

PROGRESSIO



Lisa's legacy, an auto-ethnographic account

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Abstract

The author reflects on events that unfolded more than 26 years ago. In doing so he transforms Lisa, a child receiving therapy in a children's home, to a symbol in the punctuation of the story of how he changed his methodological stance and thereby experienced an identity transformation.

The author also grapples with the meaning of the research that his students were involved with over time and he comes to the conclusion that they tried to understand something of the human condition, perhaps in an attempt to make sense of their own lives too. They entered the worlds of suffering, of despondency, of courage, and of resilience and became aware of how people dealt with issues of identity as they unfolded in the contexts of time and place.

PROLOGUE

The essence of my work at Unisa is to act as a facilitator for masters and doctoral students. In doing so, I have changed my methodological preference radically over the years. Whereas I had an appetite for quantitative research in the beginning of my academic career, I have since developed a taste for qualitative research in the form of case studies (Muller and Nieuwoudt 2003), action research (Harper 2003), and ethnographic research (Harper 2003; Harper, Harper and Nieuwoudt, in press; Papaikonomou and Nieuwoudt 2004).

This change of my research stance has been like exchanging a speed boat for a submarine. With the speed boat I could join my students as they surveyed the coast line, but with the submarine, I have been privileged to accompany them in their exploration of the murky and wondrous depths of the ocean.

The focus of this article is to report on how it came about that I moved from being a speed boater to being a submariner. In telling my tale, I will venture into the subjective world of auto-ethnography. This means that I will try to relate my story to various levels of my own consciousness in an attempt to connect the personal to the general. I have chosen to travel the auto-ethnographic route because it sets the stage to talk evocatively about matters that are important to me. I hope my words will resonate with you (Ellis 1998; Ellis and Bochner 2000).

Let me now return to the story of how I became primarily involved with qualitative research.

This tale began in 1980. I was 36 years old and ready for a drastic career change. Unisa kindly allowed me to take sabbatical leave for two years in order to qualify as a clinical psychologist at the University of Pretoria. There I was fortunate that Professor Chris Kotze agreed to be my supervisor.

My first client was someone that I will call Lisa. She was seventeen years old, in matric, and lived in a children's home. Lisa attempted to commit suicide. Professor Kotze suggested that I should become her therapist. I visited Lisa on a weekly basis and taped all our sessions. I played large sections of these tapes back to Chris. He helped me to persevere in my attempt to do therapy in an existential manner (Yalom 1980).

Looking back today at the events that unfolded more than 26 years ago, I am quite amazed at my construal here that transforms the impetuous, Lisa, to a symbol in the punctuation of the story of how I changed my methodological preference and thereby experienced an identity transformation. I think of this history as Lisa's legacy.

The next section deals with Lisa's legacy.

LISA'S LEGACY

I will present Lisa's description of the unfolding of her therapy during the eight months that our paths crossed. This story has been gleaned from the almost 200 pages of transcripts of our taped conversations.

This is Lisa speaking:

Mrs N. the head of the children's home called me a slut in front of the other children. This was the last straw. I went to the bathroom, sat on the floor with my back against the cold wall, and cut my wrist. I could feel the sharp pain where the blade pierced my artery. A river of blood ran from my arm to my legs and formed a red puddle on the green linoleum bathroom floor. I became dizzy as my life ebbed away. Just before I fainted, I could hear Katrina screaming, "Tannie Christa come quickly. Lisa cut herself."

When I awoke, everyone was kind to me, but I believe Mrs N was being phoney and more concerned

about the reputation of the children's home than about me. A child killing herself would be a blotch on the name of the children's home. She might even be fired for calling me a slut. I could see that my house mother, Tannie Christa, really cared. She held my hand. Her voice trembled when she asked me, "Lisa, will you talk to a psychologist?"

I started to cry. Tannie Christa said nothing. She just waited for my sobbing to subside. When it did, I answered her, "Yes Tannie Christa, I will".

That is how my therapy with Johan started. It lasted from the 3rd of April to the end of October of the year, 1980. I was seventeen years old and doing my matric.

In the beginning it was quite strange, him coming to talk with me and taping our conversations. He said something about another psychologist who was his supervisor who also had to listen to the tapes. I did not really understand why someone else had to know what I said. I just decided that I would be very wary and count my words.

I thought he would force me to talk of my deep secrets, to tell him of my father and also why Tannie N. called me a slut. He never did. It was as if he really just wanted me to talk about anything. At first all we seemed to talk about my studies and my plans for after matric. Sometimes it almost seemed to me as if passing matric was more important to him than to me. I never really shared his belief that I could make it, but I agreed to try.

I did not attempt to commit suicide again. Perhaps it was because Johan said over and over, "Lisa, please phone me anytime, night or day, if you feel things are getting too much. Promise me you will do that."

I meant it when I said, "I will never ever do it again, Johan". I believe that he really cared.

