

The following chapter contains the story of a woman who has been abused. By including her story she becomes the mouthpiece for countless others who have suffered in the same manner.



CHAPTER FOUR

A VIGNETTE OF ABUSE: ROSSANA'S STORY

“Narrative is the means by which we, both as participants and as researchers, shape our understandings and make sense of them. The question is not whether narrative approaches are science, but how we can bring autobiographical awareness into scholarly conversation with our understanding of science”.
(Josselson & Lieblich, 1995, p.32)

The motivation for including this narrative account of Rossana's experience is found within what contemporary psychologist, Jerome Bruner (1986, in Josselson & Lieblich, 1995, p.32) calls “narrative modes of knowing”. This mode is an effort to approach the understanding of lives in context, rather than through a “prefigured and narrowing lens”. The researcher making the linkages between someone's life story and the theoretical interpretation of available data, constructs meaning.

Psychology is more than a laboratory and therapy room, experiment and observation. As a scientific discipline it contains a great variety of concepts and propositions, ideas and theories. Some of these theories have some validity and some definite limitations. Individuals and their stories are considerably more complex than any one theory would have us believe. Psychology gives us a kaleidoscopic picture of human beings, an array of intriguing facts and beguiling themes.

This story is based on the transcribed interview between the researcher and Rossana. While Rossana does not suffer any form of IBS, she has known abuse for most of her life, and thus she echoes much of what was presented in the preceding chapter. Gilmartin (1994) summarises the long-term interpersonal problems reported among survivors of childhood sexual abuse as problems in interpersonal relationships that include fear, hostility, and a sense of betrayal. The abused often feels a sense of isolation that is maintained by the secrecy that surrounds abusive acts. In this section the background factors, the setting and the lead up to the interview will be presented. Thereafter a discussion of emerging themes will follow.

The Telling of Rossana's Story

In 1999 the researcher did an Internship at the UNISA Centre for Peace Action in Eldorado Park. This Centre operates on both an appointment, as well as, a walk-in system. On the 16th of February, 1999, Rossana came to the Centre requesting to see a Psychologist as soon as possible. As the researcher was busy at that time she opted to wait.

When Rossana eventually walked into the researcher's office she was prepared for the interview, she had spent her time in the waiting room making notes about everything that she wanted to say. She felt it was important that she start at the beginning and that she not leave anything out. Rossana opted to use her real name for the telling of her story.

Reason for Referral

Rossana is a 41 year old Coloured woman with two children: a son 21 years old, and a daughter of 11 years. She was divorced four years ago, but her ex-husband still lives in the same flat. He doesn't support her but when he has money he supports their daughter. At first it was difficult to ascertain the reason for referral, but it seemed she wanted a letter saying she would be coming for therapy to take to the Judge who she had to see later during that day. It seemed that both her son and her ex-husband went to get a court order to have her taken to Sterkfontein (a mental hospital) because she had been hysterical.

The story of Rossana's background

Rossana's parents were separated when she was young. She doesn't believe her mother is her real mother because she was never treated like a daughter. She reported, "My mother says she is my biological mother, but I don't believe her." She now calls this woman her stepmother. Her mother remarried and at the age of 12 her stepfather sexually abused her. Both her parents were drinking and she still feels a lot of anger about this.

She had a Granny who was like a mother to her who lived in a neighbouring suburb. From the age of nine she spent most of her weekends and holidays here. She enjoyed going there, as her Granny was neat and clean and tidy. She also gave Rossana lots of advice for living her life. She passed away when Rossana was 15. Rossana met her husband while they were both at school. She reports that she was very beautiful when young and had a very good figure (even now she is an attractive woman who looks younger than her 41 years). He wrote her letters full of promises that she believes were "false" love letters and then she fell pregnant. She says, "life has been full of deceit, I feel as though no one has been true to me." She says her boyfriend wanted her to have an abortion, but she refused and so she was "forced" to marry him in 1977. Since Rossana matriculated she has had a number of jobs doing clerical and bookkeeping work. She has always been very independent and she is proud of being able to support her children and herself. She alleges that her husband was having affairs all the time that they were married. During this time she had about five or six abortions because he did not want any more children.

impressions of Rossana

Rossana looked good for her given age, she was neatly dressed in a navy blue skirt and a white blouse. She did however carry an enormous amount of luggage, especially for someone who had walked quite a long way to come and see me. She had a navy blue backpack on her back that she did not remove, so she had to sit quite uncomfortably on the chair. Next to her she had about three or four bags, all navy blue and an umbrella. Once Rossana had completed her therapy sessions, this

changed– she only carried a medium sized handbag. It was as though she felt she could leave some of her baggage behind.

