papua New Guinea in a government extension programme. I have since lived and worked a number of years in 'grassroot' and institutional settings in Africa. Certain involvement in Papua New Guinea and especially in West and East Africa has been profound and crystallised some ways that helped me make sense of the complexity, challenges, constraints, inconsistencies, dilemmas, dilects and opportunities of rural community development (Dixon, 1989). The PNG programme was government-directed, economically-driven, export-oriented tropical agriculture. Disempowering and economically damaging aspects of that experience led to me shifting to more holistic rural community development approaches. I have been continually compelled as a result of those experiences, and observations of others' experiences, to explore and utilize interpretive and methodological
frameworks that would enhance and not diminish rural community development.

I am committed equally to both the development of rural communities by rural communities and the equipping in and for that - equipping both non-formally of communities and community-based organizations serving them, and formally through bodies like the University who equip facilitators for those contexts. Learning in this area heightened to the point of it becoming more like a learning journey that flowed into my 1990 onwards involvement with the Australian rural counselling programme. From my perspective I found I had ways from overseas of looking at the rural counselling programme that I believe many others, looking only from their Australian experience, did not. It informed how I saw the context of the Southern Riverina, as well as what I negotiated with the Service in terms of a participative evaluation approach.

I have previously mentioned the likes of the significance to me of committees of community-based groups; of the significance of proactive, strategic organizational and community fit where crisis and adjustment are involved; and the importance of networking and advocacy within and beyond the immediate community. I wished to utilize these overseas development and foreign aid frameworks, appraise them and adjust and add to them through the participative evaluation. I sought a greater mutual informing of overseas and local contexts one to another because of my ongoing involvement in both, but especially for the benefit of Australian rural community development.

This happened. The evaluation provided me with an excellent opportunity to test and affirm the thesis. Yet it is important to note that encouraging affirmation of the applicability of my non-Western context development frameworks to the Service and similar contexts came as a result of personal reflection and through discussion and feedback with postgraduate students and with people exploring similar issues of Australian rural hardship and of community development. Unfortunately, it did not come from Service members. I raised the matter several times, but Service ‘eyes’ during the action phase of the evaluation were focussed on more immediate rural counselling matters that taxed them, rather than on strategically important matters of where the Service and struggling clients integrated with wider rural life and social change.
My observations, reading and discussions revealed little use and understanding in New South Wales rural circles until the 1990's of the terms ‘rural development’ or ‘rural community development’ (other than ‘community development’ for largely health and welfare reasons during the 1970's and 1980's). Farming and farming support services' foci tended to be production and productivity-oriented (Bawden, 1989). It was also not unusual for programmes, such as the Rural Counselling Programme, to be established and entrenched as reactive and non-integrated responses to meet arisen needs. In recent years, I have explored four entwined aspects within my experiential enquiry ‘journey’ improving my understanding and contribution to complex contexts, particularly rural communities. I paid attention to related tools in the form of matrixes and models that help my development praxis and that help me to help others better understand theirs, especially if theirs is a newly emerging professional interest. The four aspects follow, after which I explore the first aspect as an example affirming the sub-thesis:

1. the importance of facilitators of change, rural communities and rural community-based organizations alike creating frameworks for integrated perspectives and action relevant to their participation in the diversity, inter-relatedness and at times conflict of issues, wishes and needs of members. In particular, I emphasize the development of the capacity (as defined in Sub-thesis Two) to transform contexts of people in dependency-oriented crisis situations to ones of self-responsible, interdependent change that complements the above refining of integrated frameworks of development. I explore this below largely through a matrix I have been adjusting for some years, after Miller (1978).

2. the need to view and interpret community contexts holistically in terms of levels, types, aims and impacts of 'players' and structures, because social change occurs in many forms and for many reasons. Considering local, regional, national and global perspectives and developing networks to integrate responses throughout that interrelated, interdependent network has long been an interest and challenge to me with regards overseas development purposes and more lately Australian rural development. I appreciate insights and matrixes of David Korten (1984; 1990; 1992b) to explore the complexity of players, structures and eras in development.
3. working with the diversity of disciplines and approaches of enquiry that consider complementary dimensions in systemmic, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary ways have also been important in my thinking and practice. My colleagues at the University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury and others are cited for further referral with regards holistic methodologies and paradigms for systemmic sustainable development - Bawden and Packham, (1993); Wilson and Morren, (1990); Checkland, (1984); Burrows, Mayne and Newbury, (1991).

4. meta beliefs and values, paradigms, methodologies and competencies that aid integrating my different integrating frameworks above. I cite references by Schaeffer (for example, 1970, 1973, 1982), Lewis (for example 1957), Triton (1978), Stott (1979), Gladwin (1979), Wright (1983) and MacDonald (1984); a matrixt by Cookingham (1994); as well as acknowledging other strong influences such as Rogers (1969), Freire (1970), Illich (1972) and Schumacher (1974) that help inform how I see and act holistically in my complex world.

I am challenged, as a facilitator of directed social change, with the complexity, ever-changing nature, and often impreciseness, that is ‘rural community development’. Christenson and Robinson (1989) state that, “first and foremost a community involves people”. They similarly state that another major component of ‘community’ is social interaction. I am challenged by understanding and working collaboratively with people ‘in community’ given their diversity of experiences, perspectives, issues, needs and aspirations. The following matrix (Fig. 18) is a tool I have found helpful in my African work settings. It was a prominent tool in my mind (among others) that lay behind the sub-thesis that non-Western frameworks of rural community development have wide applicability to understanding and working in rural Australian contexts, especially those where hardship is significant. The matrixt embraced both influence on me in my co-ordination of the participative evaluation, as well as ongoing learning through it.

