

**A NARRATIVE READING OF A FEMALE ADOLESCENT'S  
PROCESS OF SELF CONSTRUCTION**

by

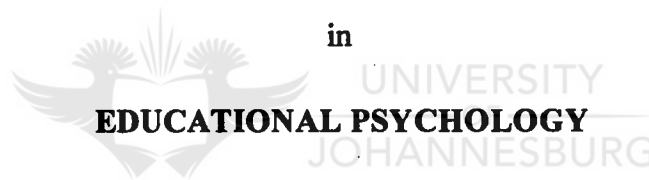
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**Dedicated to**

**Puppy, Squirrel and Pegsi**

- **your love and support continues to be the wind beneath my wings**



**and to Abi**

- **thank you for trusting me with your stories and selves**

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## ABSTRACT

South African psychologists have been called upon to question the appropriateness of the theories and methodologies employed to frame their experiences and inquiries. This study offers an alternate theoretical orientation to traditional Western modernist thought with regard to the development of human identity. A narrative understanding of self is presented as such an alternative. The research aim and its consequent methodology evolved from the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed and that there are many valid ways of thinking about and working with persons. To present a narrative interpretation of a female adolescent's self, based on her life story as it emerged within the context of narrative therapy, is the research purpose. That self can be viewed as narrative, comprises the central thesis of this work. This study supports the contention that narrative is fundamental in the presentation, preservation and transformation of personal identity.

# CONTENTS

## ABSTRACT *i*

### CHAPTER ONE

#### THE LAND OF NARRATIVE

|  |    |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION   | 1  |
| THE POSTMODERN TURN                                  | 1  |
| NARRATIVE KNOWING                                    | 5  |
| MOTIVATION   | 9  |
| ASSUMPTIONS AND ASPIRATIONS                          | 10 |
| RESEARCH QUESTIONS                                   | 11 |
| THE JOURNEY'S PURPOSE                                | 11 |
| NARRATIVE RESEARCH                                   | 11 |
| Narrative and Self                                   | 13 |
| Features of Narrative Research                       | 14 |
| A Model for the Classification of Narrative Analysis | 17 |
| A Holistic Content Perspective of Abi's Life Story   | 19 |
| Criteria for the Assessment of Narrative Research    | 23 |
| THE JOURNEY'S COURSE                                 | 26 |

### CHAPTER TWO

#### NARRATIVE THERAPY AND NARRATIVE SELF

|                              |    |
|------------------------------|----|
| NARRATIVE THERAPY            | 27 |
| A Common Worldview           | 27 |
| A Therapeutic Process        | 33 |
| NARRATIVE SELF               | 36 |
| Narrative Self in Context    | 38 |
| Narrative Self as Continuous | 42 |

Narrative Self as Separate but Related to Others 43

Narrative Self as Reflexive 44

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **A NARRATIVE READING OF ABI'S SELF**

READING FOR PLOT 47

TWO SUBPLOTS 49

Subplot One:

Abi transforms her primary experience of self from single and separate to multiple and related 49

Subplot Two:

Abi transforms her primary experience of self from self-doubt to self-understanding 55

CONCLUDING REMARKS 59

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

#### **APPENDICES**

Appendix A: Date list of therapeutic conversations

Appendix B: Abi writes her life story

Appendix C: Abi's written feedback on therapy

Appendix D: Selection of questions posed to Abi

Appendix E: Abi's written response to this study

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **THE LAND OF NARRATIVE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The reader is invited to join me as I traverse the Land of Narrative. In an attempt to orientate both Self and Other, I have situated this study within the dimensions of time and space. In this regard, the reader is alerted to the cross from Modernity to the Postmodern. My assumptions and aspirations are revealed following my motivation for electing to visit this land. Motives are linked to intentions as I consider my aims and the best way to go about this journey. It becomes apparent that the most viable way forward is through Narrative Knowing, Narrative Research and Narrative Therapy.

### **THE POSTMODERN TURN**

My intention for this section is to present a working overview of the philosophical context that informs my study. As narrative therapy neither arose nor is practiced in a vacuum, it is imperative to situate it. Narrative therapy has evolved in what is described as a “postmodern climate” (Doan, 1997:131). ‘Postmodern’ may be understood as a critique of modernism. I present these ideas broadly on the level of ideology as well as specifically as they apply to the domain of knowledge referred to as ‘psychology’.

The modern era was based on the assumption that people could rely on a bedrock of universal truths and that scientists could be relied upon to access such universal knowledge (Doan, 1997:129). The modern perspective is essentially optimistic and is characterised by a search for foundations and structures. Freud, for example, used a foundational-superstructure metaphor in his explication of the structure of the human mind (Grassie, 1997:84).

The genesis of modernism is considered to be the Enlightenment, which has become synonymous with Western thought (Hekman, 1990; as quoted by Lowe, 1991:43). This form of thought assumes that knowledge can be founded upon absolute truth, that it is external to the knower, and objectively presented. Modernist thought is essentially

anthropocentric: the focus of knowledge is 'man' who separates himself from the object of study in order to acquire objective knowledge. Science, in the modern era, practices a commitment to the empirical "elucidation of essences" for the purpose of establishing canons of systematic and objective knowledge (Gergen & Kaye, 1992:168). Such knowledge would allow scientists to predict outcomes and utilise technology to realise the ultimate aim, namely, mastery over the future. Science becomes the primary metaphor for such progress. The inherent rationality of the individual is assumed and it is believed that clear reasoning will solve human dilemmas (McNamee, 1992:190).

The essence of modernism as the belief in a knowable world can be seen by the psychologist's insistence in the existence of a subject matter as well as their search for universal principles and properties to describe that subject matter (Gergen, 1992:19). The age of modernity is characterised not only by a search for truth but a commitment to do so through method. This is reflected in the modern psychology's veneration and employment of the empirical method together with the belief that this methodology yields impersonal results. Flowing from this is the ultimate modernist commitment to the progressive nature of research.

Within the domain of psychological inquiry, postmodern critique marginalises the previously coveted position held by methodology. The modernist view of individuals as mechanical automations and the severance between the scientist and the subject is challenged. The postmodernist questions both the concept of truth and research as the vehicle for establishing truth, thus undermining modernism's grand narrative of progress (Gergen, 1992).

Hoffman (1992:9) refers to the "five sacred cows of modern psychology" as the belief in and commitment to: objective social research; the self as an irreducible inner reality; psychological development that occurs in universally applicable stages; emotions that exist inside people as discrete states; and levels or hierarchical layers of structures that characterise human interaction. Hoffman identifies the "super sacred cow" of modern



psychology as the colonial attitude of the mental health practitioner who assumes an expert stance in relation to his client.

Critical philosophers, such as Kuhn and Feyerabend, questioned the modernist assumptions that we improve our knowledge through systematic inquiry and that knowledge is derived from the systematic application of research procedures (Gergen, 1992:20/21). Instead they argued that truth appeared to be a matter of perspective and perspectives to be the products of social exchange. That which the modern era considered to be scientific truth, seemed instead to be the outcome of social processes within the scientific community. As such, the postmodern critique presents a massive attack on the foundationalism and absolutism of modern conceptions of knowledge (Lowe, 1991:43). More specifically, the attack targets the construction of knowledge, the issue of authority, and a representational view of language.

Postmodern thought rejects modernism's veneration of science, progress, and the autonomous individual. Rather it aims to provoke "an attitude of uncertainty, of studied doubt" (Parker, 1989; as quoted by Lowe, 1991:43). The Modernist search for universal properties is replaced by the postmodern emphasis on critical reflection (Gergen, 1992). Knowledge is considered provisional and transitory while attempts to acquire knowledge are fraught with reflexivity.

The Postmodern turn questions psychology's belief in 'a subject matter' arguing that we cannot assume its existence as separate from the discourse that it reflects. The social construction of the individual is emphasised, as is the power of language. Language is believed to mediate or constitute rather than to reflect or represent reality. The 'self' is de-centred by the discourse that is thought to constitute it. As such, the individual can no longer be viewed as the primary creator of meaning (Lowe, 1991:43).

In the wake the postmodern critique, psychological study is experiencing a gathering storm of discontent (Gergen & McNamee, 1992:2/3). The mental health profession can no longer be considered neutral as we become increasingly aware of its political, moral,

and valuational biases. The profession has come under attack for operating in a manner that serves to maintain the values, privileges, and hierarchies of the dominant power groups. Family therapists have challenged the concept of 'individual pathology' with individuals as centers of malfunction. Community psychologists argue that once you view the individual within various contexts, 'individual pathology' cannot be separated from communal process. Feminists question the androcentric biases that characterise psychological theory and method. They have also identified ways in which woman are oppressed by current mental health practices. Phenomenologists criticise the expert stance adopted by therapists and advocate that clients be addressed and understood in their own terms. Constructivists argue that scientists are unable to separate themselves from the observed world, thereby challenging the traditional distance between the knower and the known. By demonstrating therapy as fraught with the therapist's presumptions, hermeneuticists have challenged the belief in the 'objective analyst'.

Doan (1997:129) suggests that the postmodern era dawned when it became impossible to trust the root metaphors or metanarratives that ordered our understanding and when it became increasingly obvious that we lived more in a "multi-verse" than a "uni-verse". The message of postmodernity is the danger of the singular account. Postmodernity therefore warns against *any* account that claims to be *the* account.

The social construction discourse – close cousin to the postmodern discourse – refines this understanding of multiple versions by asserting that not all stories are equally valid. It draws our attention to discourses that marginalise individuals and that are not respectful of difference, gender, ethnicity, race, or religion. These discourses have taken on normative standards serving as yardsticks against which people are judged 'normal' and 'abnormal'. The social construction discourse challenges these versions on the basis that all knowledge is created over time within a particular context and that some versions serve to marginalise and subjugate people. If we understand that men create knowledge to serve their purposes, then we understand that knowledge is power. People, such as therapists, who have access to the dominant version, have access to the normalising

power of knowledge. The social construction discourse recognises that therapeutic practices *are* political practices (Doan, 1997:129).

The social construction viewpoint is one that encapsulates the postmodern rejection of a singular truth, objective social research and the essential self as “a kind of irreducible inner reality” (Hoffman, 1992:10). Social construction discourse understands knowledge to be socially constructed *between* people. Knowledge is no longer considered to represent the truth or to reflect external reality. Rather, knowledge is a form of negotiated meaning that arises within the context of linguistic interaction. Knowledge is understood as a social construction. It is the product of interaction between people and interaction is always historically located (Gergen, 1985:5). This understanding challenges the objective basis of conventional knowledge.

Parry and Doan (1994) state that psychoanalysis is to modernity what narrative therapy is to postmodernity. As psychoanalysis espoused the views and values associated with modernism, so narrative therapy espouses the assumptions of the postmodern turn. A postmodern understanding of self exemplifies this point. Narrative therapy suggests that we create a preferred self within a community of selves. This is premised on the social constructionist idea that we construct not only knowledges but also our selves through interaction with one another and within a variety of social contexts. Each person is constituted by a multitude of voices with varying perspectives, depending on the position or context in which the person is located (Doan, 1997:130). In this manner modern psychology’s search for *the* true self has been deconstructed.

## **NARRATIVE KNOWING**

After travelling through the storm of discontent with modernist thought the reader is invited to enter the Land of Narrative. My aim here is to present an understanding of narrative as an epistemology. Through Narrative Knowing I am introduced to Narrative Self and Narrative Research. Ultimately it is Narrative Research that enables me to develop a narrative reading of Abi’s self.

Human beings, irrespective of time and place, have always told stories. Narratives are characterised by both their pervasiveness and their universality. According to Barthes (1966; as quoted by Polkinghorne, 1988:14):

The narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; the history of narrative begins with the history of mankind; there does not exist, and has never existed, a people without narratives.

Not only are narratives ubiquitous, they serve highly significant functions. Operating on an individual level, persons have narratives about their lives. This, it will be argued, allows them to construct their identity and intentions. Narrative also serves an integrative function at the level of culture: the sharing and transmission of beliefs and values.

Webster's (1966:1503) defines narrative as a "discourse, or an example of it, designed to represent a connected succession of happenings". Narrative may be used interchangeably with story and distinguished from chronicle. Chronicles merely list events in an ordered sequence while narratives connect events by considering the whole in which the event-parts have engaged. It is through narrative that isolated events become comprehensible as the whole to which they contribute is identified. When we join diverse experiences within the temporal and consider the effect of one event on another, we operate the ordering process of narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995). This enables narrative to integrate human experience into a temporal gestalt. Polkinghorne (1988:18) has identified this ability – to configure a sequence of events into an integrated happening – as the source of narrative power. Thus narrative may be understood as a form of "meaning making" that draws sentences into discourse, the primary consequence of which is meaning.

Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner extends this understanding of narrative as meaning making to what may be considered an epistemology. Bruner (1986:11) contends:

There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality.