I never phoned him, but I just knew that I would not try to kill myself again, not before first phoning him.

We talked a lot about my mood swings. Johan explained that we could get a psychiatrist to prescribe medication to help me cope with the highs and lows. But I did not want to go to a shrink to take away my good days. I would rather suffer the bad days.

Every Wednesday afternoon he saw me for about an hour. We usually talked about the stuff that happened that week, how I felt about things and how my swotting was progressing. I almost started to believe that I would pass matric and become a journalist. Johan said the children's home would pay for my training. He also said that I have the gift of language and would be able to tell good stories.

I almost forgot that Johan is a psychologist. He started to feel more like a friend. It was only the whirring of the tape recorder that reminded me that this was not just any conversation.

Then I met Peter. I was crazy about him. He stayed in Braamfontein, quite near to the station. So, one Wednesday, I bunked school, got on a buss to Pretoria station, caught a train, and went to visit Peter. It was in the middle of my visit when Johan and Oom Dirk, my housefather, pitched up. I thought I would be punished for running away and for not keeping my appointment with Johan. But they were friendly and allowed me some privacy with Peter for about another hour whilst they were drinking coffee with Peter's parents.

Johan and my house parents never told Mrs N. about my midweek adventure. Life was good. I was in love.

Then I started to open up. I never realised that I could unburden myself so to another person.

I told Johan about my father and my sister. I told him how I complained to my teacher about all that stuff going on at night. I told him how they removed us from our home; how I felt so bad about my father when they took him to court and put us in this hell hole. I told him how I started to use sex to feel powerful. I told him how I hated being in the children's home. I told him that I think of myself as a Ghobby Child.

“What is a Ghobby Child?” he asked.

“A Ghobby Child is someone whose parents threw her away. It is someone who hurts inside”, I replied.

I lifted my mask and told him all these things.

About six weeks before my exams Tannie Christa and Mrs N. had a terrible fight. Mrs N. yelled at Tannie Christa and told her to go. She and Oom Dirk packed their things and left. My heart was broken, I loved them so.

I was placed in Tannie Tracey's house. We hated one another from the start. My mood swings became worse and she arranged that I should see a psychiatrist.

I decided that enough is enough. I will not kill myself, but I would also not remain in this place any longer. I phoned Peter. He took me away. I got my mother to give consent and we got married. No matric, no journalism, and no more children's home.

The last time I looked back at the children's home I wondered how Johan would react when he heard what I did. Then I remembered how he once said, “Lisa, you will show them one day”.

I smiled wryly and thought, “Yes, I showed them, I really did”.

This completes Lisa's tale. I will now return to my own story of how the experience of my encounter with Lisa moved me to become enthusiastic about qualitative research.

I completed my training and registered as a clinical psychologist. However, I did not make the career move I planned and in 1981 I was back at Unisa, back to my life as an academic. Shortly after my return to Unisa a colleague approached me to be her promoter. She wanted to do research on Children's homes in South Africa and I accepted her as a student.

After doing an intensive literature study she constructed a questionnaire dealing with various aspects related to the functioning of children's homes. This questionnaire was sent to a representative sample of white Children's homes in South Africa. The data was analysed and we wrote a paper on the topic. Our article was accepted in an accredited journal (Cronje and Nieuwoudt 1981). The doctorate neared completion.

Then I dreamt of Lisa. She was crying.

'Why are you crying Lisa', I asked.

She replied, 'It makes me sad that you are not telling my story'.

'What is your story Lisa?' I asked.

'You know my story. It is the story of pain behind the mask', she replied.

The next day I told my colleague of my therapy with Lisa. We concluded that our research thus far was too cold. It said nothing about Lisa's pain. We decided to transform her thesis. The quantitative data would be included as a background to our focus on an exploration of the worlds of five adolescent girls in children's home. This was the same children's home as the one from which Lisa had absconded.

My colleague completed her research three years later on the topic of the self-concept of the adolescent girl in a children's home (Cronje, 1984). This led to a published article with the title, *Pain behind the mask: Stigmatisation effects of a children's home* (Cronje and Nieuwoudt 1988). In this publication we did not try to say something that could be generalised to a universe, but we tried to reflect nuances of the psychic pain of a girl in a children's home. In doing so, I believe that I could hear Lisa whispering, 'I know my story is not in your publication, but you do reflect my hurt'.

In 1988 my colleague and I wrote an article for *Unisa Psigologia* wherein she told something of the story of one of her subjects and I told something of Lisa. The title of our article is, *Pain behind the mask* (Nieuwoudt and Cronje 1988). In this article, I remember Lisa with a little poem called, *Hello Ghobbie Child*.

My encounter with Lisa and the subsequent fulfilling experience I had as a promoter for a qualitative thesis spurred me on to motivate other students to do qualitative research. This resulted in many Masters dissertations and doctoral theses. I think of these studies as Lisa's legacy.