The Interview

Rossana was willing to be interviewed for this study once she had completed her therapy sessions. The interview needed to take place away from her home, so it was audiotaped in a garden close to where she lives. She was keen to tell her story, but she had difficulty in remembering some of the details.

Emerging Themes

Themes of abuse

Rossana suffered different forms of abuse, both as a child and as an adult. These abuses were at the hands of various people. The verbal and emotional abuse as a child was mostly from her mother.

Well as a child I would say mental abuse, emotional abuse unfortunately growing up in a home where, well I had a single parent with drinking problems. My mother had drinking problems at that time with a result I suffered verbal abuse sometimes physical abuse and obviously emotional abuse okay.

Ja, because my mother had a drinking problem many times under the influence it would be verbal abuse you know like screaming and shouting and I was even as a child I was really sensitive to screaming and shouting and too much noise and too much loudness..... I am an introvert type of person because of that I was very sensitive to screaming and shouting and fighting and unpleasant situations like you know like a crime situation, a criminal situation where people sort of end up in fighting, screaming and shouting and under the influence of liquor like.

Rossana still lives with the after-effects of the verbal abuse, when things get too noisy in her home it is as though she has flashbacks to this time, and she feels as though she needs to get out. So she takes long walks through the neighbourhood. Rossana was also humiliated by her mother's accusations; she was targeted by her mother as well and made the scapegoat for her mother's relationship with the stepfather (her husband).

Well verbal abuse was obviously I had a step father and many a times she would accuse me you know with my step father, of sleeping with him, which was something that was not acceptable because I sort of resented my step father I did not want anything to do with him and as far as I am concerned she was like verbally attacking me for no reason what so ever.

I don't know if it was jealousy you know because I don't see why your own mother can be jealous of you and if she was jealous of me because of him being my step father why would she allow him to be around because they weren't married and him being my step father maybe she felt that I was a threat to him..... and as far as I am concerned he never in fact existed you know because I never accepted him as my step-father I never loved him as my step father. I was more resentful of him more than anything else.

Rossana also suffered sexual abuse at the age of 12. The abuse consisted of fondling, and no further sex act was committed. The very fact that she hated her stepfather became an escape route for her, and she did not allow the abuse to carry on for long.

Well because of the situation I shared the same bed with her and my stepfather. I had 2 brothers that slept in the other room, myself and I had a younger sister 10 years younger than me and her, my mother and step-father we shared the same room and the same bed so to say although it was 2 three quarter beds next to each other and there were times where ,where he touched my vagina with his hand.

Rossana also suffered abuse during adulthood. She suffered economic abuse while being married to her husband.

Shortly after marriage I was forced to be independent even though we had a child after our marriage,...I married because of pregnancy and after the birth of my son I was forced to go to work being independent working for myself and him because his father never supported both of us financially.

Shortly after we were married he just left his job, refuse to work, more at home than anything, else not knowing what he was doing at home while I was at work not being aware of what was happening behind my back.

Financial abuse well he would never support us financially in any way like you know help with the food and the rent and the clothing and things like that. I was left on my own to do all that and my son. Obviously myself and my son and I still had to feed him and his sister and her child on top of that.

Throughout her marriage, Rossana was subjected to physical and sexual abuse with her husband behaving in a very violent manner.

Physical abuse, where he would beat me many a time for no reason what so ever. He was involved in affairs he had extra marital affairs. Involved with women that I did not know about maybe what ever he did.

Well sexual abuse is many a time he would force me to have sex with him against my will and he would tell me what supposed to do I am married to you, you are my wife. You know, do you expect me to sleep with other women; in the meantime he was sleeping with other women behind my back.

Although it was very humiliating for Rossana that her husband was having affairs, she was most humiliated when he would have her fetched at work by the police and taken either to the cells, or to a local hospital.

There were many a time that I didn't know he was having affairs, there was one time he ended up in movies with one of my friends so called friends. It wasn't a very healthy marriage to begin with.

The cops came to my work, in front of the boss. They said he said I was going mad so they had to take me away. Why did he have to do that in front of the work people? I lost jobs because of that.

Rossana has suffered much degradation during her marriage, but this stills carries on, as even though she is divorced, her ex-husband refuses to leave the communal apartment.

He tells me that I'm ugly, and fat. I was very beautiful when I was young; I think he married me because of that. He wasn't honest; he just wanted to get me pregnant. Then he got tired of me.

Rossana believes that she is no longer as beautiful as she was before (distortion of subjective reality), she feels that she was robbed due to all the hardships she has gone through.

Themes of loss

Rossana had suffered the loss of the mother figure in her life, both through the loss of her relationship with her mother, and through the death of her Grandmother, who died when Rossana was 15 years old.

obviously the mother and daughter relationship was not there because it never was there.