Together with the logico-scientific or 'paradigmatic' mode, narrative has been identified as one of the two basic modes of cognitive functioning. Bruner emphasises the uniqueness of each way of knowing. Although complementary, the two are irreducible. Each has unique operating principles, criteria, and procedures for verification. Furthermore, each has its own form of explanation. By comparing the requirements for establishing narrative as opposed to scientific explanation, I hope to illustrate the irreducibility of these two epistemologies.

In an attempt to explain their actions persons employ plot. This is possible because narrative explanation has occurred once we identify the role and significance of the event to the development of the story. To clarify the significance of an event in terms of its outcome requires that narrative explanation operate contextually and retrospectively. This allows persons to allocate meaning to an event in light of its outcome and to explain it in terms of the whole story. By way of contrast, a formal scientific explanation has only occurred when an event can be identified as an instance or example of an established law or pattern. This enables the abstraction of events and the discovery of relationships that are valid across all instances belonging to the category and in turn creates the symmetry between explanation and prediction that characterises logico-mathematical reasoning (Polkinghorne, 1988:21).

The human sciences, of which psychology constitutes the case in point, have modeled themselves on the physical sciences. Consequently they have emphasised the search for an objective reality without entering the realm of meaning (Polkinghorne, 1988). As psychology enters the postmodern turn, it is increasingly called upon to re-conceive itself as a social science grounded in multiple knowledges. To traffic in the realm of meaning requires a different type of training and research, one that is offay with linguistic structures and discourses, that is, one that embraces narrative and narrative knowing.

Narrative epistemology is further distinguished from that of paradigmatic at the level of discourse. As referred to earlier, the idea that language simply reflects or even distorts

meaning is associated with modernist thought and logico-paradigmatic reasoning. Modernism's understanding of language as a simple linguistic activity that serves to connect persons is extended by the social constructionist idea that people *exist* in and are constituted through language. The terms "linguaging" (Maturana & Varela, 1987) and "to be in language" (Mills, 1940; as quoted by Shotter, 1989:141) encapsulate the dynamic and formative function of language. So emerges the idea of language as a social operation. The social constructionist approach exemplifies the postmodern sensitivity to language by viewing language as discourse.

Language acts to bring forth meaning, rather than to carry or reflect it. Meaning is created through the linguistic interaction that occurs when persons converse. Understanding exists *within* language not prior to language (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988:378). The effect of linguaging is constitutive: language constitutes meaning. If life is experienced within language then language determines the meaning allocated to experience. In this way experience comes to be culturally, rather than biologically, constituted (Gergen, 1991:10). The community, in which we live and have lived, specifies or constitutes the meaning and thereby defines experience. The focus on the individual is extended to the social as language is constructed *between* persons. To view life or human activity as occurring within social interaction and conversation, is to understand that "people live, and understand their living, through socially constructed narrative realities that give meaning and organisation to their experience" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992:26). It is in language and meaning that person's lives are constituted (Bruner, 1990).

Postmodern thought emphasises discourse rather than language. Discourses refer to the meaning systems in language. To analyse language at the level of discourse is to relate the words and sentences into meaningful wholes. To make meaning is to engage in the realm of narrative. Thus language, discourse, and narrative are presented as interlocking lands. To travel in one is to consider its relation to the other. Discourses are like countries – each requiring distinct patterns of comprehension.

To summarise, narrative may be understood as a form of meaning making. Narrative draws language into discourse, the consequence of which is meaning. The referential discourse of formal science and the narrational discourse of story were presented as irreducible. Each establishes and maintains a different truth. Narrative knowing enables us to conceive of life as unified and therefore meaningful. Narrative demonstrates the significant and the interconnectedness within the seemingly random and chaotic. It is because narrative registers *purpose*, *meaning* and *relationship* that it is especially important for the comprehension of human experience.

## MOTIVATION

I selected to traverse the Land of Narrative for a variety of reasons. I am an *intern psychologist* who is in the process of constructing a discourse through and from which a “just therapy” (Waldegrave, 1990) may be practiced. This discourse not only contains but also constitutes the values and beliefs that I hold dear: fairness and equity. As I come to extend my understanding of knowledge, power, therapy and therapist, I seek to develop a therapeutic approach, which will enable me to take the context of both the therapist and the client into account. Narrative Therapy enables me to do this.

As an *educational psychologist*, I am aware of the need to reconstruct my duty and domain so that I may remain a relevant and helpful practitioner in the twenty-first century. In order to do so, it is imperative that I consider that which the postmodern turn offers psychology: new ways of conceptualising itself and its potentials. Gergen (1992:26) has identified the “scholarship of critique” as a very substantial role for psychology in the postmodern era. This does not mean that the psychologist is called upon to reject all psychological theory and practice based on modernist principles. Instead, psychologists are called upon to question the taken-for-granted and its potentially debilitating effects. By questioning the traditional modernist knowledge of identity, specifically as it applies to adolescence, I am accepting the postmodern challenge of critique.

As a *South African psychologist*, I face an additional challenge: to question modernist Western psychological theory and practice because it cannot be assumed to be relevant to

the country and the persons with whom I live and work. The discourse of social construction has sensitised me to consider the real and harmful effects of such knowledge. Indeed there is more at stake than becoming irrelevant: as a professional who traffics in discourse, I find myself in a position to subjugate or to liberate the marginalised from the dominant discourse. By performing the postmodern discourses of critique and deconstruction, I hope to transform the dominant story that subjugates. By questioning modernism's taken-for-granted presumptions about adolescents and identity, I may contribute to the unseating of conventional knowledge. In so doing, I hope to generate alternate possibilities for thought and action that are more liberating, for myself as a person/professional as well as for the persons who seek my help.

### **ASSUMPTIONS AND ASPIRATIONS**

My study is based on the premise that narrative and the discourse of social construction have much to offer a psychologist living and working in a postmodern era. I assume that knowledge is socially constructed and that there are many valid ways of thinking about and working with persons. I choose to privilege these discourses not on the grounds of validity, but flowing from the ethical imperative: "Act always so as to increase the number of choices" (Von Foerster, 1984; as quoted by Kotze, 1994:29). To base my argument on ethical grounds is in keeping with Bruner's (1990) constructivist claim that what determines truth and knowledge is the perspective that we choose to assume.

Aligning myself with a social constructionist position, I do not assume all ways to be equally valid. On moral premises, I take a stand against trafficking in discourse that serves to subjugate persons. As a 'narrative therapist' I aim to work with persons in such a way that they experience their stories, their meanings, and possibilities to broaden, to expand. I commit my work and myself to an abundance mentality, a both/and approach, which stands in opposition to reductionism and restriction.

As a therapist practicing in a South African context, I sought a theoretical orientation that provided an alternate to traditional Western modernist thought in the domain of psychological study. A narrative understanding of self is presumed to provide a relevant



alternative when working with South African clients. This inquiry allows me to question the appropriateness of a traditional developmental theory that cannot be assumed relevant in the South African context. As such this work represents my response to Seedat's (as quoted by de la Rey, Duncan, Shefer, van Niekerk, 1997:xii/xv) injunction that South African psychologists question the appropriateness of the theories which we employ to frame our experiences. In so doing, I hope to join an expanding group of South Africans who have engaged in a critique of existing knowledge on human identity and development.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In light of the above, I wish to explore a narrative understanding of self and to present a narrative interpretation of an adolescent female self based on her life story or self narrative.

I have formulated the questions that will be researched in this study as follows:

**What is a narrative understanding of self?**

**What may be learned from a narrative reading of a female adolescent's self, based on her life story, as it emerges within the context of narrative therapy?**

### **THE JOURNEY'S PURPOSE**

The aims derived from the above research questions are:

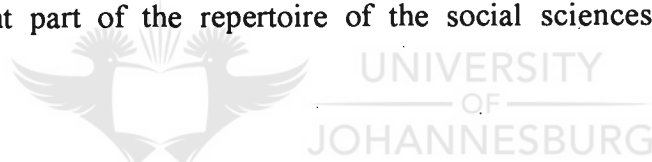
**To present a narrative interpretation of a female adolescent's self, based on her life story, as it emerged within the context of narrative therapy.**

### **NARRATIVE RESEARCH**

In this section I consider that which characterises Narrative Research and the process of conducting it. I present Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber's (1998) model for the classification and organisation into types of narrative analysis. In so doing I hope to provide a coherent rationale for the selection of Narrative Research and holistic-content

analysis as the most appropriate method when addressing my research aim. The narrative of my own research journey is presented with regard to the context, my general approach and reflections on the process. I offer the reader criteria for such qualitative research with the intention that this study be assessed according to the manner in which it was constructed.

Narrative concepts are receiving increasing visibility in the social sciences. Writers such as Bruner (1990), Polkinghorne (1988) and Sarbin (1986) have interpreted this as evidence for the demise of the positivistic paradigm. Others view narrative research as an addition to the more traditional methods of the experiment, the survey, and observation. The latter view is more in line with a postmodern understanding of plurality, a both/and approach. Alternatively narrative research may be viewed as a preferred methodological option – an alternate story to the grand narrative of traditional scientific inquiry. However you choose to look at it, “narrative methodologies have become a significant part of the repertoire of the social sciences” (Lieblich, et al., 1998:1).



Narrative research, like narrative knowing, is distinguished from a paradigmatic epistemology in its underlying assumptions regarding the nature of reality, truth and knowledge. Narrative research is premised on a postmodern understanding that there is not a single absolute truth and thus there cannot be a single correct interpretation or reading (Lieblich, et al., 1998). Josselson (1993:xi) aligns the new scholarship of narrative research with postmodern thinking:

... the new scholarship is stressing the importance of the personal, the uncertainty of objective material, the vanishing distinction between subject and object, the many layers of truth, the hazy line between data and interpretation.

As indicated above, a narrative approach or explanation is always contextual and temporal whereas the paradigmatic mode of thought aims at context free explanation

(Polkinghorne, 1995). Rather than attempt to establish facts and mirror reality, narrative research weaves in with the stories and lives that it relates (Widdershoven, 1993). Narrative Research aims to make sense through the act of interpretation. Polkinghorne (1988:155) emphasises the importance of a Narrative approach when the research intention is to interpret another's meaning:

To sever the portion of human existence that is hermeneutically expressive in order to fit into a formal science grid is to misunderstand and distort the subject matter that the human discipline seeks to know. Human existence takes place in and is figured by a linguistic milieu, with narrative being the primary form through which humans construct the dimension of their life's meaningfulness and understand it as significant.

Lieblich, *et al.* (1998:2) broadly define narrative research as "any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials". A narrative interpretation of Abi's self, based on her life story is presented in Chapter Three. Narrative research was employed to explore the phenomenon of selfhood, as it was presented in Abi's life story and interpreted by myself, within the context of narrative therapy. I join the likes of Schafer (1983), Spence (1986) Epston, Parry and Doan (1994) and Omer and Alon (1997) as therapists who employ narrative in the context of therapy and consider re-authoring of the life story as inimical to change and healing.

### **Narrative and Self**

If the unity and uniqueness of the self is achieved through the process of narrativity and if one conceives of one's own particular existence as a special story and not as a physical or mental thing, then more adequate, hermeneutically oriented research tools will be needed to study personal identity.

Polkinghorne (1988:151)

Based on the study's thesis (elaborated in the following chapter) that the story *is* the identity, I assume that a life story allows the researcher to access the self, to explore it and to understand it. In this study 'life story' may be understood as a linguistic unit that, although fundamentally involved in social interaction, is also related to the subjective sense that we have a private life story, which structures the meaning we attach to our past experiences, present circumstances, and imagined futures (Linde, 1993). Abi's narrative of self, based on her written life story and elaborated across a series of therapeutic conversations, is presented as *one* instance, *a* reading of her self. The narrative that I present is like a "single, frozen, still photograph" (Lieblich, *et al.*, 1998:8) of a dynamic and developing self. Because a life story is constituted between people and changes across time it can never be completely captured by this or any other study. Hence the research aim to present *a* narrative interpretation of Abi's self as it *emerges*.

I am aware that the context in which the story was narrated influenced the narrative presented and recorded. This is why I have specifically referred to the *context* of narrative therapy in the research question and aim. The contextual factors include, but are not limited to, the aim of our meetings, the relationship that we evolved, as well as our changing moods and intentions. Lieblich, *et al.* (1996:8) recognise the emergent nature of the life story as well as the impact of context:

... the particular life story is one (or more) instance of the polyphonic versions of the possible constructions or presentations of people's selves and lives, which they use according to specific momentary influences.

### **Features of Narrative Research**

According to Lieblich, *et al.* (1998:9-11) a narrative research process typically involves dialogical listening and results in the construction of unique and rich data. There are usually no a priori hypotheses and the work is characteristically interpretive, personal, and partial. Furthermore, replicability of results is not a criterion for its evaluation. In the discussion that follows these basic features are considered as they apply to my study and serve as my rationale for conducting narrative research.

