

Private Sorrow in the Public Domain: The Growing Phenomenon of Roadside Memorials

Susan Margaret Welsh, Charles Sturt University Australia

ABSTRACT

The placing of roadside memorials has a long history. In recent times it has become a growing phenomenon in Australia, which has sparked heated debate and controversy. In response new laws have been established in various local government areas – ranging from total bans, to time limits being imposed, to the allowing of generic structures only. Many people who are grieving perceive these limits as adding to their pain, grief and anger. It is important to understand *why* these memorials are important, *if* and *how* they help, and whether this phenomenon signifies that people are moving away from church or state run cemeteries to the roadsides as a place of significance.

This paper reviews the current literature on bereavement and roadside memorials, and explores the growing debate about these memorials. It also considers theoretical approaches to bereavement and how these inform current research.

It is concluded that much of the current literature on bereavement is quantitative and reports research undertaken from an individualist, psychological perspective, and that current research into roadside memorials is from an historical, geographic, cultural or even statistical perspective. In contrast this paper argues for more qualitative sociological research into the role of roadside memorials, taking into account more recent theoretical accounts of grief. Such an approach could explore the meaning and importance of roadside memorials for grieving people, especially if it is underpinned by the theoretical perspectives of Heidegger's hermeneutics, phenomenology and interpretivism¹. When coupled with critical social work theory this research approach offers a promising way forward with the possibility of linking personal troubles with public issues.² As well as enhancing understanding about the grieving process, such research would produce useful outcomes for professionals working with those who grieve, and inform policy and legislative developments around roadside memorial construction.

INTRODUCTION

Bereavement is a core field of practice for social workers and other health professionals. The grieving process has come under the spotlight recently, with the inclusion of acute grief reactions that last more than twelve months in the 2013 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5). This potentially turns a normal human response to the death of a loved person into a classifiable psychiatric disorder. Grief and loss, bereavement, thanatology – the time is ripe for research into this field.

I have been considering this actual topic of bereavement and roadside memorials for a number of years after a public outcry when a local council put in a motion to remove roadside crosses and ban further ones being erected. They were perceived as being a negative sign for tourists and holiday-makers, as well as an eyesore. In addition, they were seen as a distraction and a potential danger to others. The council was forced to abandon this motion; many gained comfort or solace from these reminders of mortality on the roadside. These roadside memorials take on almost a 'sacred site' meaning, marking the precise spot where a loved one passed from life to death.

The placement of roadside memorials has become a growing social phenomenon in recent years, across different cultures and countries. It is an issue which has become controversial, and has been

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Southampton: Oxford, Basil, Blackwell, 1978).

² William Schwartz, "Private troubles and Public Issues: One Social Work Job or Two?" *Social Welfare Forum* (1969): 41.

attracting considerable media attention in Australia – through talk back radio, TV programs such as *Compass*, newspaper articles, academic research and journal articles and so on. There is evidence that death along the roadside has been marked in the ancient world, so it is by no means a new phenomenon. What is new is the rate at which they are appearing.³

The field of thanatology, the scientific study of death and practices associated with it⁴ has undergone gradual changes in recent times. Freud⁵ is regarded as one of the leading theorists on grief and loss, with his beliefs entrenched in the psychoanalytic school of thought. He viewed grief as “something that would free the ego from attachment to the deceased and, in so doing, allow new attachments to be formed.”⁶ Freud also saw grief as a ‘disease’, and a passive state, which would eventually pass. Bowlby looked at the process of mourning and is renowned for his ‘attachment theory’, a model of grief extrapolated from the attachment and bonding process of children to their parents (or primary care-giver) and vice versa.⁷ Attachment theory has broadened our understanding and knowledge of the grief process. It is because we love that we grieve, it is the breaking of these attachments and bonds that join us to others that is so painful. Like many other theorists, Bowlby described phases of mourning – numbness; yearning, searching and anger; disorganisation and despair; and reorganisation. Colin Murray Parkes was another theorist, who subscribed to medical understandings of grief and ‘grief work’.⁸ His medical analogy, that grief is like a physical wound that needs time and attention to heal successfully, has contributed to our understanding of grief and the healing process. Parkes also drew attention to the fact that grief affects both mental and physical health. Just as a physical wound may need dressing and attention, a loss and the grief response that follows this loss may need to be nurtured and tended. He identified grief as a “process and not a state” and “maintained that grief is not a set of symptoms which start after a loss and then gradually fade away”.⁹ Rather, like Bowlby, he viewed grief as having four distinct phases – numbness, pining, depression and recovery. This idea of stage models for grief and ‘grief work’ continued with the well-known model espoused by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross¹⁰ (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) and Worden’s¹¹ tasks of grieving (accept the reality of the loss; work through the pain of grief; adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing; and finally to emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life).

