

# CHAPTER 6

## CONCLUSION

### 6.1 RESULTS

As indicated in Chapter 1, the primary aim of this study was to create and qualitatively explore the stories of my life in an autoethnographic manner in relation to my seventeen-year journey to become a clinical psychologist. This particular journey is characterized by a monogamous relationship with UNISA. The journey is highlighted through the telling of thirteen stories that have been included in the Appendix of this dissertation and provide thick descriptions of my seventeen-year journey.

These stories formed the basis of the subsequent narrative analysis that identified a range of themes. The themes themselves illuminated details of the stories which otherwise would have remained obscure. In addition, the themes provided contextual meaning for the overall life context of my seventeen-year journey and relationship with UNISA.

I used myself as the only research subject and my primary writings (akin to that of a personal diary) served as the data for this study.

After the stories had been created, I embarked on a process of identifying the most dominant theme which, like a golden thread, would link the various stories. In so doing 'my journey towards becoming a psychotherapist' emerged as a major thread. While the identification of 'my journey' can be considered a predictable 'golden thread' it needs to be said that this journey has taken seventeen years. Thanks to the narrative analysis a number of intriguing aspects about this journey, that I would otherwise not have noticed, emerged. My seventeen-year long struggle for education, spanning both the pre and post Apartheid eras, involving both informal and formal processes of education and training on the road to becoming a psychotherapist, has finally come to an end.

A number of findings have emerged from this particular autoethnographic study. Firstly, I have discovered the usefulness and personal relevance of engaging in an autoethnographic exploration. A critical review of the stories has revealed extremely painful aspects of my life – aspects which were deeply and safely buried. This approach to writing and analyzing my own stories has initiated a healing process, and brought closure of my painful life experiences.

A second discovery that emerged from this autoethnographic study is the discovery of my positive aspects. The analysis of the stories have revealed

things about myself I did not notice before, and was not necessarily consciously aware of. With the help of critical reflection and hindsight, I am able to affirm my unflinching determination to pursue, and complete a qualification in clinical psychology. I am now able to recognize my tendency towards being resilient more easily than before.

A third finding is the ability to identify, and embrace the negative aspects of myself – my blind spots, my limitations, my shortcomings and above all my humanness.

Fourthly, this study has also allowed me to reflect on my formal training, and understand it within the context of my life stories. I have discovered the source of my anger towards some of the trainers, and attribute this to my being a mature student with a vast array of life experiences, and my intolerance for unstructuredness.

Fifthly, I can now put my training into perspective. UNISA's emphasis on the self/personhood of the trainee can now be valued, while I can also appreciate the added value that this approach might have had, if the trainers had been willing to mutually engage with the trainees in self-reflection.

Integration of my personal and professional self can occur now, towards the end of my journey.

## **6.2 BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH**

A major advantage of the autoethnographic approach is the potential benefit that autoethnography might have on emerging psychotherapists. This autoethnographic study has served as a form of therapy for me to become a more 'holistic' and 'healed' healer.

The usefulness and helpfulness in engaging in this type of exploration cannot be sufficiently underscored. On the other hand, autoethnography has the potential for inducing fear and uncontainment, I therefore do not recommend that anyone embarks on an autoethnographic study in the absence of a supportive network. A supportive and caring family, friends, a therapist, and above all an empathetic supervisor is vital to the successful completion of a study of this nature.

My initial reservation with regard to the use of qualitative research techniques has given way to a support for this approach. I have experienced this type of enquiry as a rich and rewarding exploration, as predicted by Mary and Kenneth Gergen (2000).

Another benefit, though paradoxical in nature, is that no amount of pre-autoethnographic preparatory work – behaviourally, cognitively and/or

emotionally is able to safeguard one against the potentially paralyzing and painful effects this process might have on one. No matter how resilient one may consider oneself to be, and no matter how one may think one's vast and varied life experiences might have prepared oneself for a study of this nature, these in no way ensure immunity and protection from the potentially harsh impact it might have on one's psyche. Having faced the harsh reality, one can then at least begin to deal with it honestly.

There were times when the experiences accompanying the writing of this dissertation felt as tortuous as the life experiences retold in the primary stories. It was sometimes difficult to separate the pain associated with writing this dissertation from those associated in the reliving and writing up of what were my painful life experiences. Sometimes the pain felt agonizingly emotionally unbearable, even though cognitively I could appreciate the value of making explicit my life stories, and my experiences of a seventeen-year relationship with UNISA, and a fourteen-year closet relationship with my dream.

A study like this requires a particular level of emotional maturity. One also needs to have recourse to calling on others for help in undertaking this type of introspection. The greatest lesson I have learnt through writing this dissertation is that I am not self-sufficient, and that I am more dependent on others than I care to admit. I have learnt to rely on my husband, children, family, friends, therapist, supervisor, and above all on God in ways I had not envisaged before. It has been

a very humbling experience to encounter my limitations on an academic, emotional, physical and spiritual level, that confronted me in stark, revealing and enabling ways.

A consequence of this autoethnographic study is the feeling I experienced that not only my academic abilities are being judged, but my entire life is being critically scrutinised. I constantly had to remind myself to keep my personal journey separate from the requirements of the academic process.

It is always easier with the benefit of hindsight to evaluate a particular methodology. The challenge is of course to learn something new. Had I known the extent of the difficulties and pain I was about to encounter through this methodology I might have done things differently. I might have stuck with my original quantitative study had I known the rugged terrain I was about to traverse. I must hasten to add though, despite my reservations concerning the autoethnographic approach, it has been worthwhile for me. I have grown in ways I could not have predicted. I have been able to get in touch with the pain that was so deeply embedded – it might well have remained there for the rest of my life.

A limitation of this study is that the findings cannot be generalized to other people's experiences. This study is singularly focused on myself – I created the primary texts, I analysed my own writings and reflected on both. Yet, I have found this autoethnographic study to be useful, illuminating and therapeutic.

### **6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

I recommend that anyone who contemplates embarking on an autoethnographic study does so with caution. because the boundaries of fulfilling academic requirements, and dealing with life issues can become blurred. To help me make those essential distinctions, and thereby stay focused on the task at hand, in this case I needed to stay focused on the completion of my dissertation, and I had to rely on my husband and my therapist (who are two different people!). The complete healing of my pain needs to come later.

An autoethnographic approach to writing can be as satisfying in the end, as it can be grueling while wading one's way through the emotional quagmire. It is therefore recommended that a dissertation of this nature be undertaken within a context of supportive relationships in order to retain one's balance amongst the academic requirements with the potential intrapersonal and interpersonal growth aspects.

Prospective psychotherapists may find it useful to engage in this type of writing prior to and /or while practicing as independent psychotherapists. It may also be useful for training institutions to strongly recommend that their trainers undergo similar processes either in conjunction with their trainees or intradepartmentally. It may be beneficial for trainers and trainees to explore their vulnerabilities

together in a holding environment, in order to enable optimum future therapist-client working relationships. After all, the aim of psychotherapy training, is to provide quality service to those in need of healing. Autoethnographic introspectiveness on the part of both trainer and trainee lends itself to improved introspection techniques for their clients, and thus may ultimately contribute to more optimally functioning individuals and societies.

#### **6.4 FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future researchers need to focus on the following:

- exploring the effects that autoethnographic writings and analyses have on the personal and professional development of emerging psychotherapists.