The function of narrative (elaborated in Chapter Two) is to construct and transmit personal and cultural *meaning*. The research aim that I have identified requires an understanding that engages in the realm of meaning and points to a more in-depth understanding. To work with a narrative understanding of self requires that I grapple with the richness of the data, something that I would not achieve through variable-based research. Because my intention is to work with *Abi's* presentation of self, I required a method that would enable *Abi* to speak in her own terms about what is significant in her life – a preconceived psychometric scale or contrived experiment cannot offer this. Polkinghorne (1988:151) confirms my assertion:

... hermeneutically oriented research tools will be needed to study personal identity. These tools will seek to understand the self as an expression, and will be modeled on the processes a person uses to understand the meaning of a sentence, not on procedures for identifying characteristics of qualities.

Although I was equipped with a general research question that directed the decisions regarding the selection of narrator as well as the process and context for obtaining her narrative, I did not begin with a priori hypothesis. Instead the specific direction of the study as it is presented here, was emergent. It unfolded as I continued to interpret and re-interpret the literature and the conversations with *Abi*. This required of me to tolerate a great deal of ambiguity. It was not surprising then that the literature called for narrative researchers to be comfortable with ambiguity (Lieblich, et al. 1998:10). Because the work requires interpretation that results in unique and rich data, narrative research will always be personal, partial, and dynamic.

Lieblich, et al. (1998:10) have applied Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogical listening to the process of narrative research (Lieblich, et al. 1998:10). In an attempt to engage in dialogical listening I heard no less than three voices: I listened to *Abi's* voice as the narrator, I listened to the theoretical framework for concepts and tools to guide my

interpretation, and I listened to my own voice in a reflective monitoring of the very act of reading and interpreting. When interpreting the material, the decision making process required that I make use of my reflexive self. In an ever enlarging circle of understanding I participated in the process of generating what Glaser and Strauss (1967) identify as “grounded theory”. While reading the literature and analysing Abi’s narrative I generated theories and hypotheses that informed further readings, which in turn refined theory.

As it does not require replicability of results, is based on interpretation, defies systematisation, and appears to rely predominantly on talent and intuition, narrative research has been critiqued as being more art than research. Narrative research requires the reader to rely more on my skill, wisdom, and integrity than traditional research. But narrative research did not allow me (and neither should it any other researcher) absolute freedom for speculation. Rather responsibility and integrity demanded that I submit my intuition to the process of justification. Because this work is interpretive I was as unable to rely on a systematic inferential process as I was on inter-judge reliability. Instead I was called upon to engage in an ongoing examination of that which Abi narrated against my interpretation and to continuously examine my interpretation against that which Abi narrated. Not only was this highly time-consuming, narrative research demanded that I work with self-awareness and self-discipline.

The efficacy of narrative research also generated its limitations. Despite working with a single person, this study was based on 17 hours of therapeutic conversations and many more hours for reading and listening to its record. Due also to the interpretative nature of the work, which required continuously considering the text against the interpretation and vice versa, this study was highly time consuming. For me, the wealth of accumulated material was less daunting than the ambiguity generated by the necessarily open interpretive process. According to Lieblich *et al.*, (1998:10):

Even after long experience in conducting narrative research, every new text retains the air of an enigma, a vivid mystery that generates a mixture of excitement, challenge, and apprehension.

As a novice researcher I was, at times, overwhelmed by apprehension, which the interpretive task generated. Without a specific hypothesis in mind and approaching Abi and her stories in an open manner, I struggled to develop an understanding pertinent to my research purpose from what appeared to be a sea of data.

### **A Model for the Classification of Narrative Analysis**

Although much has been written on the philosophy of qualitative approaches to research, amongst them narrative research, little is available on the methodology of narrative research. In an attempt to further the field of narrative research by elucidating the working rules for conducting narrative studies, Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) published *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Although relevant writings occur within larger works on qualitative research methodologies (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) a review of the literature did not reveal a comprehensive model for the reading or analysis of narratives as presented by Lieblich, et al. Their model and ideas have contributed significantly to this study.

Lieblich, et al. (1998) identified two primary independent dimensions for interpreting narrative materials: *holistic versus categorical* approaches and *content versus form*. Although each dimension may be clearly differentiated at its polar end, a narrative analysis may represent the middle point along each dimension. The former dimension refers to the unit of analysis. When working from a *categorical* perspective, the unit of analysis may be an utterance or a section belonging to a defined category that is drawn from a complete narrative or from several texts belonging to several narrators. This is known as traditional content analysis and is typically employed when the researcher is interested in a phenomenon shared by a group of persons.

As the name suggests, the *holistic* approach not only considers the narrative as a whole, but also interprets sections of the narrative in relation to other parts. According to Lieblich, et al. (1998:12):

... the holistic approach is preferred when the person as a whole, that is, his or her development to the current position, is what the study aims to explore.

Based on this study's research aim – to present a narrative interpretation of an individual's emerging self – an *holistic* approach to Abi's self narrative was selected. This approach allowed me to work with a narrative understanding of Abi's self, that is, to read her self as an emergent narrative sustained by a general plot with distinct but related subplots or themes.

A *content* oriented approach may focus on that which is explicit, for example, what happened in the narrative, who participated and why. Alternatively, the implicit content may be accessed through a consideration of the meaning of the narrative. The explicit approach calls for it all to be presented from the standpoint of the narrator while the implicit content establishes a dialogue between that which is narrated by the narrator (Abi) and that which is interpreted by the reader (myself). Because my intention was to present an interpretation of Abi's self, I required an approach that would establish my voice in relation to Abi's. It is I, after all, who present and interpret Abi's narrative. An implicit reading of content was also selected because it enabled me to dialogue in the realm of meaning, which my subject matter – narrative self – demands.

At the other end of the continuum, readings may refer primarily to the *form* of the narrative, ignoring its content. To work with the form is to consider, amongst others: the plot's structure, time axis, event sequence, coherence, complexity, the narrative's emotional pull, style, and the narrator's selection of metaphors. Linde's (1993) categorical-form analysis of the self as created and sustained through the structural coherence of narrative, is presented in the proceeding chapter. In an attempt to meet the aims of this research study, I have applied Linde's ideas to an analysis that focuses on the implicit content of the story in its entirety. This provides an alternative to her categorical-form interpretation, which concentrates on the narrative's form and divides it into categories of discourse and morphology.



Reflecting on their proposed model Lieblich, et al. (1998:169) note that:

... the major distinctions created by our model frequently oversimplify the practice of conducting narrative research. When aiming to concentrate on the form of a story, globally or categorically, the content of the narrative could not be ignored. On the contrary, the content of the plot or its segments is essential for characterizing and understanding its form. The separation of “whole” from “category” is, in reality, not clearer than that between “content” and “form”.

With this in mind, I have utilised Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber’s model as a device for ordering various ideas and methods in the interpretation of Abi’s life story. As explicated above, it is the content-holistic perspective that best suits the research aim of this study. Yet it was the research aim that required me, at times, to consider categories of self and parts of the narrative within the whole. The research aim also required me to take cognisance of the narrator’s metaphors and the narrative’s emotionality. This enabled the form to inform the content and the part-categories to enrich the whole, liberating me to construct a meaningful and comprehensive analysis that would have been poorer for a slavish adherence to a strict dichotomisation of form and content, part and whole.

### **A Holistic Content Perspective of Abi’s Life Story**

Based on my research aim to present a narrative reading of *a* female adolescent’s self, I have dedicated this study to a single case. It is not my intention to draw systematic conclusions from the life and self of my narrator. Rather I aim to provide a rich narratively based presentation of Abi’s self. This resulted in *a* reading within a spectrum of possibilities.

Alternate ideas for further research include presenting the reader with a variety of readings and perspectives all drawn from the same narrative material. For example, a

holistic-form-based analysis of the material would focus primarily on the structure of Abi's life story. Here the researcher may select a turning point in the narrative, which sheds light on her entire development. Employing a categorical-content approach to the material, the researcher may define categories specific to adolescence then extract, classify, and gather separate utterances into these categories. By focusing primarily on discrete stylistic or linguistic characteristics, the researcher may conduct a categorical-form mode of analysis on defined units from Abi's narrative. Such a variety of readings and perspectives would allow for their comparison as well as their integration, which is likely to result in a richer, deeper collage of Abi's self.

Abi was selected on the basis that she met my criteria: an adolescent who was willing to participate in and commit herself to a series of therapeutic conversations that would also be utilised for research purposes. The idea of "pathology" or a presenting problem is foreign to narrative therapy and had no relevance to my research aim. Abi's confidentiality was assured and her role as consultant in the research process was established as she was requested to review and reflect on her narrative. Appendix E comprises her written response to my interpretation of her story.

The reading as it is presented in Chapter Three is based on Abi's written life story. It also takes the context through which it emerged into account, namely, 17 narrative therapy sessions. Appendix A presents a date list of these sessions and Appendix B consists of Abi's written life story. The therapy occurred in my office at the Institute of Child and Adult Guidance where I was employed as an intern psychologist. At the time, Abi was 14-years-old and attending Grade 8 at an all girls' high school in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. Abi is a white female adolescent who was born and has always lived in South Africa with her married parents, both of whom are professionals. She is the younger of two children. Her elder brother lives at home and attends college on a full time basis.

Once permission had been requested, the research procedure involved tape-recording all our conversations. With Abi's consent, notes were taken during the therapeutic

conversations as this allowed me to emphasise Abi's voice and to re-call her exact words within the session. This practice is commonly employed by narrative therapists. In an effort to augment the process of data collection, I also recorded my personal thoughts, feelings and impressions in response to some of our meetings. The first seeds of the analysis and interpretation process were planted in this manner. Reflections on my notes and further reading in between sessions generated ongoing ideas and concerns. As I followed and reflected on both the research and therapeutic process, I developed and presented Abi with tasks and lists of written questions for her reflection. Her responses were woven back into our therapeutic conversations. Abi's written feedback on her experience of therapy comprises Appendix C. The therapeutic process as Abi and I constructed it, is considered in Chapter Two once the reader is more familiar with the general practices and processes of narrative therapy.

On the technical level, given practical matters such as the large number of sessions conducted and time constraints as well as the aim of the study, most of the tape-recorded sessions were not submitted to a complete transcription. A formal linguistic analysis of all speech utterances was not required to meet the aim of this research. Intending to understand and interpret the broader themes in Abi's narrative of self, I listened to each recording and made notes, paraphrasing the emerging issue and themes, together with the counter number indicating specific location on the tape. This enabled me to go back to the tape and extract Abi's words verbatim, as it became relevant.

I engaged in the procedure of reading the material for content in a holistic manner. The following process of data analysis is based on the recommendations of Lieblich *et al.* (1998:62/63):

Firstly, I listened to the recordings of each session several times until a pattern emerged, in the form of foci of the entire narrative. I listened carefully, with sensitivity and without judgement. I tried to keep an open mind so that the meaning of the material could "speak" to me. Based on their significance to the entire narrative and its context, I

decided to pay special attention to Abi's written life story and to the metaphors of light/darkness and building/development.

Secondly, I put into writing my initial global impression after reading Abi's written narrative in its entirety as well as listening to all of the recordings in succession. Here I noted issues and episodes that seemed to particularly disturb Abi (her "backstage experience") as well as to be emotively loaded (her friendships). Contradicting and incomplete descriptions, such as, her initial references to perfectionism and self-doubt, also alerted me to their significance.

Thirdly, I selected the special themes or plots that I would track across the entire, evolving narrative. The themes identified were: self as separate versus self as related, self as single versus self as multiple, and self-doubt versus self-understanding. The choice of focus was determined, as it frequently is, by the space that Abi allocated to these themes as well as the amount of detail that she volunteered on these topics. I am aware that omissions or brief references to a subject may, at times, also suggest its significance.

Fourthly, using coloured highlighters I plotted the identified themes as they appeared in Abi's written work (i.e., her life story, poem, and feedback on therapy) and in my notes on each recorded session. I did this by reading separately and repeatedly for each theme. Finally, I was careful to keep track of my results, which I managed by following each theme through the evolving narrative and then writing my conclusions. Paying special attention to the context of each theme, where it appeared for the first and last time, transitions between themes, and the relative prominence of each, were additional strategies employed to track themes. By remaining alert to episodes that appeared to contradict the 'problem' themes of exclusion, isolation, and self-doubt, I was able to plot the development of alternate stories and selves.

At this point, I wish to draw attention to the format of this written report. Madigan, Johnson and Linton (1995:428) propose that "APA (*American Psychological Association*) style is not just a collection of arbitrary stylistic conventions but also encapsulates the core values and epistemology of the discipline." The authors identify features of the "APA style" and demonstrate how they serve to maintain psychology's

commitment to the empirical method. They contend that as learners acquire the psychology's language conventions, they come to endorse the values of their discipline. Based on my commitment to a postmodern approach, with its understanding of language as constitutive, I have purposefully pursued an alternate style when writing and formatting this work. For example, unlike writers in psychology who rarely quote directly but frequently cite other published works, mine is strewn with the direct quotation of sources, as my intention is to create a distinctive voice and vital, colourful prose.