These psychological and stage-model approaches to grief have gradually given way to more contemporary understandings of grief and loss. Paramount to this is the theory of ‘continuing bonds’, posited by Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman and Steven Nickman.¹² This model focuses on the maintenance of continuing bonds, as opposed to disentangling or disengaging from those ties which bind us to our loved ones. The goal becomes to remember, to have an on-going relationship which never ends and to incorporate the missing loved one into everyday life. It is certainly not to sever those ties and ‘move on’ without them. The notion of ‘closure’, which had been a commonly held goal, is rejected.

Incorporated within this approach are the more current cyclical or spiral models of grief. These latter approaches to bereavement acknowledge that grief may ebb and flow, moving backwards and

³ Jennifer Clark and Majella Franzmann, “Authority from Grief, Presence and Place in the Making of Roadside Memorials”, *Death Studies* 30 (2006): 579-599.

⁴ Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 12th ed., s.v. “thanatology.” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, *Sigmund Freud: Collected papers Vol.4* (New York: Basic Books, 1917).

⁶ Jenny Hockey, Jeanne Katz, and Neil Small, eds., *Grief, Mourning and Death Ritual* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), 24

⁷ John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss Vol. 3* (London: Hogarth Press, 1980).

⁸ Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1986).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

¹¹ J. William Worden, *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy. A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc, 1991).

¹² Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman, eds., *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (Washington DC: Taylor and Francis, 1996).

forwards between intense pain and acceptance, then back to deep sorrow. Grief is cyclical, not linear, in nature. It is these newer theoretical frameworks which could underpin research and inform discussion and analysis of the current literature in the field of roadside memorials.

Social work perspectives of grief and loss are informed by the sociological model of grief and bereavement, acknowledging that relationships are an important component of human existence and we seek to maintain a tie to our loved one who has died. The role of memorialisation in bereavement is thus crucial – how do we incorporate our loved ones into our ongoing lives, and how do we ensure that they are never forgotten? Roadside memorials have a role to play in this.

In the light of the newer approaches to bereavement and grief, especially those used in social work and other helping professions, the following definitions are proposed:

Bereavement is seen as a period of mourning after a loss, a state of intense grief.¹³ It is the aftermath of being deprived or made desolate; to be robbed, dispossessed or deprived of a loved one.¹⁴ Described as a complex process that is considered normal, it may be accompanied by a variety of emotional reactions, behavioural responses and thoughts.¹⁵

Grief describes an intense, deep or violent sorrow, especially caused by someone's death.¹⁶ It is seen as being a deep mental anguish and includes physical symptoms as well as psychological, behavioural, social and spiritual reactions to the loss. It is a normal response to a loss.¹⁷

Mourning is the term used to describe the public rituals or symbols of bereavement such as holding funeral services, wearing black clothing, leaving a flag at half-mast. This is a period of time during which signs of grief are publicly shown and it is usually time-limited.¹⁸ Mourning is also seen as the process by which people adapt to a loss, and it is influenced by different cultural customs, rituals or rules for dealing with loss.¹⁹

A **memorial** is a statue or structure established to remind people of a person or event. It is also seen as something created to honour someone who has died²⁰ and **memorialisation** is the act of commemorating or to preserve in memory; to celebrate.²¹

To **commemorate** is to recall and show respect for someone or something; to mark or celebrate an event or person by doing or producing something; to preserve in memory by some celebration; to be a memorial of.²²

Grief, mourning and bereavement are all normal human responses to loss. Preserving the memory of our loved ones who have died is now considered to be an important part of the grieving process, indeed the theory of continuing bonds reiterates our need to continue links and ties with the deceased. The marking of sites along the roadside goes back to the Spanish *descansos*, whereby resting places of coffins on their way from the church to the burial grounds were marked along the route.²³ Catholic

¹³ Dictionary.com, s.v. "bereavement," <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=bereavement> (accessed August 23, 2013).

¹⁴ Concise Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "bereavement."

¹⁵ About.com (Death and Dying), s.v. "bereavement," <http://about.com/od/lossandgrieffterms> (accessed August 23, 2013).

¹⁶ Ibid. s.v. "grief."