Well it (the drinking and the abuse) robbed of a lot of things as a child first of all the love from a mother was never there.

She felt as though she received no love from any one other than her Grandmother.

Well obviously unloved from a mother. Being a single parent and growing up in a divorced home no love from both parents.

There has been a lot of loss in Rossana's life. She felt that she had lost her innocence by being forced to get married. She had lost the one person who would have given her the correct guidance when she fell pregnant, her Grandmother. She felt that if her Grandmother had been there, things would have worked out very differently for her.

Why did my Granny have to die? She was wise, I looked up to her, she would've given me advice. She would have told me not to marry him. It was a hopeless marriage.

Rossana felt that there were times when she had lost the very essence of her self.

Abuse obviously it destroys your, it destroys a lot about you, you know it destroys your human nature. Abuse can destroy your human nature.

It can take away your human nature. Abuse can if you are not careful it can sort of take away your human nature.

Themes of secrecy

Rossana felt that she had to keep the sexual abuse by her stepfather secret, as she was not able to talk to her mother.

I had to talk about it and, because of the fact that she was many a time under the influence of liquor you know I did not have the freedom to talk to her about it because I knew if I had to talk to her about it. If she was under the influence she would have accused me of sleeping with him, which was something that never really happened.

Rossana, because of her hate for her stepfather, managed to speak to her Aunt about the sexual abuse she had to endure from him.

Ja, and then I eventually I had to speak about it. Well 3 of her sisters came to our home and they spoke about it and they confronted and openly about it and at that time my granny was still alive okay and then shortly after that because of non payment of the rent we were put out of the house that we were lived in and I moved in with one of my aunts.

Rossana felt that her husband had been untruthful with her, and there were large areas of his life that she knew very little about.

He was not open with me before we were married there were things that he hid from me that I did not know about him that I only felt out years later after we were married which is things that if I knew before we were married I would have never got involved with him or even married him.

Themes of isolation

Rossana needed to get away from her stepfather and his abuse, as she had no one to turn to, she did the only thing possible.

always tried to avoid him as fast as I could. You know I always tried to stay out of his way.

While at school, Rossana felt alone and she had very few friends.

children my age especially my age school children that I went to the same school with I also suffered abuse where I found that they were like very cattish and very unfriendly right and it affected me emotionally as a child and when people are very unfriendly towards you because of the situation at home.

In her marriage, Rossana was mostly left to fend for herself, and she had to raise her son as though she was a single parent. Her husband was unable and unwilling to support her emotionally and financially.

he was never there as a father towards his son and never really a husband towards his wife even though we were married.

Rossana became increasingly more isolated, until she felt completely alone. Her husband continued to isolate her even more by telling her how unworthy she was, and she came to believe this, thus disempowering her even more.

Ja, I felt I was left on my own to fight my own battles and to fight my own way through life. It is as if I could not turn my brothers because they were not people that I could obviously look up to you know and my ex husband always gave me the impression that I am nothing and because he was an educated type of person, a matriculant and varsity student, he would always look down upon me and give me the impression that you are nothing and your people, your family are nothing your brothers are nothing.

The abuse that Rossana has suffered throughout her life has caused her to become socially isolated as she is unable to trust people, thus she does not allow anyone to approach her emotionally.

has learnt me that you know in life because people are the cause of abuse in life, we have to be so careful and not to allow people to destroy you. Because people are mainly the cause of abuse in life we have to be always trying. No don't allow people to abuse you because if people abuse you eventually they will destroy you. Abuse leads to destruction.

Themes of health

While Rossana is fairly healthy, it is evident that the abuse has taken its toll on her health. The main physical complaint she has is an inability to sleep at night.

Obviously as a woman it affects you physically because your health suffers in the first place it affects you mentally, emotionally because you actually married to a person who does not care about you. Who does not care a damn about you, about your health or would rather see you destroyed than anything else.

Well it obviously it affects your health. It affects and personally if I upset myself. If I sort of get worked up and upset myself or even become angry I don't sleep well that is how it affects my health. I just don't have. It affects my sleep I don't sleep well.

Themes of power

For many years Rossana lived her life as the under-dog. She had very little power to stop her husband abusing her. There seemed to be no one on her side anymore.

Very insecure. In fact in thinking you know I come to the conclusion that my husband was actually out to destroy me mentally and physically. If he could succeed in trying to sort of to kill me he would have done it.

Well ja there were times when I actually felt you know I am faced in a situation where I am powerless and there is nothing that I can do about my situation about the abuse about the marriage that was one big mistake. Many times I felt that there is nothing that I could do about it.