Although the typical psychological study is portrayed as a logical, linear sequence of activities organised into distinct phases (introduction, method, results, and discussion) and presented as a rational account, the research experience is seldom as systematic (Madigan, *et al.* 1995:430). This is indicative of a modernist, paradigmatic way of thinking and reinforces psychology's empiricist values. Because my research argues for the consideration of narrative as an alternative, equally valid way of coming to knowledge, I have selected to present my work alternatively, as a narrative. Furthermore, in an attempt to draw the reader's attention to the complicated role that language plays in communication, I have endeavoured to create attention-getting metaphors and to establish a strong first person presence. This is in direct contrast to the utilitarian view of language, encouraged by the APA style of report, in which words merely transmit information. My experience of the research process has been shared as less organised and more ad hoc than the APA style of writing suggests. When languaging and formatting this study, my primary intention was to establish an alternate knowing, that is, a subjective narrative knowing, which seeks alternate interpretations rather than objective, universal truths.

### **Criteria for the Assessment of Narrative Research**

Based on a review of criteria for qualitative research together with their experience as researchers of narratives, Josselson (1993:xi/xii) and Lieblich, *et al.* (1998:173) propose the following criteria for the evaluation of narrative studies:

*Width or the comprehensiveness of evidence* refers to the quality of the interviews and observations as well as to the proposed interpretation. In reporting narrative studies quotations should proliferate as this provides for the reader's judgement of the evidence and its interpretation.

*Coherence or the way different parts of the interpretation create a complete and meaningful picture.* Coherence can be evaluated externally – against existing theories and research and internally, in terms of how the parts fit together.

*Insightfulness or the sense of originality in the presentation of the story and its analysis.* This is linked to the question of whether reading the analysis of the narrative has resulted in greater insight regarding the reader's own life.

*Parsimony or the ability to provide an analysis based on a small number of concepts, and elegance or aesthetic appeal.* This relates to the literary merits of the narrative's presentation and analysis.

The criteria presented above are qualitative in nature. This means that, in contrast to the quantitative measures of reliability and validity, Narrative Research requires judgements that cannot be reduced to numerical values or simple formulas. This does not mean that narrative studies are superior to those statistical or experimental. I wish to emphasise that each approach is better suited to some purposes than others and within each there is always a myriad of possibilities for analysis, evaluation, and interpretation.

Due to its underlying philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of reality, knowledge, and truth, narrative research may be characterised as qualitative research, while scientific or paradigmatic research as representative of quantitative research. Although each requires its own form of explanation and is distinguished by its own discourse, both are concerned with the creation of valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner (Merriam, 1998:198). As it is my intention to generate such knowledge, it is incumbent upon me to consider the concepts of reliability and validity, as they apply to my study.

Without entering into the theoretical debate concerning validity and reliability in qualitative studies, the following six basic strategies to enhance internal validity have been identified by Merriam (1998:204-205): triangulation, member checks, long-term observation, peer examination, participatory or collaborative modes of research, and researcher biases. In this study I have attempted to address these by respectively: using multiple sources of data and relying on a holistic understanding to construct plausible interpretations; by taking my interpretations to Abi and asking her to comment on their plausibility (see Appendix E); by gathering material over an extended (seven month) time period (see Appendix A); by asking colleagues to comment on my tentative and emergent interpretations; by involving Abi in the evolving research process – from its conceptualisation to this written report; and by presenting the reader with my assumptions, aspirations, worldview, theoretical contextualisation, and biases from the outset and throughout this study.

I contend, together with Merriam (1998:206) that when engaging in qualitative research, to strive for reliability in the traditional, quantitative sense, is “not only fanciful but impossible.” It is neither my intention to present this study as a definitive reading nor to replicate its interpretations. Instead, to ensure that my reading is consistent with the material gathered, I have adopted ‘the investigator’s position’ and engaged in triangulation and an audit trail (Merriam, 1998:206/207). This entailed explaining my assumptions and this study’s theoretical orientation, discussing my position vis-à-vis Abi and the basis for her selection. I have provided the reader with a description of Abi as well as that of the context in which the material was constructed and recorded. By using Abi’s written and oral work, my own notes during and between sessions, and by considering these materials in terms of their content and form, holistically and categorically, I have employed multiple methods of data collection and analysis. With the purpose of creating an audit trail, I presented the reader with the details as to how I went about gathering and reading Abi’s narrative. The reader has – and will continue – to be privy to the decision making process that informed this entire study.

## **THE JOURNEY'S COURSE**

Chapter One was intended to orientate the reader within the Land of Narrative. My motivation for embarking on this journey was revealed, together with my assumptions and intentions. The research problem, question and aim were established in light of these. Narrative Research, which encompasses Narrative Knowing, was presented as the most likely research vehicle to access that which may be learned from a narrative reading of a female adolescent's self – i.e. my research intention. Chapter Two introduces the reader to Narrative Therapy and Narrative Self. In Chapter Three, I consider Narrative Research and Narrative Self within the context of Narrative Therapy as they apply to an emergent female adolescent self. Consequently I present 'A Narrative Reading of Abi's Self'.





## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **NARRATIVE THERAPY AND NARRATIVE SELF**

In Chapter One the postmodern turn and Narrative Knowing were presented as coordinates that map the emergence of Narrative Self. Here Narrative Therapy is established as the third major coordinate in the establishment of a narrative understanding of self.

#### **NARRATIVE THERAPY**

Narrative therapy includes all therapeutic work conducted within a social constructionist or postmodern perspective where no single reality is objectified as the correct view (Griffith, 1997:xviii). Within this framework, Smith (1997:34 f.) has distinguished a re-authoring and hermeneutic emphasis. Michael White and David Epston have pioneered a re-authoring approach to narrative therapy where client and therapist co-author a new, preferred narrative that is less restricting and more liberating than the old problem saturated narrative. The person's self is strongly differentiated from that of the problem's identity, usually through the externalising of the problem. The hermeneutic/dialogic approach, as espoused by Harry Goolishian, Harlene Anderson, and Tom Anderson assists persons in dialoging with their many different voices so that they may move from stuck monologues to more liberating dialogues. Unlike re-authoring therapy, externalising conversation is not necessarily employed and an alternative narrative is not intentionally consolidated.

#### **A Common Worldview**

Despite differences in emphasis and application, narrative therapies are characterised by a common worldview. This worldview is described by Freedman and Combs (1996:22) as "postmodern, narrative, and social constructionist". The authors identified four ideas as inimical to this worldview. In the discussion that follows these ideas are elaborated, particularly as they manifest and find their application in narrative therapy. My intention is to link narrative therapy to the postmodern turn and the discourse of social

construction. By so doing, I aim to present narrative therapy as an appropriate therapeutic arena for the presentation and interpretation of narrative self.

A central tenet of the postmodern worldview in which Narrative Therapy is based is that *realities are socially constructed*. In the words of Freedman and Combs (1996:23), “people, together, construct their realities as they live them”. This means that beliefs, laws, knowledges, even ways of understanding self arise through social interaction over time. Gergen (1985:267) explains that the concept of “the autonomous self” arose from “historically contingent factors” and that in certain historical periods “the self was not viewed as isolated and autonomous”.

Berger and Luckmann (1966:89) demonstrate how concepts become reified “*as if* they were something else than human products”. Although necessary for efficient thought and communication, reification becomes problematic when we forget that concepts, such as ‘the autonomous self’ and ‘narrative self’ are social constructions that do not exist as part of an external, universal reality. It is this idea, as it emerges within the discourse of social construction, that has facilitated psychology’s shift in focus from a private, embodied self to a consideration of how persons interact to establish, maintain, and transform a self in accordance with what their society holds as real and true.

If realities are socially constructed then it is *in* language that people construct them. The idea that *realities are constituted by language* is a postmodern one. It stands in contrast to the belief that language can be employed to represent external reality, which is based on the modernist view that there is a real world ‘out there’ and that it can be known unambiguously through language. The following quotes indicate a postmodern understanding of language as constitutive:

Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind  
– because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out

there, but descriptions of the world are not... The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs.

Rorty (1989:5-6)

Language does not mirror nature; language creates the natures we know.

Anderson & Goolishian (1988:378)

According to Gergen (1992) it is the emphasis on language that characterises the postmodern movement in psychotherapy. Thus narrative therapy emphasises social relatedness and what happens *between* persons as opposed to the individual and what happens within.

To understand that realities are created between people in language is to understand that change of self always involves a change in language. This is possible, according to Derrida (1988) because meaning is indeterminate and therefore changeable. Like reality, meaning does not exist 'out there'. Meaning does not reside in a word; it is negotiated in a specific context between persons. As no two persons and contexts are exactly alike, meaning will always be mutable. Thus it is *in* language and *between* people that selves are continuously created and transformed.

Freedman and Combs (1996:29) point to implications that the mutability of meaning has for therapy:

We see this inevitable mutability of language as useful. It makes our conversations with the people we work with opportunities for developing new language, thereby negotiating new meanings for problematic beliefs, feelings, and behaviors – new meanings that can give legitimacy to alternative views of reality.

To view therapy as an event occurring *in* conversation (Berg & de Shazer, 1993:5) is to challenge the structuralist and foundationalist ideas (associated with modernism) that

language represents or reflects reality. A poststructuralist view suggests that language *is* reality. When therapists invite clients to describe their experiences in a new language they bring forth a plethora of possibilities for change. Although past events cannot be changed, one can transform the narrative about them. To change the way we speak about our selves *is* to change how we see our selves.

Postmodern writers have demonstrated how *realities are organised and maintained through narratives*. According to Bruner (1991:4) “we organise our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative”. Anderson (1990:102) expresses the same message:

... life is a matter of telling ourselves stories about life, and of savoring stories about life told by others, and of living our lives according to such stories, and of creating ever-new and more complex stories about stories – and that this story making is not just about human life, but *is* human life.

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In the words of White and Epston (1990:10):

In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequence across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them... This account can be referred to as a story or self-narrative.

Here White and Epston are tapping into the form and function of narrative knowing. As referred to above, narratives operate by configuring a sequence of events into an integrated happening. According to Polkinghorne (1988) the consequence of integrating human experience into a “temporal gestalt” is the registering of purpose, meaning, and relationship. As White and Epston (1990:10) put it:

The success of this storying of experience provides persons with a sense of continuity and meaning in their lives, and this is relied upon for the ordering of daily lives and for the interpretation of further experiences.

Some narratives are told over and over again and they come to constitute a person's life.

Each remembered event constitutes a story, which together with our other stories constitutes a life narrative, and experientially speaking, **our life narrative is our life.** (Bold added)

Freedman & Combs (1996:32)

The idea that language (in the form of narrative) shapes lives and selves is premised on the postmodern view that language constitutes realities (White and Epston, 1990). According to Goolishian (as quoted by Friedman, 1993:v):

Our prevailing narratives provide the vocabulary that sets our realities. Our destinies are opened or closed in terms of the stories we construct to understand our experiences.

White and Epston (1990) refer to these "prevailing narratives" as "dominant stories". Dominant stories determine which experiences will be attended to and included or storied. Yet a single narrative can never capture the full richness of our lived experiences. Although part of a person's experience, the stories that do not get told are referred to as "alternative stories" (White & Epston, 1990). Alternative stories and knowledges become subjugated and as such do not form part of a shaping narrative.

If alternative stories are fated to become marginalised and subjugated, then narrative re-authoring intends to resurrect and empower the knowledges and selves that these stories constitute. In this manner *alternate* experiences come to be noticed and storied, and thus to constitute lives. I wish to draw attention to the interconnections between language,

discourse, narrative, and therapy. The focus in narrative therapy is on languaging, meaning, narratives and particularly how they come to constitute people's lives (Kotze, 1994:37). Therapy then can be described as linguistic events or as conversation (Berg & de Shazer, 1993), therapeutic conversation (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992), or dialogue (Goldner, 1993). Postmodern therapy is understood to be discourse sensitive whereby "(d)iscourse is *both* the major theoretical object and the method of practice" (Lowe, 1991:47).

Postmodern therapists do not believe in "essences." Knowledge, being socially arrived at, changes and renews itself in each moment of interaction.

Hoffman (1991:12)

Here Hoffman refers to the fourth idea inimical to the postmodern worldview: *there are no essential truths*. This idea has profound implications for our understanding of self. Since we cannot know reality objectively, we can only interpret our experiences. In contrast to a modern search for a singular, universal interpretation, the postmodern "multi-verse" celebrates the search for multiple stories and multiple possibilities (Doan, 1997). No singular account is *the* truth as there are many possibilities for interpreting any experience. Because the same experience is retold from different points of view it takes on different meanings. In the same way, different selves come forth in different contexts and no singular self is *the* self.