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The Free Dictionary, s.v. "mourning," www.thefreedictionary.com/mourning (accessed August 23, 2013).

¹⁹ About.com, s.v. "mourning."

²⁰ Macmillan Dictionary, s.v. "memorial," www.macmillan.com/memorial (accessed 23 August 2013).

²¹ Concise Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "memorialisation."

²² Ibid., s.v. "commemorate."

²³ Jennifer Clark, ed., *Roadside Memorials: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Armidale NSW: EMU Press, 2007);

traditions have also had an influence on the erecting of memorial crosses at the exact spot where a person had died suddenly, before the last rites were administered. These crosses were to remind others to pray for the repose of the soul of the deceased.²⁴

Wartime memorials and graves are an important part of military history, marking the battlefields where soldiers were killed, to commemorate the tragic loss of lives at these places. White crosses abound on the fields of the Somme in France and Flanders in Belgium and each year record numbers of Australians are making a 'pilgrimage' to Gallipoli on ANZAC day, to remember the lost. Closer to home, the Adelaide River War Cemetery in the Northern Territory has row after row of sobering plaques, commemorating our service men and women. Memorialisation is thus an important part of human history, and memorials such as these have been in existence for decades. Roadside memorials, however, are a relatively new phenomenon in this century, both in Australia and overseas.

The phenomenon of increasing roadside memorials has attracted academic interest and research. Locally, Dr Jennifer Clark and Professor Majella Franzmann from New England University, Armidale NSW, are two academics who are world leaders in researching this phenomenon. Clark has looked at roadside memorials as they relate to heritage and history, and their placement along the roads as a "challenge to the functionalism of the modern roadside".²⁵ She also points out that they give a "human dimension" to the statistics, and help to remind us of the faces behind these tragedies occurring on our roads.²⁶ This act of preserving the memory of the deceased loved one is reiterated in others' research.²⁷ These findings give weight to the argument that roadside memorials play an important role in the bereavement process, ensuring that loved ones live on in the memory of others.

Clark and Cheshire in their comparative study of NSW and Texas, USA²⁸ point out that the roadside memorial "reclaims public space for the celebration of the individual". This is a common theme within the literature – is it permissible to allow private grief in the public domain, private sorrows to spill out onto public spaces?

Clarke and Cheshire also found that the "diverse ethnic and religious profiles and different historical backgrounds" dictated the form the memorial took, along with the practice of roadside memorial establishment.²⁹ Jipson, Becker and Byers take this question further with their research.³⁰ They examine laws in the US aimed at controlling roadside memorials, laws that are an attempt to "shape the commemoration of fatal accidents". The effects on local communities are examined, with their findings indicating that roadside shrines are tolerated by most as "permissible commemorations".

Anna Petersson, "Offerkast and Roadside Memorials" (paper presented at the 8th International Conference on 'The Social Context of Death, Dying and Disposal', University of Bath, UK, 2007);

Keith Suter, "Sacred Places in a Secular Era: The Use of Roadside Memorials", *Contemporary Review* 292, (2010):51-59. Retrieved from www.Global-Directions.com

²⁴ Clark and Franzmann, "Authority from Grief", 579.

²⁵ Jennifer Clark, "Challenging Motoring Functionalism: Roadside Memorials, Heritage and History in Australia and New Zealand" *The Cultural Turn* (2009): 23-43.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Erika Doss, "Spontaneous Memorials and Contemporary Modes of Mourning in America", *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 2, no.3 (2006):294-318.

Mirjam Klaassens, Peter Groote, and Paulus Huigen, "Roadside Memorials from a Geographical Perspective", *Mortality* 14, no.2 (2009).

Una MacConville, *Roadside Memorials*, Centre for Death and Society, (University of Bath, UK, 2006).

Petersson, "Offerkast and Roadside Memorials."

Deborah Lynn Wagner, "Death, Memory, and Space: A Rural Community Response to Roadside Memorials", (master's thesis, University of Texas, 2008).

²⁸ Jennifer Clark and Ashley Cheshire, "RIP by the Roadside: A Comparative Study of Roadside Memorials in New South Wales, Australia, and Texas, United States", *Omega- Journal of Death and Dying*, 48, no.3 (2003):203-222.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Arthur Jipson, Paul Becker, and Bryan Byers, "How Roadside Memorial Laws Redefine Crime and Discretion in the Community" (paper presented at the ASC Annual Meeting, St Louis Adam's Mark, St Louis, Missouri, 2008).