I use the term ‘development’ in the matrixt heading in the general sense of all directed change across the range of contexts of community participants that implies improvement, benefit or growth. I distinguish that from the other common usage referred to as a mode within the matrixt that is aligned to the notion of self-help for those able and willing to do so.
A FRAMEWORK FOR FACILITATORS OF RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

A TOOL TO AID MAKING SENSE OF, AND ACTING ON, THE DIVERSITY AND INTER-RELATEDNESS OF SITUATIONS, ISSUES, NEEDS & WISHES IN & OF COMMUNITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODE</th>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
<th>PROCESS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RELIEF</td>
<td>CRISIS</td>
<td>SURVIVING</td>
<td>PROVIDING</td>
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<tr>
<td>REHABILITATION</td>
<td>DISABILITY</td>
<td>RESTORING NORMALICY</td>
<td>REMEDIAL THERAPY</td>
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<tr>
<td>WELFARE</td>
<td>CHRONIC DISABILITY</td>
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<tr>
<td>RECONSTRUCTION</td>
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<td>STARTING ANEW</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td>IMPoverishMENT</td>
<td>ENRICHING</td>
<td>FACILITATING SELF-RESPONSIBLE ACTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVISM</td>
<td>EXPLOITATION &amp; INJUSTICE</td>
<td>EMPOWERING &amp; DEMOCRATIZING</td>
<td>CONSCIENTISING/ NETWORKING/ SUPPORTING/ ADVOCATING/ CONFRONTING/MOBILIZING/REVOLTING</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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[My adaptation of a matrix in Miller's (1978) discussion paper, "Development that is Christian". Dale Williams, 1994]

In reality, distinctions between above modes do not occur - they are blurred - indeed, the matrix is merely a mental construct tool to clarify perceptions to guide appropriate action. For a facilitator to thoughtlessly approach, say, a 'development' mode with unconscious assumptions of knowing 'what's best for others' and acting in a directive, resource-providing, dependent-creating manner, then real development of self-responsible action by participants will likely be inhibited. Indeed, in my experience on several continents, it is likely to create barriers to real development for years to come. Once 'context' and 'purpose' are clarified, we must match appropriate processes to them. If there is a dominant
contextual need, such as might be the case with a widespread disaster, than choice of appropriate processes is made more simple. If the context is one of diversity of interests and aspirations, than an appropriate blending of responses is necessary, not simplistic encompassing solutions that do not match 'realities'.

An additional approach can be to add a third matrix dimension. These could consider alternatives. One could be physical, emotional and spiritual distinctives. Another could be disciplines and yet another could be explicit action learning cycles for each mode. I have found doing these quite useful. While assumptions and general nature of processes are similar, for say crisis contexts, methodologies in the diversity of the third dimension vary. One contrast would be a starving African child dying, unable to physically help herself, and an Australian farmer who is suicidal or emotionally paralyzed or completely broken mentally over the impending loss of her family farm. Both require directive intervention\(^2\) by others to ensure 'survival' (whether physical or emotional), but the expression of the intervention and competencies required of the interventionist(s) will be quite different and will need to be conscious of longer term outlook and processes. More often than not it seems situations have a blending of multiple facets within each mode, again requiring sensitivity of facilitator insight and interaction.

I do not see the matrix as a tool to merely guide understanding of the past and present, nor of merely guiding reaction to perceived present 'needs'. I see its usefulness is most reinforced when used as a simple guide to aid proactive strategic complementarity to necessary reactive responses ... of using the matrix to help create futures as well as reacting to the past and present.

\(^2\) While intervention in such cases is needed, I consciously hold to an ethical commitment to the dignity of people and at all possible to the creating or highlighting of options available for people's mutually-responsible choices. There is a risk, especially with those in crisis or deprivation and especially when involving large numbers of people, that such people can take on the face of a statistic or of implicit inferiority to others because of their disenfranchisement, helplessness, lost will, humiliation, disability or lack of beauty - and in the process, be disregarded from any decision-making. I appreciate Moore Lappe' (1985) and Allen's (1984) exploration of different facets of this theme. However, I realize the major influence comes from my own Christian beliefs.
I believe the matrix can also be useful whether the focus is an individual, group and/or community - or whether the scale be regional, national and/or transnational. I was conscious during the participative evaluation of the extent of the Southern Riverina as a region and the diversity of contexts and range of potential responses even for the Service within that. And I shared that with the Service, especially given their overtaxed but relatively narrow addressing of only one of their four Service objectives. This is a problematic issue for semi-voluntary community-based organizations. Such matters can seem too complex or too big or irrelevant. My assumption is not that all groups such as the Service involve themselves in every mode. Rather it is at least to know where, why and how they fit ... to know what is important to them and why and to recognize where their expertise and constraints lie ... and to network with those involved in complementary aspects of the matrix so a more systemic approach is undertaken. In the Service’s case, an example could be greater political networking for advocacy with regards greater or different support for struggling farm families.

But perhaps the most important benefit will come from exploring the different assumptions behind each of these modes. I have found an hour of early collaborative exploration of contextual and process assumptions of a given situation has enhanced appropriate planning, action or evaluation. And it has been useful to critique which of these assumptions seemed appropriate and which less than helpful, and why. As mentioned, most communal contexts comprise a diversity of human appreciations, aspirations and needs. So it is rare to encounter an above mode totally predominating over others to the exclusion of a multiplicity of responses for embracive social change. Constant review is necessary too, because situations change over time, requiring different mixes and balances of responses and actions. And if multiple groups are acting in different modes in a situation, mutually informed planning and building for complementarity or integration can enhance overall development.