Although no self is conceived as truer than another, Freedman and Combs (1996:35) note that specific presentations of Self are preferred by particular persons within particular cultures. In this manner the notion of an "essential self" has been extended to that of a "preferred self". Narrative therapists who work within this postmodern worldview seek to bring forth various experiences of self and to strengthen, through the performance of meaning, the selves that are in accordance with the person's preferences.

Geertz's (1983) presentation of the Balinese self as a character in an eternal drama, stands in contrast to the Western individualised 'true self' or 'deep self'. The comparison highlights the self as an idea that is constructed within a specific cultural context and through social interaction. Freedman and Combs (1996:34) conclude that "there is no such thing as an "essential" self" preferring to conceptualise the self "as a process or activity that occurs in the space between people". Kvale (1992:15) narrates the re-conceptualisation of self that postmodern thought has ushered:

In current understanding of human beings there is a move from the inwardness of an individual psyche to being-in-the-world with other human beings. The focus of interest is moved from the inside of a psychic container to the outside of the human world.

### **A Therapeutic Process**

Although narrative therapy does not comprise the focus of this study, it does the context in which the material was created and recorded. Therefore, in an attempt to further contextualise this study, I wish to consider the therapeutic process as it was constructed between Abi and I. Should the reader wish to consider a South African case study with narrative therapy as its research focus, I suggest Yule's (1993) dissertation.

... I have to give you a warning – if externalization is approached purely as a technique, it will probably not produce profound effects. If you don't believe, to the bottom of your soul, that people are not their problems and that their difficulties are social and personal constructions, then you won't be seeing these transformations.

O'Hanlon (1994:28)

In the preceding discussion, I suggested that despite differences in application, narrative therapies be characterised by a common worldview. This worldview was described as postmodern and social constructionist. When considering the process of narrative therapy, I wish to supplement O'Hanlon's advice not to venerate technique above belief

with the warning of postmodernity: beware of the singular account. There is not, and in my opinion, nor should there be, a recipe for conducting narrative therapy; such an approach inherently contradicts the postmodern thinking that sustains it. That said, there certainly are therapeutic phases, ideas, practices, and attitudes that may be considered characteristic of a narrative therapy process.

Based on the work of Freedman and Combs (1996), I had discerned a flow to the process of narrative therapy, which served as my guide when working with Abi. Each conversation tended to crystallise around the following two themes or phases: 'opening space for new stories' and 'story development'. Associated with each phase are several practices and attitudes that comprise the 'how' of narrative therapy. Keeping the research questions in mind, it is beyond the scope of this study to present a detailed discussion of these phases, practices, attitudes, and ideas. With the intention of further contextualising this study, a brief outline of our therapeutic process follows.

I began, as I begin all therapy, by listening. I listened to Abi's stories; that is, I listened to understand the meaning that they held for *her*. By not assuming that I knew their content or meaning, I approached Abi and her narratives from a "not-knowing" position (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, 1992). I attempted to listen deconstructively to Abi's stories, guided by the belief that each story has a multitude of possible meanings. Listening enabled me to join with Abi in acknowledging her problem-saturated stories. Furthermore, I endeavoured to listen in ways that objectified Abi's problems, located them in sociocultural contexts, and opened space for new stories. I did this by perceiving the problems as separate from Abi's self. This practice or attitude is referred to as the "externalisation" of problems (White, 1987, 1988/9). "Relative influence questioning" (White, 1988) and "naming the plot" (Tomm, 1993) are additional practices used to structure externalising conversations.

Shifting my primary intention from that of understanding Abi's stories to that of opening space for their transformation, I also engaged in deconstructive questioning: inviting Abi to see her story from different perspectives, to notice its effects and limitations, and to



discover other possible narratives. During this phase of ‘story development’ my aim was to expand openings into substantial, multi-layered narratives that supported Abi’s preferred values and ways of being. Story development proceeds by listening for openings or “sparkling events” (White, 1991) that contradict the problem-saturated narratives, checking that the opening represents a preferred experience, developing a “history of the present” (White & Epston, 1990) and extending the story into the future. This entailed connecting Abi’s present selves to her past and future selves.

Epston (1995; as quoted by Cowley & Springen, 1995:74) contends that “(e)very time we ask a question, we’re generating a possible version of a life.” Based on this understanding of questions as constitutive, I asked Abi questions, not to gather information but to generate experience. By posing questions that generated the experience of preferred realities for Abi, I understood how questions could be therapeutic in and of themselves. Appendix D comprises a selection of questions posed to Abi throughout the course of our conversations.

Freedman and Combs (1996:113-143) offer the following structure for thinking about “types” of questions: deconstruction questions, opening space questions, preference questions, story development questions, and meaning questions. Each set of questions may be linked to a specific intention: to deconstruct problematic stories, identify preferred directions and ways of being, and develop alternate stories that support these preferred directions and selves.

Although the phases ‘opening space for new stories’ and ‘story development’ came to constitute the bulk of our therapeutic process, the process of narrative therapy may include ‘thickening the plot’ and ‘spreading the news’. Various practices for thickening new narratives include, but are not limited to, “reflecting teams”, letters, documents, celebrations, and particular interviewing practices. New stories can be circulated in families, leagues, and “communities of concern” (White & Epston, 1990; White, 1991; Anderson, 1993; Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Having sketched the context for the emergence of narrative self in this section, the following serves as an application of narrative knowing to the idea of self. Specifically, I consider the function of narrative in the establishment of self, the properties of self that are built by the narrative structure and the social process of narrative.

## **NARRATIVE SELF**

That the self can be viewed as narrative, is the central thesis of this discussion. I contend, together with a growing number of sociologists and psychologists, that narrative is fundamental in the creation and transformation of personal identity. I am supported in this view by the likes of Spence (1982,1986), Schafer (1983), Gergen and Gergen (1986), Sarbin (1986), Scheibe (1986), Polkinghorne (1988), White and Epston (1990), Bruner (1991,1996), Hermans, Rijks, Harry and Kempen (1993), Linde (1993), McAdams (1993), Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995), Laubscher and Klinger (1997) and Rosenthal (1997).

According to these writers, the self can be viewed as narrative and self narratives *are* persons' identities. Not only do we make sense of our lives and selves through narratives, we live our lives in terms of narratives. These authors contend that all people are story tellers who construct narratives about their selves. Narratives imitate life and function as an inner reality while simultaneously constructing the narrator's self and reality. Narratives have tremendous power as they come to constitute our selves and to shape our behaviour (Gergen & Gergen, 1986). Because narratives explain the events of lives in an ongoing manner, they enable persons to make meaning of and from life. The brief discussion that follows serves to historically contextualise the emergence of 'narrative self'.

Polkinghorne (1988: 146-155) plots the story of self as one which begins with the "Self as a substance", progresses to the "Self as a construction", and culminates with the "Self as narrative". Gergen (1991) traces the story of self across the Romantic period, to the period of modernism, and culminates with a postmodern perspective. Both writers rely on the temporal dimension to plot profound transformations in our view of self.

Personal identity, as proposed by Descartes, was located *within* each person's unique mental substance or self. This incorporeal self was directly knowable and accessible to the individual. The self (to which thought belonged) remained stable throughout our lifetime. Hume challenged this "Self as a substance", arguing that there was no "thing" within which thoughts are maintained. The self as "the sum of all one's experiences without a stable something behind them" was considered unsuitable for maintaining an integrated identity (Polkinghorne, 1988:149/150).

Gergen (1991) identifies the romanticist view of self (located primarily in the nineteenth century) as characterised by personal depth together with the attributes of passion, soul, creativity, and moral fiber. In the early twentieth century the self as constituted from personal depth, gave way to the modernist understanding of the rational and cognitive self. The modern self was perceived to be stable across time and context, rational, ordered, and accessible. This self existed inside the individual as "an intrapsychic entity" (Lax, 1992:69). The modern self is predictable, honest, and sincere (Gergen, 1991:6). Personal identity was guaranteed by its substantial existence (Shotter, 1989:137). Ultimately, all thought, language, and meaning was seen to be situated within and emanating from this self (Kotze, 1994:47).

With postmodern thinking the existence of a stable and essential self was challenged. The idea of the 'constructed self' and the 'self as narrative' emerged. As the idea of an embodied person came to replace the immaterial, thoughtful self at the centre of identity so the "Self as a substance" was replaced by "Self as a construction". Identity, according to James (1892; as quoted by Harter, 1988:44 f.) is an idea that a person *constructs*, rather than an underlying substance that a person discovers. Because it is built on other people's attitudes and responses, the construction of self is a continual process that is subject to ongoing transformation. The process involves the cohesion of multiple facets and ideas of self into an integrated identity. An historical English verse quoted by Harter (1988:62) eloquently presents this multiplicity of self:

Within my earthly temple there's a crowd,  
There's one of us that's humble, one that's proud;  
There's one in eager search for earthly pelf,  
And one who loves his neighbour as himself.  
There's one who's broken-hearted for his sins,  
And one who, unrepentant, sits and grins.  
From much corroding care I should be free  
If once I could determine which is me.

According to the postmodern discourse of social construction, knowledge is a social construction, and so too is self (Gergen, 1985; Hoffman, 1992). The self is constructed and transformed within the domain of the social, and more specifically, through conversation (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). According to Lax (1992:69) "the individual is considered within a context of social meaning rather than as an intrapsychic entity". Thus the notion of self is transformed from the incorporeal to the symbolic and bodily interaction within the social context. "The concept of self is not the discovery or release of some innate 'I'; it is a construction" (Polkinghorne, 1988:150). It is because the "Self as a construction" is a self built on other's responses and attitudes, which are inherently variable that the "Self as a construction" is a self subject to change.

### **Narrative Self in Context**

In contrast to many traditional theories of personality that assumed childhood was the most important arena within which the development of self occurred, Erik Erikson (1963, 1968) was among the first to pioneer a lifespan approach to personality. This challenged the psychodynamic idea, advocated by Freud, that the experiences of the first few years of life predispose the self to assume a specific structure in adulthood. The notion that we construct narratives about our lives and selves supports lifespan theories of development, such as Erikson's, while departing and extending upon them in various ways. As the story of self unfolds, these will become more apparent.

According to Erikson (1963;1968) personality evolves throughout life by means of developmental crises, with each crisis representing intense potential for growth. If the developmental crisis is favourably resolved, the personality comes to encompass new skills and virtues. Erikson emphasised adolescence as the time when a coherent self must be forged. He described this need as an *identity crisis*. Should this crisis be successfully negotiated the self acquires the characteristic of fidelity. Uncertainty or ego diffusion is the legacy of the unsuccessful resolution. In the words of Erikson (1962:14):

I have called the major crisis of adolescence the *identity crisis*; it occurs in that period of the life cycle when each youth must forge for himself some central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the effective remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood; he must detect some meaningful resemblance between what he has come to see in himself and what his sharpened awareness tells him others judge and expect him to be.

Traditional lifespan approaches, such as Erikson's, have been widely criticised, particularly with regard to the universality issue and the role of environment. As research for these theories was based primarily on the white-professional-middle-class-North-American-male, the need to question the applicability of these theories to different cultures, peoples, and genders, has become paramount (Laubscher & Klinger, 1997:64-66). South African psychologists and educationists have been called upon by the likes of de la Rey, Duncan, Shefer and van Niekerk (1997) as well as Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (1997) to question the relevance and validity of the theories and methodologies that we employ.

Anthropologists have demonstrated the differences in the constructions of self across cultures. Geertz (1983) for example, noted that Javanese and Moroccan Arabic employ different terms for identifying people and argued that these linguistic differences form the basis of different understandings regarding what constitutes a person. As different cultures appear to have different sources for creating different types of self (grounded in

the linguistic and cultural resources that each culture deploys) it is imperative we are concerned with the self within a particular culture.

Mair (1988:127) emphasises the role of culture in the construction of our narratives:

We inhabit the great stories of our culture. We live through stories. We are *lived* by the stories of our race and place... we are, each of us, locations where the stories of our place and time become partially tellable.

Bruner (1986:17) draws our attention to the inevitable mutability and continuity of the cultural narratives that come to constitute our stories and selves:

... retellings are what culture is all about. The next retelling reactivates prior experience, which is then rediscovered and relived as the story is re-related in a new situation. Stories may have endings, but stories are never over.

As the life story is open to editing, so too is the self. To understand that the self narrative is open-ended, is to realise that the self is a narrative in process. Narrative self is something we become, something we construct. Life and story are differentiated through their performance.

Life is not merely a story text: life is lived, and the story is told. The life story is a redescription of the lived life and a means to integrate the aspects of the self.

Polkinghorne (1988:154)

... we are not dealing with culture as text but rather with culture as the performance of text – and, I would add, with the reperformance

and retellings ... Stories become transformative only in their performance.

Bruner (1986:22-25)

Thus it is not enough to tell a new narrative. Narratives must be lived and experienced if they are to transform lives and selves.