Taking a different approach again, Tay, Churchill and de Barros have conducted research to “understand the effects of roadside memorials on drivers’ behaviour”.³¹ Many claim that these reminders on the roadsides have a warning function to other drivers, to alert them to the dangers inherent on that stretch of road.³² Their findings, however, were inconclusive – the effects were neither positive nor negative. That is, drivers did not slow down at these sites, neither did they speed up. They concluded that roadside memorials “did not have any effect on traffic speeds or ...following too closely”.³³

Another study conducted in the Netherlands, by Klaassens et al. looked at roadside memorials from a geographical perspective. One of their most interesting findings was that friends of the victim tended to hastily erect a temporary memorial, whereas parents spent time and effort planning and erecting a more permanent structure.³⁴

One of the most common themes emerging from the current literature deals with the importance of **place**. Smith³⁵, Collins and Rhine³⁶, Weir³⁷, McNearney³⁸, Wood³⁹, and Klaassens et al.⁴⁰ all discuss the significance of the actual spot of the accident as being of central importance and significance to the bereaved. Comments such as “this is where I see him best” from a father of a traffic victim, and “this is holy ground” from a mother mourning her teenage son reflect this sentiment.⁴¹ Daniel Weir’s research was an effort to “understand why the exact location of a person’s death is so important that a sacred place must be created where no place is intended”.⁴² In a similar vein, Wood’s research in Perth, Australia, spoke of roadside memorials as being a “ritual space...part of a symbolic landscape”.⁴³ Does the precise place of death make it worthy of establishing a lasting memorial on that ‘holy ground’?

Collins and Rhine,⁴⁴ Weir,⁴⁵ McNearney,⁴⁶ Wood,⁴⁷ and Petersson⁴⁸ extend this theme of spiritual significance at the place of death in their research. Sentiments are expressed that as this was the last place their loved one was alive it is laden with significance and closeness, hence taking on almost a ‘sacred site’ meaning. Likewise, Suter found in his research that some bereaved people feel a closer connection with their loved one here, by the roadside, than at the cemetery where their remains lie.⁴⁹

³¹ Richard Tay, Anthony Churchill, and Alexandre G. de Barros, “Effects of Roadside Memorials on Traffic”, *Accident Analysis and Prevention* 43, no.1 (2011):483-486.

³² Klaassens et al., “Roadside Memorials from a Geographical Perspective”.
MacConville, *Roadside Memorials*.

Olga Nesporova, “The Public Remembrance of Death- Roadside Memorials”, *Sociologicky casopis. Czech Sociological Review* 44, no. 1 (2008): 139-164.

³³ Tay et al., “Effects of Roadside Memorials on Traffic”, 485

³⁴ Klaassens et al., “Roadside Memorials from a Geographical Perspective”.

³⁵ Robert James Smith, “Roadside Memorials – Some Australian Examples”. *Folklore* 110, no. 1 (1999):103.

³⁶ Charles Collins and Charles Rhine, “Roadside Memorials”, *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying* 47, no.3 (2003):221-244

³⁷ Daniel Raymond Weir, “No Place to Die: The Poetics of Roadside Sacred Places in Mexico” (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2002).

³⁸ Clay McNearney, *Contested Sites: Roadside Memorials, 1st Amendment and Popular Debate*. (2006).

³⁹ Dennis Wood, “Crossing the Verge: Roadside Memorials – Perth, Western Australia”. *Symbolic Landscapes* 1 (2009):161-171.

⁴⁰ Klaassens et al., “Roadside Memorials from a Geographical Perspective”.

⁴¹ Collins and Rhine, “Roadside Memorials”, 230

⁴² Weir, “No Place to Die”

⁴³ Wood, “Crossing the Verge”, 165

⁴⁴ Collins and Rhine, “Roadside Memorials”, 230

⁴⁵ Weir, “No Place to Die”

⁴⁶ McNearney, *Contested Sites*

⁴⁷ Wood, “Crossing the Verge”, 170

⁴⁸ Petersson, “Offerkast and Roadside Memorials”

⁴⁹ Suter, “Sacred Places”, 54

Despite this notion of spiritual significance, however, others have pointed out that many roadside memorials are not religious in nature at all, featuring football jerseys, teddy bears, truck or car parts and the like. Crosses may be used, but as Clark and Franzmann explain this may only be because of the lack of another culturally appropriate symbol for death.⁵⁰