I will provide several assumption examples for the six modes in their ‘theoretical purity’ to illustrate the significance of making assumptions explicit - especially to clarify planning or response process selection:

* Relief (in the extreme): crisis sufferers cannot help themselves; intervention is needed, and immediately; it is short-term duration; there is
dependence on ‘outside’ resources, so there are assumptions about giving and receiving; it is interventionist directed; the range of immediate necessary responses required are few and obvious; there need be little identification between ‘victim’ and ‘helper’ for survival through the crisis; et cetera

* **Rehabilitation**: normalicy of the past can be restored in full or in large part; the disabled has something to offer the restoration process; it is initially therapist directed - restoration that requires transition from significant dependency on others' therapeutic input to full independency by those who experienced disability; joint directed; it lacks immediacy and is usually of medium term duration; there is usually greater identification and commitment required of therapist or supporter on one hand and trust, co-operation and increasing self-responsibility by the disabled on the other; therapists or donors usually have control over non-human resources; et cetera

* **Welfare**: the disability has no foreseeable end; response is longterm - the disabled requiring sustained giving or supporting by others; the disabled cannot help themselves and are dependent on others' resources; usually interventionist and sustainer-directed; requires identification and commitment by providers; the range of responses can be few and generic; et cetera

* **Restructuring**: various starting points may build on initial crisis or disabling experiences or on changes to life goals or beliefs and values; past normalicy cannot or will not be retrieved, a new and different normalicy needs to be established; medium to longterm in nature; requires proactive creating the future; requires self-direction, relevant competency and self-responsible action, but will usually require dependency on access to others' ‘start-up’ resources, networks and facilitated help to begin the road to self-fulfillment; if the reason for restructuring are crisis or disability, an experience of acknowledgement, grief, acceptance and change is expected; will require a re-evaluation of what is important, whatever the reason and outcome; et cetera

* **Development**: it belongs to, and is, people themselves; requires will, awareness and competency of participants - people can help themselves, but they may require initial catalyst of others' contributions towards their
self-conscientizing, self-esteem and self-belief, or initial facilitation of
their process of self-enrichment; is strongly relational-oriented and
longterm when people are involved collaboratively; any facilitators will
not and should not remain forever; self-directive; resources are self-
controlled, if not initially owned; as many reasons for, and ways of,
responding and acting as there are people; et cetera

* Socio-political action³: the reasons for, and ways of, responding or
proacting are as numerous as the number of people, issues, agendas and
changing contexts; raises sensitive issues with regards social values,
power and politics; may be short, medium or longterm; may range from
acting on others’ behalf to fully self-determined and self-executed action;
that exploiting, oppressing and undignifying people is inappropriate, as
is inhibiting their “right and responsibility ... to shape their world, to be
culturally busy” (Blomberg, 1986); that the status quo is often responsible
for such experiences and will usually react to social activism; that win-win
(-win-win allround) situations may not always be desirable or attainable,
but improving the situation can be; that these are issues that belong to
humanity corporately; an emphatic ‘et cetera’.

The thrust for the matrix came from a discussion paper given to me in
1985, written by Donald Miller (1978), then of the Medical Assistance
Programme International, Mombasa. I had been making distinctions for
some time about diverse modes of development-related action, especially
between ‘relief’ and ‘development’. But I found Miller’s expansion useful
and I have been creating alternatives to it for some years now. And it has
been helpful building substance behind individual words, both for
descriptive and prescriptive purposes. Master of Applied Science students

³ Matrixes can become too cumbersome and lose their effectiveness if they are
complicated. I have, over time, included multiple expressions of context in the
matrix for the socio-political action mode. I have returned, for this chapter, to just
the context of ‘injustice and exploitation’, after Miller’s ‘injustice’. I have done so
because of its significance to so many contexts around the world. However, I
considered a context of ‘value, planning and policy conflicts’ could have been more
appropriate if only considering a limited context for the participative evaluation of
the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service. While I believe issues of injustice and
exploitation of rural Australians exist in various forms, perhaps the more immediate
socio-political action confronting the rural counselling programme relates to
regional, State, Federal and international policy issues. I wish to spend more time in
the future pursuing these matters and perhaps developing a matrix similar to the one
above, but focussing purely on socio-political action and its relationship to
community development and fundamental social change (Dixon, 1989).
enrolled in electives that I co-ordinate at the University of Western Sydney Hawkesbury, have similarly now documented its usefulness and modified it for their own purposes - particularly around crisis, adjustment and development in rural Australia, but also local and international community development contexts. I have tried alterations to the model over the years and always appreciate any feedback for further consideration.

I have adjusted the matrix as a result of my Service evaluation experience. Learning has been mutually rewarding. A number of experienced community workers-come-postraduate students actively engaged in working for change with rural people in the midst of severe hardship have affirmed the usefulness and therefore the transferrability of the above originally African-oriented matrix. Course members have included representatives of rural counselling, home farm management education, rural finance corporations and rural community development. Feedback on their critique has included constructive alterations and alternative models, but primarily the framework has for them enabled the rural crisis to be placed into the context of community development. It has assisted in better integrating work with community-based support networks and it has provided a useful reference for sorting out the possible foci that are present in any community development situation and in so doing help identify the emphasis that needs to be given to various processes within the whole community development strategy.