Both the stock of narratives available to the self and the extent of the self's continuity is determined by the culture. According to White (1991) cultural stories determine the form of our self narratives. Not only do we make sense of our lives through the stock of cultural narratives available to us, we construct our personal narratives in relation to these cultural narratives. Within a given culture, certain narratives will come to dominate other narratives and prescribe specific ways of believing and behaving. Narrative therapy reifies the implications of this by attending to cultural and contextual narratives in addition to the individual's narratives (Waldegrave, 1990; Freedman & Combs, 1996). From a postmodern, social constructionist and narrative perspective, identity is always political (Madigan, 1996).

A narrative approach to the development of self is proposed as a viable alternative because of its universal nature and pervasiveness regardless of colour, gender, and context. As narrative relies on context for meaning and operates on the level of the individual and society simultaneously, a narrative approach to self is able to respect the individual while it acknowledges the society. This is a claim which earlier, traditional theories of self cannot make (Laubscher & Klinger, 1997).

Thus far, narrative self has emerged as a somewhat complex and perhaps seemingly contradictory character that is mutable and continuous, multiple and integrated, individualistic and culturally based. The question then arises as to narrative self's origin and survival. How do we create and maintain a narrative self that is simultaneously continuous and changeable, concordant and multiple, personal and cultural?

Linde (1993:98 f.) presents narrative as a primary social resource for the creation and maintenance of identity while embedding the personal within the cultural. She has identified three primary characteristics of self that are specifically constructed through language. In the discussion that follows, I have employed these characteristics of narrative self to serve as a structure that integrates theory of autobiography with psychological theories of self. My intention is to demonstrate the effectiveness of narrative in the presentation and preservation of self.

### **Narrative Self as Continuous**

To have a self that is continuous through time requires that a person's past be related and relevant to their present. The continuous self is differentiated from a pointillist self, which consists of isolated experiences and memories that are not connected and cannot therefore influence one another. Despite the flux of living within a continuously evolving external and internal world, the individual's movement should be towards a oneness or integrity of self. According to Linde (1993) the ability to create a historically continuous self is an achievement of a healthy personality and that personality disorders represent a severe disturbance in the continuity of the self.

The continuity of self establishes the connection between self and narrative: just as the events of a narrative are organised into unity by the plot, so is the experience of self organised along the temporal dimension. In other words, the unity of the plot establishes the continuity of the self. To quote Polkinghorne (1988:152):

The experience of self is organised along the temporal dimension in the same manner that the events of a narrative are organized by the plot into a unified story... The whole of an individual human existence is articulated in the narrative plot; it is much more than a simple chronicle listing of life occurrences. The self, then, is a meaning rather than a substance or a thing.



The self is more than the chronicle of human existence that begins with birth and ends with death. The self is established as the plot draws these events into a meaningful unity. It does so by considering the context and significance of individual episodes and structuring their contribution toward the coherent configuration that is the self narrative.

The temporal continuity of self lies at the very root of narrative. This is because narrative has temporal order as its defining characteristic. We do not have a story without a sequence of events – we may have a description or an explanation but not a narrative. To illustrate the power of this “narrative presupposition” Linde (1993:107-111) compares the following two sentences:

1. I got flustered and I backed the car into the tree.
2. I backed the car into a tree and I got flustered.

The difference in meaning between these two sentences is the difference of causality and this is due to the difference in sequence. Not only does narrative provide temporal sequence and continuity it also provides narrative causality. In other words, continuity of self is established through narrative sequence and narrative causality. We know this is possible because the self in the present is always connected and relevant to the self of past. That is, the Abi of today, although different, is connected to the Abi of ten years ago.

### **Narrative Self as Separate but Related to Others**

Linde (1993) identifies the second quality of self that is established by narrative as the ability to distinguish the self from others in such a way that it is simultaneously unique and related to others. Here we cannot assume that all people in all contexts can attain the individualised self. It has been demonstrated that only in certain historical times and contexts can a person be considered to possess a self (Gergen, 1991; Olney, 1972). In cultures where the basic unit is the community, the individual is defined in relation to the community rather than as separate from it (Geertz, 1983).

Feminist critics as well as the discourses of social construction have challenged the theory of an individualised self. Issues of appropriateness and relevance are raised as it is argued that one cannot apply the individualised self to women's experience of self (Gilligan, 1982). But more is at stake than applicability when we consider that the individualised self has been established as *the* ideal and therefore normative self. It is here, within the realm of discourse, that women and other marginalised groupings are set up to experience their selves as deficient, as abnormal when compared to the 'norm' of the privileged-white-American-male experience of self. The subjugating and restricting consequences of a culturally prescribed normative self were previously considered. Once again, a narrative understanding of self points to the politics of identity.

The characteristics of narrative and the act of oral narration establish the simultaneous distinctiveness and relation of self to others. The self as a separate and discrete entity is achieved at the most basic level of English's linguistic structure, namely, pronouns. Linde (1993:111-112) notes that it is universal of language to distinguish among different persons of the speech situation. Pronouns in any form differentiate the first person (speaker) from the second person (addressee/s) from the third person/s (those not present or not participating in the conversation). The self as separate-but-related-to-others is further established by the very act of oral narration: it is interactive. Oral narrative requires an addressee and is therefore a relational act. Through the act of narration the narrator maintains a relationship with the participants. The self as a member of a group is established through the exchange of narratives about that which is shared or common, such as interests and values. In this manner narrative functions as a major social resource for the creation of self as distinct yet related to others.

### **Narrative Self as Reflexive**

To function as a social self requires that we possess the ability to relate to our self externally, as other. The self is required to possess the characteristic of reflexivity, which suggests one self among many selves that can be reflected upon or related to as other. This lends support to a postmodern understanding of a multiple selves for the

Carr (1985:117) presents the self as reflexive when he writes that the self is simultaneously the author and an audience member of its own narratives:

We are constantly explaining ourselves to others. And finally each of us must count himself among his own audience since in explaining ourselves to others we are often trying to convince ourselves as well.

Without the characteristic of reflexivity the self would neither be able to know itself nor be able to judge and correct itself. Polkinghorne (1988:154) notes that the self cannot know itself directly, that it can only know itself indirectly through self-interpretation.

According to Linde (1993) the self as reflexive is established through the very act of narration due to the inevitable distinction between the narrator and the protagonist. The consequence of speaking *about* the present and not being able to speak the immediate present *in* the present, is the distance between narrator and protagonist. It is the distance between them that enables the narrator to judge the protagonist. This means that the speaker of the narrative is always presented and judged to be moral, even if the protagonist is not. For example, by saying, “that was when I used to do destructive things” the narrator is portraying her present self as wiser and more competent than the younger protagonist of her narrative.

George Mead’s (1934) classic understanding of self conflates the moral self with the social self. To exist as a self requires not only that the self be related to others but that it be correctly or *morally* related. Mead (1934:162-163) explains:

The structure, then, on which the self is built is this response which is common to all, for one has to be a member of a community to be a self. Such responses are abstract attitudes, but they constitute just what we term a man’s character... and a

person who has such an organised group of responses is a man whom we say has character, in the moral sense.

To locate the self in the context within which it arose and is maintained is to consider the politics of identity. In its quest for a “just therapy” (Waldegrave, 1990) narrative therapy requires that the taken-for-granted concepts, such as identity, be deconstructed. Perhaps the ultimate value of a narrative understanding of self is its insistence that we conceive of self within context and in relation to other.

Thus far, the general practices and processes of Narrative Therapy were linked to the postmodern turn and the discourse of social construction. Narrative Therapy was presented as the most appropriate therapeutic arena for the interpretation of Narrative Self. The primary characteristics of Narrative Self were as identified as continuity, reflexivity and the self as separate but related to others. I argued for the effectiveness of narrative in the presentation and preservation of self.



## CHAPTER THREE

### A NARRATIVE READING OF ABI'S SELF

We are all alone as we experience who we are,  
our thoughts, our own feelings, our own exquisitely inarticulate, but  
deeply felt notions of what we have been.  
Yet, we stand intimately connected to others, longing to be important to  
them, to be affected by and to affect them.  
This is the dance of life – sometimes by ourselves, sometimes with  
others.

Kahn (1986:63)

In this chapter, Narrative Self, situated within Narrative Therapy and interpreted through Narrative Research, is applied to an emergent female adolescent self. The result is a narrative reading of Abi's self. In the interest of authenticity, I have not altered the spelling or formatting of Abi's written work.

#### **READING FOR PLOT**

What strikes me most, on reading Abi's narrative in its entirety, is her ability to transform her self. Like a triumphant phoenix arising from her own smouldering ashes, Abi's self narrative is characterised by personal growth. And although growth demands change, there is a thread of sameness, which yokes her seemingly discontinuous childhood self to that of her adolescent self: it is her presentation of her self as continuous. According to Linde (1993:107) "... temporal continuity – or identity of the self through time – is the most basic form of coherence we can create."

Abi used our therapeutic conversations to plot her growth, to map her changing yet always familiar self. It appears that she did so by making use of the perspective of time. Abi's written self narrative, illustrates the use that she makes of perspective across time:

The following chapter deals with perspective...

Chapter four deals with what I have

learnt from my experiences:

Where I am and where I want

to be.

When asked to reflect on our therapeutic conversations, Abi shows an awareness of perspective's contribution to her development: "Our therapy was dealing with me in past, present, and future, which definitely helped in my growth."

Abi is driven by a tremendous need to make sense of her present self – "I believe that my greatest challenge is finding out who I am" – as well as her past self and experiences. This enables her to "build my base" in the present, which in turn allows her to imagine her future self with confidence. She re-considers her past self in the light of her present and future selves, and finds that her interpretation and understanding has changed. It is in this manner that she re-authors her self and life story. In her words:

... our therapy helped me to find answers in my self by making use of – previous experiences. By sifting through my past, the ways I reacted, how I feel about current situations you aided me to be comfortable with myself, and what I had originally thought to be personality failures or defects were actually challenges in becoming happier/comfortable with myself.

I understand Abi's transformative ability to be the re-authoring process itself. With her story in mind, the words of White and Epston (1990:10) are reified:

In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequence across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them... This account can be referred to as a story or self-narrative. The success of this storying of experience provides

persons with a sense of continuity and meaning in their lives, and this is relied upon for the ordering of daily lives and for the interpretation of further experiences.

Abi refers to the re-authoring process as one of “reconnecting with old parts”. For example, when she discovers her sporty self in the present, she remembers that she has always had a sporty self and goes on to explain that self-doubt tricked her into not believing in this self. As she uses our conversations to separate her life and selves from the problem of self-doubt, Abi displaces the problem from the centre of her identity and increasingly resumes *authority* and *authorship* over her life and life story. Consequently, she confers upon her social self a larger role in her preferred self narrative.

Zimmerman and Dickerson (1994:235) note that when persons retell their narratives in therapy, they often “notice that they have already experienced participating in an alternative story.” Indeed Abi’s sporty self was always there, she just stopped being noticed and storied as dominant. By using therapy to plot her self narrative across time, Abi attached new meaning to old experiences and in so doing, she established her self both as continuous and as transformed.

Within the framework provided by this plot of a continuous and transformed self, Abi’s narrative suggests two major foci. Although presented separately, these subplots overlap considerably and may be understood as two alternate perspectives for reading her self narrative as a whole.

## **TWO SUBPLOTS**

**Subplot One: Abi transforms her primary experience of self from single and separate to multiple and related**

When asked to present her life story as a book with chapters, Abi segments her narrative into four. In the first chapter, she deals mainly with her primary school years (grades one to six):

During my earlier years of primary school I was mainly concerned with my academic achievement...

I believed that one was either sport or academically oriented and doubted my capabilities as a sportswoman.

Labeled by her peers as a “boffin” Abi came to experience and to present her self primarily as a single self, that is, an academic self.

Generally I never fitted into the “in crowd”, I was excluded because of my academic capabilities...

Because I had not been accepted I hated those that had excluded me. I made myself believe that I did not want to be part of them.

Not only did labeling serve as a “box” restricting Abi into a single version of being, it also served to keep her self separate and isolated from others. From the vantage point of adolescence she describes this singular self as “prickly”, “defensive”, and “stagnated”. Throughout our conversations she refers to these experiences of self and other as “dark” and describes her self as being in a “hole” or a “box”. She refers to her self in terms of separateness and difference as well as being distant from and closed off to the experiences of other. Abi’s language is littered with metaphors of light and its absence – darkness. Light is associated with knowledge and an enlightened, open and knowable self. I have come to understand this period as the dark ages in her understanding both of self and of other.

Labeling, being labeled, and a belief in the existence of a social hierarchy that separated Abi from her peers, constituted Abi’s experience and storying of self as separate, alienated and disjointed from other:

... I contributed to my own alienation in that I accepted only my answers and ideas as being correct and gave the impression that I was higher above my peers...



I was very analytical and labelled them in the same manner that they had labelled me.

I went so far as to create “social levels”...

Abi’s poem “Bird” expresses both an experience of her self as separate from other and a desire to understand this self.

– Bird –

Today she does not fly  
She has flown before  
Today she is unsure  
She watches them fly –

Soaring

She too wants to soar  
But she just watches,  
What she wants

Fly by

Her wings are not broken

Her muscles not tore

Why then, does she

not soar?