Another important theme arising from the literature is the apparent shift of memorialisation from the traditional churches and cemeteries to the roadside. Claims that our post-modern society is rejecting the traditional authority of either the church or the state, and the establishment of private, non-sanctioned memorials is possibly indicative of this move. Clark and Franzmann for example, see this as a “rebuff of government authority”, with no permission being sought to erect private structures on what is essentially public land.⁵¹ Santino argues that the “sterility of official commemoration is resisted through spontaneous shrines or alternative sites of grieving that engage a community in ways that are not possible in the sequestered and managed spaces of graveyards or official monuments”.⁵² Thalson continues with this theme, pointing out the tension resulting from people building their own memorials instead of the “standardised traditional mourning customs offered by a variety of established and institutionalised religious traditions”.⁵³

A further theme which arises from the literature involves the recognition that people try to cope with their grief through **doing** something in an attempt to ‘make meaning’ of their loss. Perhaps building and erecting a roadside memorial serves the function of providing comfort and solace? For many, the act of doing something positive with their grief appears to bring a measure of purpose, accomplishment, comfort. A case in point is Eric Clapton’s song *Tears in Heaven*, composed in 1991 as a dedication to his four year old son Conor. Likewise, in Australia the parents of Anna Wood became active on the drug campaign trail following the death of their teenage daughter after she took an ecstasy pill at a dance party in 1995.⁵⁴ In my local community, another father has formed a Drink Driver education program for school children, after the senseless death of his teenage son, killed by a drunken youth.⁵⁵ All of these bereaved people have expressed a desire to try and make meaning out of their loss, to make something positive out of their tragedy, to try and warn or help or save others. The building and maintaining of roadside memorials likewise has provided a sense of meaning and solace to many.

The literature has plenty to tell us about roadside memorials – historians, folklorists, anthropologists, geographers, poets, filmmakers and other related disciplines have done a myriad of research and exploration into the phenomenon. There remains a dearth, however, on the role such memorials play in the grieving process, and their importance to bereaved family and friends.

Many people feel that such an overt expression of private grief in a public place is too confronting, too uncomfortable. Reports abound of police and ambulance personnel, for example, who are now suffering Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of not just attending such scenes of carnage on the roads, but then being forced to re-live it as they pass by the roadside memorial for that victim. “Why do I have to be reminded again and again?”⁵⁶

I have also had this experience, and now feel somewhat uncertain about the ‘fairness’ of roadside memorials to other road users. I was the social worker at a local hospital when a utility with three men were killed on the highway, which I had to travel twice daily on my way to work. I was involved with

⁵⁰ Clark and Franzmann, “Authority from Grief”, 583

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Jack Santino, ed., *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death* (U.S.A.:Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁵³ Denis Thalson, “Individual Memorials: An Emerging Typology of Ritual Mediation through Place” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2006).

⁵⁴ *The Sun Herald*, Sunday May 27, 2012

⁵⁵ Discussion with educator in Drink Driver program, Shoalhaven, NSW, June 18, 2010

⁵⁶ Suter, “Sacred Places”, 57

counselling the distraught older couple who survived the accident and I found the establishment of three white crosses very confronting and distressing.

Another anecdote was told to me via personal communication from the local Illawarra Brain Injury Service (IBIS). A patient of their service suffered a brain injury caused by a drunken driver right outside his house. The drunken driver was killed, and a large memorial was erected next to the driveway of his house. The patient's life also ended that day, metaphorically. He is very angry that, every day, he has to look at this tribute to the fellow who caused him such grief and loss.⁵⁷

Further anecdotes include a roadside memorial on a power pole right out the front of two young girls' home. The victim's mates gather here regularly on Friday and Saturday nights, to 'have a beer with their mate'. This frequently turns into a drunken party, which distresses the young children who live there. The father, in his anger and protection of his family, removed the memorial, which then led to conflict and passionate outcries from the friends and family of the deceased.⁵⁸ A balance is perhaps needed between the rights of the father and his family and the needs of the bereaved friends.

A roadside memorial at a local beach has also been the source of public outcry and angst. A teenager was killed, and the tree he collided with has turned into a large shrine, complete with photos, football jerseys and messages from friends and family. This is too much, according to some local people who also knew the youth, too confronting, not fair to be imposed upon them day after day. "This kind of grief should be kept private".⁵⁹

Other sides to this debate centre on the potential danger and distraction roadside memorials can cause (Smith,⁶⁰ Collins and Rhine,⁶¹ Tay⁶²). Police, council and RMS personnel are concerned that drivers' attention may be taken off the road as they pass these visual reminders of lives lost, ironically possibly causing further loss of life.