Sub-thesis Four: that the organizational learning capacity of voluntary, rural Australian, community-based, development-oriented organizations is, by nature, problematic given their fundamentally reactive culture

The sub-thesis has emerged as theory constructed through the participative evaluation. I briefly describe the nature of organizations created to freely give care, time and energy to the well-being and enjoyment of others (and indirectly self, Vellekoop-Baldock, 1990). I introduce the significance of organizations being able to learn and adjust, especially in the current climate of rapid societal and global change. Finally, problematic implications for certain types of organizational learning by rural Australian, community-based, development-oriented, organizations are raised as a prelude for further research.
Voluntarism could be described as “any relatively uncoerced work intended to help without primary/immediate thought of financial gain” (Scheier in McGregor et al, 1982). Vellekoop-Baldock (1990) more fully describes a volunteer (in welfare) as, “a person who, on a regular basis, contributes his or her time and energy to a voluntary agency, statutory body, social action or self-help group concerned with issues of welfare, without being paid for this other than in some instances through the payment of out-of-pocket expenses”. Australians are proud of their rich heritage of volunteer spirit. It is expressed in many and varied ways. As an individual it might be donating blood to the Red Cross. As groups it might express itself as mutual help in impromptu crises such as floods; or organizing periodic activities like environmental clean-ups and school working bees; or more embracive longer term efforts on a community basis around issues like children’s sport, neighbourhood security, economic development and landcare. Voluntarism has been crucial to Australia, both through the millenia of indigenous cultures and traditions (expressed as co-operative spirit) and on through colonised Australia of the past two hundred years (McGregor, ibid and Vellekoop-Ballock, ibid).

Organizational learning is difficult enough in general, whatever and wherever the organization is, however:

Today in Australia, as elsewhere in the world, we are facing and having to adapt to change on an unprecedented scale. Globalisation of markets, corporate restructuring, regional political conflict, economic instability and accelerating socio-technological discontinuity characterize our age to such an extent that it is unlikely that there ever can be a ‘return to normal’.

The management of change has become the central activity of our civilization. Indeed the way we manage and shape our organizations both affects and reflects what our society is becoming. The very word ‘change’ symbolises one of the most challenging and stimulating tasks confronting contemporary organizations. And, at last, there are encouraging signs that even the less well informed of

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our chief executives are beginning to acknowledge and come to
terms with the fact that the manner in which we have traditionally
managed our organizations is, at best, archaically inappropriate
and, at worst, grossly incompetent. Indeed, most of yesterday's
answers will lead to an inexorable decline in our quality of life and
the eventual extinction of Australian industries by overseas
competitors. (Hames, 1991).

Australia in general, and significantly rural Australia from the mid-
1980's, is struggling to understand rapid change or to effectively manage
adapting to its consequences and requisites. Farm families and rural
voluntary organizations are naturally included in this struggle to adapt as
part of this 'law of life' of change (Kennedy, 1963; in Hames, Ibid.).
Individual services in the Rural Counselling Programme can be good
examples of the challenges and dilemmas for organizations created by and
for change.

One of my major interests behind seeing rural communities holistically
nurture themselves (socially, economically, culturally, politically,
environmentally) is exploring the facilitation of committees of voluntary,
community-based, development-oriented organizations for the purpose of
them becoming more effective collaborative, self-responsible learners.
This is imperative, given the complexity and rapid changes in society
noted above. Community groups historically have influence on the
perseverance and development of their communities (Kenny, 1994). So
proactively5 creating their own futures, as well as their inevitable
reacting to internal and external impacts, is a strong conviction of mine.

Sub-thesis Two postulated that empowerment is enhanced through people
having responsibility to create their own desired learning processes. In
1989 and 1990 I encountered notions about multiple-loop learning that
crystallised process-related empowerment further (Bawden, 1989; Salner,
1986; Normann, 1985). I took several related notions of my interpretive
framework about organizations into the participative evaluation of the

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5. I use the terms "proactive" and "reactive" similarly as do Schneider and Meyer
(1991): "Behaviour is considered to be proactive when actions are taken to effect
change, in the environment or in the organization, and reactive when simply
responding to change.
Service. These were based on past experiences and perspectives. The most significant were:

* the link of seeing both organizational change and community development as processes of interdependent learning
* clarity of an organization's identity, vision, mandate and interpretive frameworks of involvement
* the emerging significance of 'culture' to organizational life and change
* organizations thinking holistically and futuristically (or strategically) - of proactively creating their own future in the midst of rapidly changing environments. More needed to be present than just a maintenance of mediocrity or of reactionary responses to unanticipated crises
* and the nature of voluntary, community-based organizations and the implications of their peculiarities for organizational change and community development.

In terms of the sub-thesis, the organizations to which I am referring are those given primarily to development's notion of new or restored, directed, beneficial change through increasingly self-directed, self-responsible action. I have in mind organizations like rural counselling groups and community economic development-oriented organizations (such as the Nyah-Koraleigh group in Victoria, McKenzie, 1994). I am not so much considering community service organizations with narrowly defined crisis and welfare goals and range of activities like volunteer bushfire brigades. Their goals and enaction options tend to be few and less changeable over time. I am not suggesting learning issues like regular monitoring and evaluation of allocative and operative management are not important. I am just suggesting that these may not be as frequently and critically problematic as for the more development-oriented organizations. That in itself could be a thesis, but one not being pursued further, here.

There are several key matters that make learning problematic in voluntary, rural Australian, community-based, development-oriented organizations. However, I am being discriminating in the domains of learning included as problematic in the sub-thesis. I am principley referring to what I see as related notions of Normann's double-loop and duuetero levels of cognition (Ibid) and Mezirow's communicative action and perspective transformation (1981). Rural voluntary organizations are often effective so far as "mastering the productive tasks associated with
controlling and manipulating the environment” (Mezirow, ibid). They, often more so than urban groups, can be very effective doers of tasks, because of rural pragmatism, self-sufficiency and ethic of hard work.

However, like individuals and organizations everywhere, unconscious learning in domains that affect primary tasks are often problematic. Issues of process and beliefs and values - of how people go about their ‘doing’ and why that is important - are fundamental to the ability of organizations to both evaluate primary tasks and to be able shape those differently. The implications that instead of managing the rapid change and complexity in which they are increasingly embroiled, many rural organizations appear to me to either leave themselves at the mercy of change thrust on them, to have confidence that they can handle issues as they individually arise, or to see no need to think strategically.