I pondered a long time how I should describe this legacy. How does one describe the essence of your work of so many years? After giving this much thought, I decided to start factually. I will tell you how many dissertations and theses I have become involved in and I will give you the gist of some of the titles of these studies. I do this to set the stage to tell you how my students entered the worlds of people that were grappling with life's challenges, and to tell you how we became aware of the human spirit through the life stories of our subjects.

So, let me give you some numbers:

From 1981 when I returned to Unisa after my clinical training, I was involved with 21 masters studies of which 14 were qualitative. During this same period I acted as promoter for 20 doctoral studies of which 14 were qualitative. This contrasts with the 13 years before 1980 when I acted as supervisor for three masters degrees and two doctoral studies. All of these were quantitative.

Let me now give you a flavour of the titles of some of our qualitative studies:

- The impact of job loss on marriage
- Expectations in romantic relationships

- The empowerment of black teachers
- Exploring forgiveness
- Treating gambling addiction
- Exploring place identity at work
- Stories of bereavement
- Adult friendships and the boundaries of marriage
- Exploring stories of coping with childhood cancer in a support group for parents
- The individual and marital adjustment of the dialysis patient
- Facilitating forgiveness
- Women who suffer
- Preventing burn-out amongst adolescents
- Stories of identity in a multicultural children's home.
- Being a house parent in a children's home
- Women after divorce: exploring the psychology of resilience.
- Teaching street children: The Masupatsela experience.

Through these and other studies, we tried to understand something of the human condition, perhaps in an attempt to make sense of our own lives too. We entered the worlds of suffering, of despondency, of courage, and of resilience. We became aware how people dealt with issues of identity as they unfolded in the contexts of time and place.

The stories of identity that we heard were stories about what happened or did not happen between our subjects and the people who have populated, who are populating and will be populating the places where they live their lives. So we heard stories of love and joy, but we also heard stories of hate and betrayal and loneliness; we heard stories of greed and we heard stories of generosity; we heard stories of belonging and we heard stories of alienation. Indeed, as David Sims (2005, 86) says, we became aware that we are all 'living a story and storying a life'. Not only do we tell stories, we 'live out our affairs in storied form' (Ochberg 1994, 116).

All these studies suggest that people constantly find themselves through the stories that they tell and the stories that they live, as Kearney (2002, 129) says:

Every human existence is a life in search of a narrative. This is not simply because it strives to discover a pattern to cope with the experience of chaos and confusion. It is also because each human life is *always already* an implicit story. Our very finitude constitutes us as beings that are born at the beginning and die at the end.

Our research over the years implies that as time unfolds we are constantly at odds with our identities, seeking answers to the questions of who we are, who we were and who we are going to be.

'And what is identity?' you might well ask.

The answer to this question is twofold, depending on who is replying to the question. On the one hand a person imagines who he or she is amongst others. On the other hand

people are inclined to assign identities to one another. Sometimes there is a consensus between these two types of imaginings, and sometimes they differ immensely. Sometimes these imaginings are true, and sometimes they are illusions. Sometimes the illusion becomes the truth, and the truth becomes the illusion.

Our identities unfold over time, as we move from birth to death; from being a child to being an old person. This passage through time does not occur in a vacuum. We live our lives in different places, and each of the places in which we find ourselves has its own history which we have to face, just as the surfer has to face the wind and the tide in his or her struggle to ride the waves.

I am saying these things because Lisa's legacy tells not only her story, it also resonates with my story and with the stories of my students during the time that I have become the person I am, at a place called Unisa. I believe Lisa's legacy says something about the tapestry of life.

This completes my description of Lisa's legacy. I hope my words conveyed something of the quality of our work; something of the adventure of being allowed to enter the inner depths of another person's consciousness. I realise that our research does not provide easy answers to the challenges of life, but I do believe that we created a realisation of the deepening of questions.

I will now turn to the epilogue of my article.

EPILOGUE

Imagine that it is some time in the future. You see me sitting in front of the computer, ready to log off. You hear a knock on the door.

'Come in', I say.

A woman in her early forties enters. She smiles and says, 'I am Lisa. I am back'.

I am amazed and I wonder, 'Will there be closure now?'

I invite Lisa to sit and I say, 'Lisa please tell me, how did your life unfold?'

Lisa resumes her story. I am transported back in time and it almost feels as if it is a Wednesday afternoon at the children's home, just as it was so long ago, but on this occasion there is no tape recorder to capture our words.

As Lisa tells her story, the identity of a girl of seventeen is transformed to that of a woman, who is older now than I had been then. I become intensely aware of time: time as captured by a spinning earth as it circles an aging sun, all part of an expanding universe; time as measured by a cesium atom as it vibrates consistently in an atomic clock, marking fractions of fractions of seconds (Callender and Edney 2004); time as reflected in the changing seasons of life; and time as whispered by a heart that beats and beats and beats, until it beats no more ...

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