Adding to the controversy is the opinion that roadside memorials often become unkempt and untended, an eyesore. For this reason, some believe that a time limit should be enforced, say for a three month period before they must be removed. This raises the question 'how long does grief last?' – a topic which was recently tackled on the Australian television *Insight* program, entitled "Good Grief".⁶³ Indeed, how long does grief 'last' and what is an acceptable time frame for memorials to be allowed to remain, to mark this site of tragedy?

Size limits and structures allowed have also become a topic weighing into the debate. Some councils in Australia and countries overseas have imposed size limits and the use of generic structures only to alleviate this problem. On the road from Adelaide to Victor Harbor in South Australia, for example, red and black markers are placed on the highway – red signifying injury, black, death. No crosses or other types of structures are permitted. The Australian state of Tasmania has developed a similar policy allowing black posts with a small red cross to mark a death, and a red post to signify an injury. Ironically, on a recent trip to Tasmania I noted that approximately seven out of ten of these black markers also had a more personal and individualised roadside memorial nearby. Perhaps a generic structure is not sufficient for grieving families? Overseas, Germany has come up with another novel idea – electronic billboards along the roadside can display the names of deceased people along with messages from their loved ones.⁶⁴ Some argue that the State is trying to control people's grief and

⁵⁷ Discussion with social worker, IBIS, Nowra NSW, April 15 2010

⁵⁸ Discussion with senior paramedic, Ulladulla NSW, July 24, 2010

⁵⁹ Discussion with social worker, Nowra NSW, September 18, 2011

⁶⁰ Smith, "Roadside Memorials"

⁶¹ Collins and Rhine, "Roadside Memorials", 230

⁶² Richard Tay, "Driver's Perceptions and Reactions to Roadside Memorials", *Accident Analysis and Prevention* 41, no.4 (2009): 663-669.

⁶³ SBS *Insight* Program, "Good Grief", Tuesday April 17, 2012.

⁶⁴ Discussion with psychologist, Nowra NSW, November 10, 2010.

mourning – what you can and cannot do as a bereaved citizen. Perhaps this is why some people are choosing to defy both State and Church by erecting their own memorials, as they see fit.

Finally, the question of what to do with memorials when the road needs to be widened, or power poles need replacing, or maintenance crews need to remove them to mow around them or do repair work by the roadside? Is it possible to notify the families concerned? Is it the concern of councils or the RMS to be following up these people, and what reaction may they be met with? This scenario is currently happening in my local area where major road works are being undertaken and several roadside memorials will need to be removed to allow the highway to be widened. What will happen to these memorials? What impact will this have on those involved? Whose problem is this?

This is, therefore, a controversial and growing field. Policies and legislative reforms are afoot. Several Australian states and councils are looking at introducing legislation that would only allow generic memorials to be erected. Other councils - for example Forbes Shire Council in NSW - have specific legislation in place, allowing only structures of a very specific dimension, for a prescribed time frame.⁶⁵ Other areas have banned roadside memorials totally. Some allow for say three months duration, some have prescribed size and content guidelines, or the use of a generic structure only. Other areas have no policies in place.

Having reviewed the current literature and debates in the field and popular culture, several gaps in our understanding about bereavement and the role of roadside memorials become apparent. Research in the area has been dominated by historical and cultural accounts, without paying attention to the actual people who have constructed these memorials. There is a lack of sociological, qualitative research in which those who have built these roadside memorials have been asked to tell their story, to give an insight into their lived experience. A phenomenological approach to such research would provide a worthy alternative. Phenomenological research “is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, ‘bracketing’ taken-for-granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving”.⁶⁶

Likewise, in order to explore the experiences of people who construct roadside memorials, the theoretical perspectives of Heidegger’s hermeneutics offers a useful framework.⁶⁷ This approach suggests that by exploring the experience of bereaved people’s lives, attempting to understand the placement and significance of roadside memorials from *their* perspective it becomes possible to better understand their social reality. In focusing on the meanings behind the phenomenon of roadside memorials, and what significance is ascribed to their use, it becomes possible to ‘uncover the unseen’. As Heidegger explains: “Phenomenology means...to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself.”⁶⁸

Using the above theoretical frameworks of phenomenology and hermeneutics to underpin a research approach is a worthwhile undertaking. By interviewing family members and friends who have built roadside memorials, hearing their personal stories and viewing their reality through their ‘lens’, it becomes possible to gain new insights into the phenomenon of roadside memorials and to understand why they are so important in the grieving process.