Not only does Abi yearn to make sense of her self and others, she also expresses a strong desire to be seen and understood. It is so important to be recognised, that Abi concludes her written narrative by expressing the need to be known by others, as she has come to know her self:

I would like to be at a stage  
where I am completely comfortable  
with myself and can be more

open to the people around me.  
I wish to be more confident  
and easier understood. I want  
more people to know the real  
me!

Her desire to be recognised is directly acknowledged when she admits, on several occasions to being “a person who likes the limelight”. Abi’s persistent pursuit of academic achievement and seemingly tireless participation in theatrical and cultural engagements may be interpreted as a less direct expression of this desire to be noticed, to have her name “up in lights”.

Previously I had been happy with my self-made “social levels”, however during my last two years of Primary school my set ideas changed.

I wanted to be part of the fun my peers seemed to be having.

Here Abi expresses dissatisfaction with her primary experience of self as isolated and indicates a preference to belong. It is her longing “*to be a part of*” – to experience her self as related to other – which becomes her impetus to transform her self. She turns her attention to noticing, to hearing and seeing other. Abi does this by becoming “more open minded and prepared to listen to other peoples ideas.” This has the effect of “removing the barrier” between self and other.

... I did not change my values or beliefs to “fit in” and I don’t believe that my peers changed too much either, it was a kind of mutual understanding...

It is important to Abi that she found friendship and belonging through understanding, rather than through changing to “fit in”. She relinquishes ideas, such as social levels, that no longer support her preference to belong. What she does not relinquish, is her continuity of self. Instead Abi speaks of “extending”, “developing”, and “building” her

self-base. In this manner Abi presents her transformation of self as an evolution – she is always becoming more, she is always expanding her self-base.

Abi recognises the contribution of Anthea – a friend from the past with whom she remains friendly today – to the development of her self-base:

I am grateful to her as she was the first to accept me into her friendship group and I have met many new people through her and they have met me. Hopefully through meeting me they have been able to remove previously allocated labels and I can say that I have.

Reciprocity and mutuality are highlighted in this passage, which may be understood as Abi's expanding awareness of the contribution of other in the development of self. Not only does the friendship group enable her to meet new people and thereby extend her social self, it also allows Abi to *be met*. The unusual addition of "*and they have met me*" when it is ordinarily assumed that meeting people includes being met, is indicative of the significance that Abi attaches to being met or acknowledged. As her story confirms, being seen by others, without the obfuscation of barriers, labels, and darkness is a new and significant chapter in Abi's narrative of self.

I have learnt to look at people  
openly and not analyse so much –  
I believe this change has come  
about with my increase in  
self acceptance.

This is one example of many, where Abi directly connects her understanding and development of self to that of other. Consider the following three sentences:

I would like to be at a stage  
where I am completely comfortable

with myself and can be more  
open to the people around me.  
I wish to be more confident  
and easier understood. I want  
more people to know the real  
me!

Abi's use of "and can be" implies that the first part of the first sentence – to be comfortable with her self – is a precondition for the second part – so that she can be more open to others. In the second sentence, the conjunction "and" links her wish to be more confident in her self to her wish to be better understood by others. In the third sentence Abi makes a direct plea for her real self to be known by other. Whether I consider Abi's language in terms of its content (what she says) or its form (sentence structure) it is clear that Abi's experience of self has become intimately connected to her experience of other.

In her consideration of the qualities of self that the narrative creates and sustains, Linde (1993) identified 'the self as separate but related to others' as one of the three characteristics of self. According to Linde (1993:112):

To understand the shifter nature of I is to come to comprehend that others exist in one's world who have the same nature and who must be seen as separate but fellow beings.

It is through her experience of other that Abi comes to extend her self-base as much as it is her extension of self that enables Abi to experience other. This makes sense when we understand that the self is simultaneously separate and related to others (Fogel, 1993; Linde, 1993).

### **Subplot Two: Abi transforms her primary experience of self from self-doubt to self-understanding**

In Chapter Three, Abi describes her first two years of high school. Abi's first paragraph confirms the role that other has come to play in her experience of self, as she immediately contextualises her experience and employs the inclusive pronoun "we":

One of the things I recall my primary school principle stating before we left, was that when we are in grade 7 we are the big fish in the small pond and that on reaching standard six we would be the small fish in a big pond.  
All too true!

What distinguishes this paragraph, when compared to the rest of her written narrative, is Abi's reliance on the words of an other as she quotes her primary school principal. In so doing, Abi temporarily displaces her self as her primary source of reference. This interpretation, based on the structure of a discrete section of the text, is confirmed by the content of Abi's narrative: Chapter Three tracks the ascendance of self-doubt in Abi's experience of self.

Primary school had offered me very little competition, in the form of other academic achievers so high school came as a bit of a shock.

To understand the meaning of the above text, it is important to keep the whole of Abi's narrative in mind. Previously, I attempted to establish the link between Abi's identity and academia: in primary school her academic self *was* her self. With this in mind, I am not surprised when Abi refers to her experience of academic competition as shocking: a threat to Abi's academic dominance had come to mean a threat to her selfhood.

Abi continues to track the growth and development of self-doubt as problematic. Through repetition, she establishes the influence of self-doubt as pervasive. She also demonstrates how this problem's presence and impact was not limited to the context of academic achievement:

... I experienced a few other problems such as not being chosen as a cast member for our drama productions.

For a while I dwelled in self doubt, doubting my capabilities as an actress.

... how ever after auditioning for this years Parktown girls play and the house plays and not getting into either only re inforced my self doubt.

Then Abi made a decision to participate in the production as part of the backstage team. Her reason to do so is familiar: Abi is determined to build her base, to add to her skills and knowledges by learning from all experiences.

I decided to do backstage as I believed that if I didn't take part in anyway I would be accepting my failure, which I was not prepared to do.

I also decided that it would be good to see drama from another angle and I determined that backstage would be a learning experience from which I would one day benefit from.

Keeping Abi's whole narrative in mind, this may be interpreted as more than determination and positive re-framing. Instead it appears that Abi is drawing, once again, on her self as continuous and this time she utilises the perspective of her future self. Abi is beginning with the end in mind (Covey, 1998) as she connects "where I am" (her present self) with "where I want to be" (her future self). Her ability to construct a narrative that is continuous will serve her well in the face of an onslaught of self-doubt. I understand this to be the link between the two subplots identified as well as the thread that binds the plot of her entire self narrative: Abi makes use of her continuous self to transform her self.

Not only does Chapter Three map the ascendance of self-doubt in Abi's life it also points to its decline. The following text may be understood as a turning point – a "unique outcome" or "sparkling moment" in Abi's story and experience of self:

I didn't enjoy my "backstage" experience  
and after not getting into house plays  
and refusing to do backstage for them  
my friend said that I would be  
losing out on my drama scroll.  
I told her that I wasn't prepared to  
accept an award for something I didn't  
enjoy doing and I wouldn't put much  
effort into.

Here Abi narrates her self firmly (and I think magnificently) back into the role of leading lady. She resumes authorship and authority of her life and self. Self-doubt and related problems will no longer dictate her plot nor dominate her action. Instead, Abi makes use of her preferences, her values and interests, her *self* as her ultimate base and resource centre. Now she acts and makes most of her decisions based on that which she prefers and values as opposed to that which what others expect.

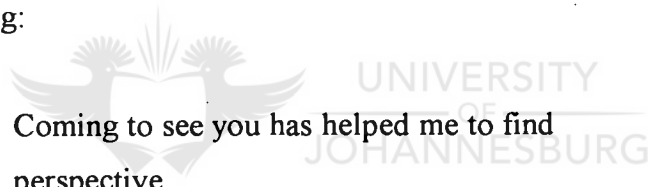
The difference between the present Abi and the past Abi is that now she acts *in relation to other* rather than *in reaction to other*. That she is still able to take other into account is indicated by her reference to others – "them" and "her" – as well as to the inclusion of her friend's indirect speech – "my friend said that...". That her self is not displaced by other, is apparent through the content of her message as well as through the form of the text. Abi both begins – "I didn't enjoy my 'backstage' experience" – and ends the text with her voice – "I wouldn't put much effort into". She also makes reference to her self by using the first person "I" on four additional occasions in this paragraph.

Considering the meaning and significance that Abi attaches to recognition, it is all the more remarkable that she refuses an award and thereby the opportunity to be publicly acknowledged. It seems that the more she experiences her self at centre, the less she requires the recognition of other, this in turn reduces her vulnerability to self-doubt. How

did Abi come to this experience of self? What has enabled Abi to transform her self? In the final paragraph of Chapter Three Abi directs me to the sense that she has made of her experience:

I think that during this stage of my life  
I was faced with many problems  
which seemed greater because I was  
unsure of my true self. –  
I was unsure of my capabilities...

Abi has linked the increasing influence of problems to her relative lack of self-knowledge: the less she knew and understood about her self, the more susceptible she became to self-doubt. Throughout our conversations, in Chapter Four, and again in her written feedback, Abi attaches tremendous significance to her increasing self-knowledge and self-understanding:



Coming to see you has helped me to find  
perspective ...  
And to understand myself and why I do  
the things I have done and do.

In response to my question “What have you achieved in and through therapy?” Abi answered:

A better understanding of myself, a relaxed and confident view of who I am, what I want, where I am going... also to understand that I can ask others for advice decreased the effect of self-doubt on myself and my progress... The understanding that I am a unique individual person...

Thus far, Abi’s self narrative has emphasised the importance of building and developing her self-base. She has repeatedly referred to the importance of learning and particularly



to self-learning or self-knowledge. To quote Abi: “I believe that my greatest challenge is finding out who I am...”. Not only can her self-base be interpreted as the way in which she establishes continuity, self-understanding is the way in which she maintains her influence and authority over self-doubt. It is her *understanding* that enables her to take a *stand* – against self-doubt and for her own beliefs and preferences. Simultaneously, it is self-understanding that has enabled Abi to extend her experience of self to include other. And in turn, it is through her experience of other that Abi has come to know her self. It is through other that Abi has come to self. I conclude this reading with Abi’s words:

... in understanding and being more confident about myself I understand more about the people around me, I am open to discussions, opinions and new experiences.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This analysis demonstrates what may be learned in interpreting Abi’s narrative from a point of view that is primarily holistic-content. Reading for plot, I identified continuity and transformation as that which yokes Abi’s stories and selves. Together the two subplots of transformation in her primary experience of self – from single and separate to multiple and related and from self-doubt to self-understanding – allow for a comprehensive understanding of Abi’s life story. Like a tightly woven ball of wool, the subplots are not easily extricable: self-understanding enabled Abi to experience her self as related to other and her experience of other facilitated Abi’s understanding of self. It is also the contribution of other to Abi’s understanding of self that empowers her to break the stronghold of self-doubt.

At this point I wish to make reference to the concept of “interpretive level”. According to Lieblich *et al.* (1998:76):

Reading and interpreting a life story may vary in the extent to which theoretical understanding plays a role in interpretation. At one extreme is the phenomenological stand, which takes the report of the teller at face

value... respecting the explicit narrative as is. At the other extreme, we may come to understand a story armed with a variety of theoretical assumptions...

Between these two extremes exist various shades of interpretation levels. While I have attempted to present a relatively non-judgmental reading and have purposely refrained from comprehensive theoretical interpretation, I inevitably bring my culture, experiences, expectations as well as my personal and professional preferences into my reading. Although I have attempted to respect Abi's subjectivity I am aware that my commitment to all that is democratic, optimistic and liberating filters through my interpretation of Abi's narrative. This is why I presented my motivation, assumptions, and aspirations in Chapter One and it is why I have interspersed my analysis with some of the theory that informs it.

In ending I wish to reiterate a point made in the beginning: the above interpretation is not presented as *the* "true" reading. Instead it is presented as *a* possible reading based on the inference process documented above. It was not my intention to provide a definitive analysis of Abi's self nor is it possible to capture that which is forever evolving. Hence my journey's purpose: to provide *a* narrative interpretation of Abi's self.

This brings me full circle to the research question posed at the outset of this journey: What may be learned from a narrative reading of a female adolescent's self? I have learned that the data does speak if you are willing to listen. To me, Abi's life story tells of triumph and transformation and of continuity within the context of change. Her story has inspired me to embrace the paradox of self that is separate yet connected, personal yet contextual.

By conceiving of self within context and in relation to other, this way of working has created space for alternate narratives and knowledges. Just as a narrative understanding of self served me with an alternate and relevant way of thinking about and working with a South African client, so I hope, has this study served the reader with an alternate and

relevant way of thinking about and working with human identity and development. Readers are invited to consider the impact that this narrative has had on their understanding of self. In order to do so each person must draw, as I did, from his or her stock of personal and cultural narratives.

As it applies to both my understanding of Abi's self narrative and to my experience of this research process, I conclude with the words of T.S. Eliot (1974:222):

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.