There could be a number of constraining factors as to why most of the voluntary Australian rural organizations I have observed appear to be ineffective in accessing alternative perspectives for understanding their situation; in giving it meaning and direction; or in acquiring sensitivity and competence in social interactions important to that (Mezirow, ibid.). I suspect a number of factors can be linked to causal or exacerbating factors as to why learning can be particularly problematic for rural organizations in rural Australia: to culture - no nonsense, pragmatic, stoic, independent, conservative and reactive (Poiner, 1990); to meeting travelling distance and infrequency and short duration of meetings; to lack of vision for and training in becoming explicit learning organizations I base these on reflecting on the Service and experience in other rural groups during the period of my research. The spirit is captured in McGregor (Ibid.):

Socrates said ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’; perhaps it is the case that ‘the unexamined service is not worth giving’.

The obverse is to affirm, that in a world of increasingly rapid change, the purpose of education can no longer be transmitting what is known, but rather developing the capacity to enquire - of learning how to learn:
To be adequate for our strange new world, we must come to think of learning as being the same as living. We must learn everything we do; we must exploit every experience as 'learning experience' ... Education - or, even better, learning - must now be defined as a lifelong process. Knowles, 1975.

Organizational learning that is rural community-based, remains a current primary research interest for me. It thus warranted highlighting as an issue of learning in the participative evaluation, but one which also moved beyond it through my ongoing professional praxis. The Service by its own acknowledgement began to realize through the participative evaluation the problematique of its inbuilt reactive nature inhibiting its ability to be proactive in strategic change or being other than random in operative and allocative management learning. I am thankfull that its self-validation of the subthesis is in the process of self-review.

Sub-thesis Five: a threefold sub-thesis that the Rural Counselling Programme per se has an inbuilt propensity to be reactive rather than proactive; that this is problematic given the complexity and rapidly changing face of rural Australia; and that individual counselling services who comprise the programme need to become ongoing learning organizations to flexibly change to the point of creating their own futures

This, my last proposition, is a more contextualized one related to the nature of the Australian rural counselling programme. I was conscientized to what I believe is its potentially problematic fundamentally reactionary essence through my prior crisis-oriented experiences and observations in rural Sahelian Africa. Crisis-oriented programmes and organizations are usually relatively hurriedly created to alleviate existing severe hardship or to make ready for impending, inevitable hardship. Such organizations normally have a strong sense of purpose to address untenable suffering or danger and to focus doing that through short-term, largely curative, means. I am certainly not critical of that in itself. I strongly empathize with suffering, danger and severe hardship and have membership with organizations committed to ameliorating them. I also have an ongoing interest and link with the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service and I have an equal ongoing interest for the rural counselling programme as a whole - a programme, I add, that is ubiquitously appreciated throughout
rural and political Australia. So what is my proposition about the rural counselling programme and why does it concern me?

Crisis-oriented organizations rarely exist only for short durations before disbanding. Some continue in the service of new clients. This is the case with the rural counselling programme, given the increasingly longterm outlook of rural hardship and rural reconstruction in Australia in the mid-nineteen eighties through nineties. Some organizations find new areas and groups 'in crisis' to continue to utilize their existing crisis-alleviating felt-mandate and capacity. Others adjust to changing times by complementing or refocussing crisis-oriented activities with ones of prevention, promotion and advocacy - doing so either to also address the perceived causes and exacerbating factors of the crisis or to adjust to the changing requirements of those helped out of their past crises. An example could be a women's crisis refuge now incorporating the likes of assertiveness training, child-minding and employment skills training (Victorian community learning centres) - or again, groups initially set-up to respond to severe community crisis in the South World (like TEAR Fund) but who now feel compelled to see and act in more holistic ways for longterm benefit, dignity and crisis prevention. Yet other groups scale down activities and resources, while maintaining contingencies, monitoring, networks and occasionally prudent purchase and storing of supplies in order to respond early and effectively in future looming crises. SIM International, with whom I have long involvement in Africa, operate well in this regard.

One of my concerns is that neither the rural counselling programme nor individual local autonomous services of which it is comprised have a clear vision or commitment of them being, or changing to, any of the above or other alternatives. Perhaps of more concern is that there does not appear to be a process, and will (in many cases), to enable vision and adjustment to constructively emerge. There are exceptions to this (Williams et al [especially Rowe], 1992 and elements of Cameron, 1994). However, the programme essentially provides reactionary, curative services to farming clients in, or at risk of, severe hardship.

A related element affects the future of the programme but has significantly also affected both its establishment and contribution to date to Australian rural community and regional development. It quickly
became apparent to me in 1990 that many involved in various aspects of the rural counselling programme made no attempt, and in some cases resisted, contextualizing the programme in wider realities impacting it - particularly socially, politically and economically (Williams et al, 1992; Korten, 1984). The programme was not explicitly seen by creator DPI&E in terms of rural development - nor did many individual rural counselling services similarly envisage and create themselves accordingly, though noting exceptions like the attempts of the Mallee Crisis Committee, now, Mallee Support and Development Group (Lees et al, 1989). Factors explored elsewhere in the Thesis suggest different reasons for this. Individual rural counselling services comprised over-worked rural counsellors and locally-focussed voluntary committees who had little time or sense of power over matters of politics and economics impacting their communities from capital cities and overseas.

Correspondingly, nor did many services see responsibility to significantly network into wider rural Australia and beyond for what the programme could and should offer to those outside the programme. I believe everyone stood to be enriched if that happened, especially ultimately rural counselling clients. However, it is important not to over-generalize. Rural counselling services are autonomous bodies, all different one from another, who largely express themselves consistent with a combination of local rural needs and the 'personality' and agendas of their committee members and rural counsellors. In saying that, it is interesting to note what appears to me (from my partial exposure to a number of rural counselling services of eastern Australia) to be more holistic, integrated community development attempts of some Victorian services, and to an extent the Tasmanian service, in contrast to the more insula tendencies of many New South Wales services in this regard - although I believe this trend is changing in the past couple of years with instances in New South Wales of more genuinely interdependent multi-disciplinary and multi-organization activity at district levels (Gamble et al, 1994).