In addition, social work takes a multi -dimensional approach, looking at both the personal and the political. Critical theory and critical social work practice then forms an important part of the conceptual framework for research. Drawing on the work of authors such as Ife,⁶⁹ Fook⁷⁰ and Pease

⁶⁵ Forbes Shire Council Roadside Memorials Policy 21st September 2006 www.forbes.nsw.gov.au/index.php?-roadside-memorials-policy (accessed 8 March 2011).

⁶⁶ Stan Lester, ‘An Introduction to Phenomenological Research’ (Taunton UK, 1999) www.sld.demon.co.uk/resmethv.pdf (accessed 12 Sept, 2013).

⁶⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 58.

⁶⁹ Jim Ife, *Rethinking Social Work: Towards Critical Practice* (Melbourne: Longman, 1999).

⁷⁰ Jan Fook, *Social Work. A Critical Approach to Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2012).

and Fook⁷¹, this approach aims to link the personal to the political, and to enable change as a result of research. Operating from this critical theory perspective allows for a research agenda with outcomes which have a political and social change function. The aim is not merely to seek an understanding and interpretation of people's experiences with roadside memorials; rather it also seeks to have a political agenda and outcome. It is not, therefore, just an interpretative, phenomenological study. As Ife summarises, "one of the central aims of critical theory is to enable people to be empowered through equipping them with the tools to analyse their own experiences by relating them to social and political structures (the personal is political) and thus to take action".⁷²

CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed some of the approaches to grief and loss and the current literature on roadside memorials. It has outlined the need for research which seeks to understand the role of roadside memorials in the grieving process and contribute to professional practice and policy in this area. The outcomes of this research will then be useful for making recommendations to policy makers, in addition to assisting contemporary social work practice and other health and welfare professionals in their work with people who are bereaved.

Roadside Service

another tree with the bark ripped off
a mound of flowers, a wooden cross
a soccer ball, a teddy bear
the burnt remains of a safety flare
a set of skid marks, torn up grass
an oil stain, some shattered glass
friends all gather at the sight
holding candles, burning bright
try to figure what went wrong
break into his favourite song
remember stories through the years
some bring laughter, most bring tears
reminisce about a friend that's gone
who wasn't on this earth that long
someone's brother, someone's son
why did he have to die so young?
we'll never drive by here again
not without remembering⁷³

⁷¹ Bob Pease and Jan Fook, eds., *Transforming Social Work Practice: Postmodern Critical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁷² Ife, *Rethinking Social Work*, 129.

⁷³ Charlie Parant, - <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/roadside-service> (accessed 19 June 2013).