Her husband's power over her extended so far that he was able to make her have abortions against her will, even though these were children that she desperately wanted.

there were times when I was pregnant and he forced me to do away with it because he did not want the responsibility of having more children because he was an irresponsible type of person. He did not want more children in life.

Later, when Rossana found the inner strength to go through with the divorce, she needed something to give her the final motivation, and she found that in a very concrete way. She felt that she had the right to protect her body.

Well in the first place to stop the idea that he had of thinking that he has got the power of me, over my body. First of all my body that was one of the reasons you know why I actually applied for the divorce to sort of break that power that he thought he had over my body.

Themes of survival

Rossana has survived her many years of abuse. She feels she is on the way to recovery. As a child she took refuge with her Grandmother. This was the one place where she felt loved and valued.

which that was why I took my refuge to my granny because I knew she had it for me. I felt it that she had that love for me.

at the age of 9, 10 years old I went over weekends and school holidays I take my refuge to my granny's home which was like a very big difference compared to the situation that I grew up in my mother's home and with a result I took my refuge to my granny.

my granny was just the opposite she was very soft, sweet, quiet type of person. Never used drink, scream, shout she was never loud never rude never used to fight you know or even angry at me or shout at me or fight with me. She was a church going person and she loved the Lord in her own way you know. The situation was there was totally different with the result that is why I took my refuge there every weekend and during school holidays.

Rossana tried a number of times to leave the relationship in order to preserve her sense of self, it was a long process, but she knew that she would have to free herself from further abuse.

Eventually I tried to get away from him. There was one time that I actually applied for a divorce but because I considered my son at that time I just withdrew it, cancelled the divorce. But there were times when I tried to get away from him.

The abuse had worn Rossana down to such an extent that, although she knew she had to get away, she despaired of ever doing so. For a while she became immobilized and trapped in her situation.

Many a time I just felt that isn't there a way that I could just either get rid of him or just you know move away somewhere just to get away from him. Just to stop this kind of abuse.

About five years ago, Rossana eventually went through with the divorce. Although she is divorced her ex-husband refused to leave the marital home, even though he had been ordered to do so by the divorce court.

and he always thought he had a strong hold on me which he obviously he did not have.

Well the divorce was a great help because it stopped sexual abuse it stopped the financial abuse. It stopped the physical abuse.

Rossana's daughter was a much wanted child as she felt that she had been given a gift by being allowed to give birth to this child. When she decided to get divorced her husband tried to use the child in order to get her not to proceed with the hearing.

the reason why he wanted to fight the divorce not because he didn't want to be divorced because he wanted custody of my

daughter. That is the main reason why he wanted to fight the divorce. He wanted to take my daughter away from me.

Now that Rossana's ex-husband is no longer able to sexually and physically abuse her, he continues to try and undermine her role as mother to her young daughter.

Not that he has the power he is trying. He does not have the power to abuse emotionally because as far as I am concerned there is no ties between the two of us in fact I am trying the best of my ability to avoid him at all times but many a time he forces issues and he is using my daughter as a weapon to try and abuse me emotionally but he has not got the power to do it.

Themes of hope

Rossana refuses to allow herself to be revictimized.

The one thing that I have tried to avoid is the same abuse to be repeated in my life. I try to avoid that, you know, not to allow people to abuse me like I have been abused in the past.

Ja, I have learnt something from the abuse and I am definitely not going to allow it to happen to me again. Definitely not.

Rossana is very aware of the presence of God in her life. She feels that this has filled the gap left in her life by the death of her Grandmother. She feels that here she has found healing and restoration

I take my refuge to God you know I have taken my refuge to God in the past and still on a daily basis I take my refuge to God and that is what is actually it fills the gap and to me God made the difference of all the abuse that I have suffered during my childhood and my marriage.

It is like He (God) blackened out you know all the blackness. He blotted out all the blackness of the abuse.

Rossana has overcome great obstacles in getting to this point in her life. She has a strong identity as a Christian, and it is her faith, grounded and rooted in God that has helped her come to terms with her abusive past. She is proud of how far she has come, and she is now at the point of finding her own place to stay. She has had a permanent job for a year now and she feels that, although it has taken a long time, she can look forward to a good and secure future.

Rossana was very keen for her story to be used in this research, and perhaps if more stories are told by more women who have

survived, there would be a greater understanding of the role that abuse plays in the lives of so many people. For it is not only women and children who are suffering, but there are men who too are being abused, and there are families who suffer, as well as communities who are powerless to stop the suffering and abuse of their members. But the silence must first be broken. Silence affords abuse, against whoever that abuse is perpetrated, a power that it does not deserve. People must be found who will be accountable for putting an end to these cycles of abuse.