A history of how the existing DPI&E programme was established in 1986 in response to widespread rural hardship was described in Chapter One. Its reactionary nature has been alluded to implicitly throughout the thesis, but explicitly in Chapter Five as evidenced by the Service under evaluation. The complexity and increasingly rapidly changing nature of rural Australia has been discussed in Chapter Three - as has the nature of
organizational life that Chapter and immediately above in Sub-thesis Four. It is not my purpose to explore the issues of the sub-thesis here. I am articulating the proposition and why I think it is important and is worthy of further, targetted, research.

My sub-thesis stated that it was problematic that the propensity of the rural counselling programme and its individual services is to be fundamentally reactive without being complementarily proactive. I see there are two primary groups for which that propensity is problematic. Firstly, it is problematic to itself. As Hames (Ibid.) is earlier quoted, “Today in Australia, as elsewhere in the world, we are facing and having to adapt to change on an unprecedented scale” - and the thesis has highlighted the particular speed and complexity of that in latter-day rural Australia. Reactive organizations largely have their futures created for them, rather than create them themselves in ways they deem appropriate and acceptable.

Issues of the future shape and even existence of the programme in general and the sustainability of its individual community-based services are, I believe, more in the hands of rural counselling services themselves than of anyone else - including funders. There are a range of issues currently facing the programme. I mentioned two issues in Chapter Five that I think are particularly important. One is the need for inbuilt organizational learning capacity of rural counselling services to provide regular monitoring, evaluation and adjustment in both immediate service activities and in their strategic fit. The other can best be fulfilled through the first. It is the question of continuance or otherwise of the programme and how that might be funded.

I have an assumption that rural Australia needs the kind of support provided by rural counselling services - whatever the extent of support as adjusted by the varying needs of time, whatever the organizations providing them over time, and whatever (hopefully) the blend of promotive, preventive and advocacy activities to complement rural counselling. There are many aspects involved in this question - and again I think it warrants substantial and participative research in the future. However, true learning organizations will find creative alternatives to their future on issues such as the 1998 ‘sunset clause’ by DPI&E terminating their funding of the programme. I have mentioned for
starters, in Chapter Five, my idea of enquiry into possible interdisciplinary service co-operatives; of reduced and/or modified services able to enlarge and/or change over time according to changing situations, needs and goals; and also of the Tasmanian Rural Counselling Service's move for corporation funding.

Secondly, the reactionary propensity of rural counselling is problematic to those it seeks to serve. There is a limitation to empowerment of clients when rural counselling services themselves do not, by and large, have or seek their own empowering capacity of multi-looped learning, after Normann (1985) as cited in Sub-thesis Four above. Rural counselling services focus strongly on curative-oriented activities. I cite two issues of empowerment related to how rural counsellors relate to their clients with regards immediate and longer term support.

In the immediate client timeframe, DPI&E guidelines (1989) put priority on rural counsellors providing the way for farm clients to choose a course of action appropriate for them and to be supported in that by rural counsellor provided financial counselling, information, networking and, if necessary, advocacy. Feedback and evaluations show effective and appreciated client support by rural counsellors in the large majority of cases. However, I understand it has not been uncommon in the past for some counsellors to go beyond DPI&E guidelines and do most if not all client-related work for them, including submissions to the Rural Assistance Scheme. Extreme crisis calls for extreme action in terms of directive, dependent-oriented action by rural counsellors (see comments on 'crisis' in Sub-thesis Three). But it is important for dignity and learning that clients take increasing responsibility to do all they can rather remain inappropriately dependent on their rural counsellors.

Yet it is the vision and actions by rural counsellors with regards longer term consequences for their clients which is of greater interest and concern to me. Client competency development to increasingly be creating their futures and to be able to keep shaping them, rather than being swept along by forces beyond their control, is important both for them as individuals and for Australian rural development. As a generalization, I believe rural counselling services, as busy as they are, need to think more strategically now about promotive and preventive activities for both clients and the wider farming constituency. It is not so
much the issue as to whether rural counselling services choose to extend their activities into these more 'developmental' arenas, whether they collaborate with other organizations and professionals in an integrated approach or whether they actively network clients into them. What is important is that it is ensured to happen by individual services throughout the programme - and the significant initiative and influence in that, I believe, must come from service committees (see Chapter Five, 'Service Committee Learning').

The vision and functional frameworks of the rural counselling programme (which overarches each service) are inadequate to a necessary link with proactive, holistic, sustainable, rural community development. It is an important conviction reinforced by the evaluation that I believe warrants wider research. The evaluation provided this opportunity of recognizing things which could (and I believe, should) be explored that could lead to community-based learning that further enhances rural community development through the programme - both within the Southern Riverina and beyond. Full pursuit of these issues goes beyond the expectation of both this Masters thesis and the initial evaluation on which it is based. But they contribute to the mosaic of related issues so necessary if one is to understand and be involved in any of these or other related issues or contexts in the future.

OTHER LEARNING AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I also desired another outcome. However, it was not a thesis per se. I wanted to improve my capacity to equip others who are, or intend to be, facilitators of rural community development. This included continued learning as an external facilitator myself with regards the change process of how to better enhance organizational and community-based learning - and staff development within those two often entwined contexts. There was learning with regards both the process for designing curriculum and its content, as well as its implementation - and all done in a manner consistent with the principles and goals of development that underpin all above issues. There was integration of contextual, interpretive, ethical and process-related considerations and frameworks integral to facilitating participative critical social change for more sustainable rural community development (particularly within the context of hardship and crisis). My focus was facilitating facilitators of change - of helping facilitators learn
how to learn to do their job of facilitating social change better - and to do that I had to be learning myself:

the degree to which I can create relationships that facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth I have achieved in myself.