REFERENCES

- About.com (Death and Dying) <http://about.com/od/lossandgrieffterms> (accessed August 23, 2013).
- Bowlby, John. *Attachment and Loss*, (vol 3). London: Hogarth Press, 1980.
- Clark, Jennifer, ed. *Roadside Memorials: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Armidale NSW: EMU Press, 2007.
- Clark, Jennifer. "Challenging Motoring Functionalism: Roadside Memorials, Heritage and History in Australia and New Zealand." *The Cultural Turn* (2009): 23-43.
- Clark, Jennifer and Ashley Cheshire. "RIP by the Roadside: A Comparative Study of Roadside Memorials in New South Wales, Australia, and Texas, United States." *Omega- Journal of Death and Dying*, 48, 3, (2003): 203-222.
- Clark, Jennifer and Majella Franzmann. "Authority from Grief, Presence and Place in the Making of Roadside Memorials." *Death Studies*, 30, (2006): 579-599.
- Collins, Charles. O. and Charles D. Rhine. "Roadside Memorials." *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying*, 47, 3, (2003): 221-244.
- Concise Oxford English Dictionary. 12th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Dictionary.com online <http://dictionary.reference.com/> (accessed August 23, 2013).
- Doss, Erika. "Spontaneous Memorials and Contemporary Modes of Mourning in America." *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, 2, 3, (2006): 294-318.
- Fook, Jan. *Social Work. A Critical Approach to Practice*. 2nd edn. London: Sage Publications, 2012.
- Forbes Shire Council Roadside Memorials Policy 21st September 2006 www.forbes.nsw.gov.au/index.php?roadside-memorials-policy (accessed 8 March 2011).
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *Sigmund Freud: Collected papers (vol 4)*. New York: Basic Books, 1917.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Southhampton: Oxford, Basil, Blackwell, 1978.
- Hockey, Jenny, Jeanne Katz, and Neil Small, eds. *Grief, Mourning and Death Ritual*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001.
- Ife, Jim. *Rethinking Social Work: Towards Critical Practice*. Melbourne: Longman, 1999.
- Jipson, Arthur, Paul Becker, and Bryan Byers. "How Roadside Memorial Laws Redefine Crime and Discretion in the Community". Paper presented at the ASC Annual Meeting, St Louis Adam's Mark, St Louis, Missouri, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.allacademic.com/>
- Klaassens, Mirjam, Peter Groote and Paulus Huigen. "Roadside Memorials from a Geographical Perspective." *Mortality*, 14, 2, (2009).
- Klass, Dennis, Phyllis Silverman and Steven Nickman, eds. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Washington DC: Taylor and Francis, 1996.
- Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan, 1970.
- Lester, Stan. 'An Introduction to Phenomenological Research' (Taunton UK, 1999) www.sld.demon.co.uk/resmethv.pdf (accessed 12 Sept, 2013).
- MacConville, Una. *Roadside Memorials*. Centre for Death and Society, University of Bath, UK, 2006.
- Macmillan Dictionary online. www.macmillan.com/ (accessed 23 August 2013).
- McNearney, Clay. *Contested Sites: Roadside Memorials, 1st Amendment and Popular Debate*, 2006. Retrieved from All Academic Research. <http://www.allacademic.com/>
- Nesporova, Olga. "The Public Remembrance of Death- Roadside Memorials." *Sociologicky casopis. Czech Sociological Review*. 2008, 44, 1, (2008): 139-164.
- Parant, Charlie. *Roadside Service*, 2011. Retrieved from PoemHunter.com, www.poemhunter.com/poem/roadside-service/. 19/6/13.
- Parkes, Colin Murray. *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*. 2nd edn. London: Penguin, 1986.
- Pease, Bob and Jan Fook, eds. *Transforming Social Work Practice: Postmodern Critical Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Petersson, Anna. "Offerkast and Roadside Memorials." Paper presented at the 8th International Conference on 'The Social Context of Death, Dying and Disposal', University of Bath, UK, 2007.

- Santino, Jack. ed. *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*. U.S.A.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- SBS *Insight* Program. "Good Grief", Tuesday 17 April 2012. Transcript retrieved from www.sbs.com.au/insight/episode/overview/467/Good-Grief.
- Schwartz, William. "Private troubles and Public Issues: One Social Work Job or Two?" *Social Welfare Forum* (1969): 41.
- Smith, Robert James. "Roadside Memorials – Some Australian Examples." *Folklore*, 110, (1/2), (1999): 103. Retrieved from Academic Search Complete database.
- Suter, Keith. "Sacred Places in a Secular Era: the Use of Roadside Memorials." *Contemporary Review*, 292, 1696, (2010): 51-59. Retrieved from www.Global-Directions.com
- Tay, Richard. "Driver's Perceptions and Reactions to Roadside Memorials." *Accident Analysis and Prevention*. 41, 4, (2009): 663-669. doi:10.1016/j.aap.2009.03.006.
- Tay, Richard, Anthony Churchill and Alexandre G.de Barros. "Effects of Roadside Memorials on Traffic." *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 43, 1, (2011): 483-486. doi: 10.1016/j.aap.2010.08.026.
- Thalson, Denis. "Individual Memorials: An Emerging Typology of Ritual Mediation through Place." Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2006. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, <http://gradworks.umi.com/>
- The Free Dictionary online, www.thefreedictionary.com/ (accessed August 23, 2013).
- The Sun Herald*, Sunday May 27, 2012
- Wagner, Deborah Lynn. "Death, Memory, and Space: A Rural Community Response to Roadside Memorials." Master's thesis, University of Texas, 2008.
- Weir, Daniel Raymond. "No Place to Die: The Poetics of Roadside Sacred Places in Mexico." Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2002. Retrieved from Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Collection, Louisiana State University, US.
- Wood, Dennis. "Crossing the Verge: Roadside Memorials – Perth, Western Australia". *Symbolic Landscapes*, 1, (2009): 161-171. doi: 10.1007/978-1-4020-8703-5_7
- Worden, J. W. *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy. A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. 2nd edn. New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc. 1991.