Carl Rogers (in McGregor, ibid)

I also wanted to improve my understanding of the contexts of Australian rural hardship; to improve my networks and resources related to those to share with others in their learning; and to adjust and enrichen my own frameworks of rural community development - initially adapting to rural Australia those frameworks formed largely for overseas non-Western settings, but ultimately through that, being able to enrichen my frameworks for all settings through the learning of any one setting.

Each of these aspects had learning for me in the evaluation, along with the action research and my sub-theses enquiries. They have had implications to thesis critique. They have already found benefit in my facilitation of student learning, as outlined in Chapter Five.

In conclusion, the thesis described the learning journey of the participative evaluation of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service. Dilemmas, issues and insights for both the participants corporately and me as an individual team member have been pursued in a manner that affirmed the over-arching thesis that a participative approach to evaluating voluntary rural community-based organizations is an effective tool for organizational learning and ensuing rural community development, as evidenced in the participative evaluation of the Southern Riverina Rural Advisory Service. My own emerging learning and research themes and sub-theses affirming of this chapter then grounded implications of the evaluation to my wider professional context. Of my future, my participation in the range of learning activities associated with or arising from the Service evaluation have opened further avenues of enquiry for me in nurturing rural community development and, in turn, being nurtured in my own development as an inevitable expression of my being 'in community'.
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1.
A brief reflection on some implications of my Christian faith to my life as a learner and nurturer of people-dignifying development.

Appendix 2.
Systems-related models that aided assimilation of understanding about: the Service (2a), the Committee (2b) and the Rural Counsellor (2c).

Appendix 3.
Linked models of ‘The Norm of the Person in Society - Adapted’ (3a) and ‘A Mattrix of the Teacher-directed and Autonomous (Self-directed) Learning Dilectic’ (3b).

Appendix 4.
Facets of strategic planning - a dendrogramme.

Appendix 5.
Issues of Total Quality Management (TQM).
Appendix 1: A BRIEF REFLECTION ON SOME IMPLICATIONS OF MY CHRISTIAN FAITH TO MY LIFE AS A LEARNER AND NURTURER OF PEOPLE-DIGNIFYING DEVELOPMENT.

I believe the Bible to be the inspired, infallible, written revelation of God to humankind, and thus significant to my life as one of God's creations. But for some this raises seeming inconsistencies with key notions of development principles like democracy and empowerment of individuals and communities. I'll explain from where I'm coming briefly as follows. In summary, I understand the purpose of the Bible to be the revelation of God's grace in restoring rebellious, broken relationships with and between His creation through Jesus, the Son of God. There are implications of this for me as a participant and facilitator of community development with development's notions of the synthesis of interdependent 'community' and the dialectic and paradox of individual human dignity, learning and self-directing and self-responsible action. As a Christian, I look to the Bible (sometimes in perplexity and certainly with impoverished understanding) as the most important guide and arbiter of my and others' insights. But I do so, inclusive of the richness, diversity and differences contributed to that process through others interactions and shared insights with me.

The Bible occassionally enjoins normative thought and behaviour for all people, for all times and for all situations that conform to the character of God. But it far more frequently only offers principles that need to be interpreted and applied contextually - providing no exclusivity of insight to an individual. My belief in the 'priesthood of all believers', in 'general revelation' and that all people are created in the image of God (and therefore have dignity, uniqueness and interdependent value), commits me to explore and benefit from the unique perspectives and responsibilities all people have in contributing human understanding to daily contexts. Conversely, I believe rural community development workers in general, can benefit from "the understanding that Christianity provides concerning the transcendent nature of humans and the cosmic history within which they live" (Heibert, 1983). To me, community development is imbued with significance because of its centrality in God's purpose of 'community' - with the heart of 'community' being the Three-in-One who creates, enjoins, nurtures and enjoys it.
THE SERVICE MODEL

STRUCTURES

- Local Financial Sponsors
- FUNDING
- 50% Federal Govt for 3 years
- 25% State Govt
- In Kind
- Phone Answering Computer Machine
- Community Services Building
- Independent Person

COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES

- PHYSICAL
- RURAL COUNSELLOR
- Formal
- Informal

SUPPORT

- Community
- Reports
- Bi-monthly

ACTIVITIES

- Provide Rural Counsellor
- Monitor, Evaluate the Service
- Financial Support
- Educational Role
- Preventative Role
- Reactive not Proactive

ACHIEVE

A. By identifying and providing the human, financial, and material resources required
B. Provide Educational Role to assist rural
C. Develop Policy for Rural Counselling in Southern Riverina

PurPOSE

- To provide relief of distress, suffering, or poverty associated with the rural recession
- To inform of Solutions to these problems - the activities being conducted to help alleviate them

CLIMATE

- Lack of Direction
- Committee
- Rural Counsellor
- High Interest Rates
- Continuing Rural Crisis
- Low Commodity Prices
- NOT FUNCTIONING AS GROUP
- 1. Monitor, Evaluating Rural Crisis
- 2. Referring problems on
- 3. Advertising

FACILITATE STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT

- Imbalance in demand for Service
- Increases in demand for Service

THROUGH STATED AIDS & OBJECTIVES

- Provide Assistance to Farm Families in Difficulty
- Service to the wider Community of problems
- To inform farm families in S.R. of the wider community of problems
- C.R. make recommendable to Govt on issues affecting regional economy
STAGE I
I will give you knowledge
I will test your recall

STAGE II
I will give you knowledge
I will pose you a problem
You will use your memory of
knowledge to solve the problem
I will test your ability

I will give you knowledge and show you
where to get more
I will pose you a problem
You will use resources to solve the problem
I will test your ability

STAGE III
I will pose you a problem
I will give you resources to
solve that problem
I will test your ability

STAGE IV
I will give you knowledge
You will find the knowledge with
my help, to solve the problem
I will test your ability

STAGE V
I will identify a problem
You will find the knowledge with
my help, and solve the problem
We will both evaluate your abilities

STAGE VI
I will provide experiences to permit
you to identify a problem
You will find the knowledge with
my help and solve the problem
We will evaluate your abilities

STAGE VII

STAGE VIII

STAGE IX

TEACHER DIRECTED
SELF DIRECTED
AUTONOMOUS

3b. THE TEACHER-DIRECTED—SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING SPECTRUM (1963 Ph. D HANDBOOK OF APPREHENSION/WELSH)
SEE ALSO A COMPARISON—K-DIRECTED LEARNING RESOURCES (KNOWLES, 1975)
Appendix 4.

Planning (Strategic)

Individual
Organisation
Community
Experiential
Experiential

Locus
Form of Learning
Levels of Learning
...

Projecting
Empowering
Creating
Changing

Strategic in Nature
Timing
Levels of Management

Levels of Management
Strategic
Allocative
Continuous

Situation - Planning
- Moving into Future
- Proactive
- Continuous
- Sharing - Being Shared

* Bob Macadam & Julian Julian
September 1990.
Appendix 5.

TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT

Observation: another potential Service evaluation methodology-related issue, in hindsight, is aspects that could aid efficiency and precision where appropriate.

Reflection: I will consider principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) in future enquiry when it is based largely on working with issues arising from people perspectives of their contexts. I am yet to explore this matter indepth, but I suspect there will be aspects of TQM that will enhance 'quality control' in my personal-oriented approaches to social change. There are similarities of some assumptions of self-directed learning, participative action research, community development and limited aspects of TQM. They commit themselves to the full participation of people in the clarification and responsibility of their own roles, tasks and procedures, learning and the ongoing monitoring, evaluation and adjustments to ensure quality performance and well-being.

I particularly want to explore early enquiry setting of 'measurable' performance in the process of collaborative social enquiry. I italicize 'measurable' because I assume procedures that in all likelihood would not be numerically quantifiable. And by definition, action research and multi-level cognition have inbuilt commitment to critiquing, without prescribing which method and technique to do so. But I suspect there can be a complementing of the seemingly incongruous nature of an ever-emerging action research process and an adaption of TQM's more set performance indicators. But the emphasis is continually improving rigour or quality control of enquiry processes and outcomes, whether it is aspects from TQM or other performance ensuring approaches that are utilized.

My major evaluation approach had not been to accept or to try to establish objectively measurable bench marks by which to evaluate the Service. I am not denying aspects that are quantifiable, such as number of clients helped to remain in farming or helped to move out of it. However, there are strongly relational and human development-oriented factors in the nature of rural counselling services. So I chose majoring on working with perspectives of those who have a stake in, or significant view of, the
Service. I worked with what these people perceived was the way things were with the Service, what in their minds would entail needed improvement and then what they had the will to implement.

However, the 'Review of Support and Training/Development Needs of Rural Counselling Services' (Ou, 1992) raises a useful point about appraising that exercised me during the evaluation, but to which I did not then have ready answers. I did not pursue these. I could not see any possibility of adding new aspects to the participative evaluation, because our financial limitations disallowed complementary alternatives. Ou suggests three appraisal judgements:

1. If what rural counsellors ACHIEVE at work counts, (then) judge results, (by) using a Management by Objectives System (or a variation)

2. If what rural counsellors DO at work counts, (then) judge behaviour, by using a Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales (or a variation)

3. If what rural counsellors ARE at work counts, (then) judge personal characteristics, (by) using a Competency Based System (or a variation).

I would be open in the future to utilize a combination of any of the three appraisal alternatives, where a context warranted it and funding was sufficient to do that. TQM may provide some guidelines in how to do that. The context for radical adoption (in deed as well as word) has tended to be in commercial businesses. Literature frameworks for managing quality improvement tend to follow the realities of those commercial contexts, rather than the likes of my semi-voluntary rural community ones. However, I am confident that TQM has something to add to my effectiveness facilitating improvement in quality of services like the Service.

Dale and Boaden (Dale [Ed.] 1994) discuss six key actions related to measures of performance. I feel the need to strongly qualify some of their points, such as "linking rewards to quality improvement activities". I also recognized that we adopted most of the points in the participative evaluation in some manner, such as "discussion with customers (internal as well as external) about the performance expected, their needs and expectations, using a variety of techniques". But I am interested in pursuing two of their points further. The first of these is that, "key internal and external performance measures should be identified and defined to assess the progress being made, and to ensure that customers are
satisfied”. A post-evaluation example of this is the client feedback form the rural counsellors of the Tasmanian Rural Counselling Service utilize to improve the effectiveness of the rural counsellors. The second “key action’ to further pursue is that “benchmarking should be considered once the organization has taken some steps to improve quality’. Now while I have significant qualifications with the notion of benchmarking and ensuing measurement, such as to what can changes be accurately attributed and how relational aspects are assessed, I like to modify their idea of accessing the good things in other organizations.

I also felt another chapter of Dale’s edited book warranted further exploration and contextualizing for my purpose. Aldridge and Dale discuss Failure Mode and Effects Analysis, where organizations build in anticipating and dealing with things that can go wrong in the future. Action research by nature commits itself to cyclic review and improved adjustment, but this chapter gives some specific pointers as to how that might be enhanced.
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