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**APPENDIX A**  
**DATE LIST OF THERAPEUTIC CONVERSATIONS**  
OF  
JOHANNESBURG



**Therapeutic conversations, between Abi and I, took place on the following days:**

| <b>SESSIONS</b> | <b>DATES</b> |
|-----------------|--------------|
| Session 1       | 15/03/1999   |
| Session 2       | 22/04/1999   |
| Session 3       | 29/04/1999   |
| Session 4       | 13/05/1999   |
| Session 5       | 20/05/1999   |
| Session 6       | 27/05/1999   |
| Session 7       | 03/06/1999   |
| Session 8       | 10/06/1999   |
| Session 9       | 17/06/1999   |
| Session 10      | 24/06/1999   |
| Session 11      | 01/07/1999   |
| Session 12      | 22/07/1999   |
| Session 13      | 05/08/1999   |
| Session 14      | 26/08/1999   |
| Session 15      | 08/09/1999   |
| Session 16      | 23/09/1999   |
| Session 17      | 28/10/1999   |

The logo of the University of Johannesburg, featuring a stylized bird with its wings spread, holding an open book. The bird is positioned to the left of the text.

**APPENDIX B**  
**ABI WRITES HER LIFE STORY**

UNIVERSITY  
OF  
JOHANNESBURG

## Chapter one

This chapter deals mainly with my Primary school years-Grade one to grade six. During my earlier years of primary school I was mainly concerned with my academic achievement. I did not participate in a many sports, however did involve myself in many cultural activities: speech festivals, drama, choir etc.

I believed that one was either sport or academically orientated and doubted my capabilities as a sportswoman. Perhaps this was re-inforced during an incident in Grade two where I had been listed to play in our inter-house netball day.

It was a freezing cold winter morning when our match was to be played.

I remember repeatedly asking our houses' netball coach if it was my turn to play.

Her Unchanging answer was just now, in a few minutes.

As it turned out I never got the chance to play and had waited patiently for the whole afternoon in vain.

I never attempted to play netball again until Grade six!

Generally I never fitted into the "in crowd", I was excluded because of my academic capabilities.

How ever I contributed to my own alienation in that I accepted only my answers and ideas as being correct and gave the impression that I was higher above my peers- something I believed myself-Because I had not been accepted I hated those that had excluded me. I made myself believe that I did not want to be part of them.

I was very analytical and labelled them in the same manner that they had labelled me.

I went so far as to create "social levels" scrutinising the bad things they did and to explain it to myself I analysed why they had done it inferring that they had an ulterior motive. -masks.

I viewed my ideas about the "social levels" openly.

During a guidance discussion I stated to my peers, "I will never stoop to your level."

I was quite comfortable with having these "levels" and my parents re- inforced my beliefs by being glad that I was "standing up for myself" and had a "good head" about me.



## Chapter Two

Chapter two is composed of my primary school years grade 6 and 7.

Previously I had been happy with my self-made "social levels", however during my last two years of Primary school my set ideas changed.

I wanted to be part of the fun my peers seemed to be having.

I am not sure how it happened but I became friends with those that had originally labelled me and I them.

During one of these years my guidance teacher stated that I had become more open minded and prepared to listen to other peoples ideas.

I think that perhaps this had aided in removing the barrier between my peers and myself.

Although I believe that this change in perspective was mutual-shared between my peers and myself.

I say this because I did not change my values or beliefs to "fit in" and I don't believe that my peers changed too much either, it was a kind of mutual understanding which occurred mainly between myself and another girl- Anthea.

We are still good friends today, we have never discussed our past feuds.

I am grateful to her as she was the first to accept me into her friendship group and I have met many new people through her and they have met me.

Hopefully through meeting me they have been able to remove previously allocated labels and I can say that I have.

### Chapter Three

This chapter is composed of my first two high school years. One of the things I recall my primary school principle stating before we left, was that when we are in grade 7 <sup>we</sup> are the big fish in the small pond and that on reaching standard six we would be the small fish in a big pond. All too true!

Primary school had offered me very little competition, in the form of other academic achievers so high school came as a bit of a shock.

besides this I experienced a few other problems such not being chosen as a cast member for our drama productions.

This happened first in Grade 8 and came as a shock after taking lead roles during primary school.

For a while I dwelled in self doubt, doubting my capabilities as an actress

However my self confidence was restored when I was chosen to act in the Parktown boys' drama production.

There I met few girls from my school who assured me not to worry about Parktown girl's plays as one had to be a "favourite" of the producer in order to get in.-This was reassuring how ever after auditioning for this years Parktown girls play and the house plays and not getting into either only re inforced my self doubt.

I decided to do backstage as I believed that if I didn't take part in anyway I would be accepting my failure, which I was not prepared to do.

I also decided that it would be good to see drama from another angle and I determined that backstage would be a learning experience from which I would one day benefit from.

### Chapter 3 Continued.

I didn't enjoy my "backstage" experience and after not getting into house plays and refusing to do backstage for fun my friend said that I would be losing out on my drama scroll.

I told her that I wasn't prepared to accept an award for something I didn't enjoy doing and I wouldn't put much effort into.

I think that during this stage of my life I was faced with many problems which seemed greater because I was unsure of my true self. —

I was unsure of my capabilities and in some ways I tried to change my priorities to deal with my failures.

## Chapter 4

The following chapter deals with perspective. Although past issues of my life have been described in the previous chapters. Chapter four deals with what I have learnt from my experiences; where I am and where I want to be.

As previously discussed my first years of highschool had imposed a lot of self-doubt upon me -

I had found this very difficult to cope with because I had always been good at "managing" myself and pushing myself forward.

I knew that I had problems which needed to be dealt with.

I had two choices:

To be quiet reserved and accept my failure, or to fight to be on top of things again.

Coming to see you has helped me to find perspective.

to rather deal with than worry about!  
And to understand myself and why I do the things I have done and do

I believe that my greatest challenge is finding out who I am and what I am comfortable with.

I have learnt to look at people openly and not analyse so much - I believe this change has come about with my increase in self acceptance.

I would like to be at a stage where I am completely comfortable with myself and can be more open to the people around me. I wish to be more confident and easier understood. I want more people to know the real me!



**APPENDIX C**  
**ABI'S WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON THERAPY**

UNIVERSITY  
JOHANNESBURG

1. What is your understanding of what we were doing in therapy?

Taking a look at myself as a whole, discussing problems I have experienced and am and may experience in the future. Looking at the positive aspects of myself, my achievements what I enjoy and dislike-discovering myself, understanding myself and learning about social behavior, growth and change.

2. What were you hoping to achieve or get from therapy?

A better understanding of myself and a less-stress life style. To exist without worrying about doing or saying the right things, to be relaxed and comfortable with myself when around others-to eliminate the anxiety I felt about my then divided, academic and social life.

3. Did your experience differ from your expectations? How?

Yes, I have believed that your role was to analyze me and prove strategies to solve difficulties/problems. However I found that you prompted me to analyze myself and through our therapy helped me to find answers in myself by making use of – previous experiences. By sifting through my past, the ways I reacted, how I feel about current situations you aided me to be comfortable with myself, and what I had originally thought to be personality failures or defects were actually challenges in becoming happier/comfortable with myself

4. What have you achieved in and through therapy?

A better understanding of myself, a relaxed and confident view of who I am, what I want, where I am going. A positive outlook on challenges and the strategy to look inward for answers but not destructive self-criticism, but also to understand that I can ask others for advice decreased the effect of self-doubt on myself and my progress and in doing so opened myself up to new opportunities and experiences. The understanding that I am a unique individual person, I am confident in myself and am open for the world to get to know me.

5. What allowed or supported you in achieving this?

To understand and sort out where and why my difficulties had occurred. In learning to understand myself and society. And how the two function together. You saying that it was okay for me to have done the things I do (defensiveness etc) and to prompt me in understanding that those times or stances were learning curves and in finding what I had learnt from them and how to put that learning experience to future use.

6. Which aspects of therapy empowered and/or disempowered you?

The fact that I had to analyze myself, your constructive questioning. I was talking about myself which is not something we often do this aided me in realizing many things about myself and others.

7. Which aspects did you experience as useful or helpful?

Your constructive questioning and comments aided me in feeling self-confident. The 'alive' discussion atmosphere aided me in working build-ups out of my system and allowing room for growth.



8. Why and how did they help you?

Without discussing the problems and finding answers to questions I was restricted by the build up of self-doubt (there was something wrong with me) and I didn't look at the positives, enjoyment and growth I could experience.

9. Did you experience yourself as contributing to or owning the therapy?

Yes, especially with self reflection and I could discuss anything that was hindering me or an achievement that had made me feel good. Our therapy was dealing with me in past, present and future, which definitely helped in my growth.

10. What contribution did you make?

Facing up to my past and present. Things I knew had gone wrong or needed attention, also self-reflection and finding coping strategies in myself.



11. What enabled or supported you in making this contribution?

The atmosphere in which therapy took place was one of openness and positivity, your questions or comments were always positive and prompted a constructive, positive self-image.

12. How did the questions I asked impact on your experience of therapy and of self?

As in 11.

13. Are there any questions, conversations and metaphors that stand out for you?

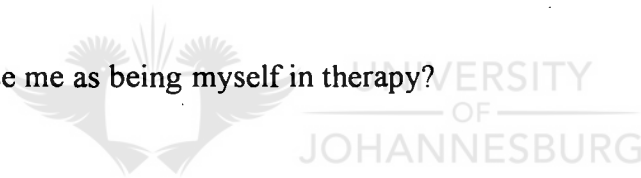
The building of a brick wall or base.

14. What effect of impact did they have?

Sometimes negative as I thought if I missed out in anything or didn't understand something I would not be able to continue building my base.

15. Did you experience me as being myself in therapy?

Yes



16. What effect did that have on you?

It relaxed me a lot. I enjoyed being able to share my special moments with you (Camelot) and I'm sure they enabled you to understand more about me.

17. What should I be aware of or sensitive to?

You are always sensitive when approaching a new topic and when you have acquired a better knowledge of it you then explore deeper, by then understanding how the topic should be dealt with. You allow me the space and time I needed in expressing myself to you. So as to promote a relaxed and open atmosphere.

18. Have our conversations initiated any change in the way you think about things/people/life?

Yes, in understanding and being more confident about myself I understand more about the people around me, I am open to discussions, opinions and new experiences.

19. How do you think about your self now?

I am confident in myself, I trust my decisions and reactions I feel better equipped to deal with diverse situations, I look at myself as a source from which many wonderful things can be drawn that others may enjoy as well as myself. I am happy and relaxed with who I am.

20. Is it in any way different from before?

Yes.

21. Did our conversations contribute to this understanding? How?

Yes, we worked through me the position and negative aspects of myself, your questioning and mine and self-reflection.

22. What are the implications of this current understanding for your future self?

I will be and am becoming a happier person who allows input from those around her, I will enjoy the new experiences I am more open to and have removed the prickles from myself, which inhibited growth and social relationships. I will be more comfortable, relaxed and confident in everything I do.



**APPENDIX D**  
**SELECTION OF QUESTIONS POSED TO ABI**

- ◆ What future does this version of self hold for you?
- ◆ How did you go about re-visioning your preferred version of self?
- ◆ Was standing up for your self equivalent to standing against others?
- ◆ Did you turn this understanding around? How?
- ◆ Did being open to and listening to other person's ideas allow you to be open to your own ideas and preferences?
- ◆ Would you say that in listening to and discovering others you came to listen to and discover your preferred way of being?
- ◆ Did labels and labeling serve as barriers, preventing or hindering your access to others as well as to your self?
- ◆ Would you say that labeling is on the side of 'not-knowing' and that labeling prevented you from knowing fun and friendship?
- ◆ How has 'non-labeling' and acknowledging changed your relationship with your self? With others?
- ◆ What future does this preferred self hold for you?
- ◆ Would you say that becoming friends with Anthea was a unique outcome? I.e. an event which would not have been predicted by your (her)story of "I will never stoop to your level."
- ◆ Did "mutual understanding" allow you to create your own version of friendship? A version that was level-less?
- ◆ As you move towards your preferences for fun and friendship and away from alienation and analysis, what knowledges and practices of self do you take with you? What ways of knowing and being do you wish to retain in your preferred version of self? What ways of knowing and being do you wish to disregard and discard?
- ◆ Is alienation on the side of self-doubt and other-doubt? What side would togetherness be on?
- ◆ As self-doubt recedes into the background of your lived experience, what comes to the foreground? Is this preferred? Does this fit with your present version of self as well as your future vision for your self?

- ◆ Did self-doubt attempt to throw you out of your own story and rob you of your own voice?
- ◆ What were your original intentions? Did you intend to frame your experience in the story of exclusion and difference?
- ◆ From the present looking back, did you ever have a sense that you were authoring your own story? Or did it feel then that you were more of a character in other people's stories?
- ◆ What else can you do to grow and support your preferred story of self? What can we do in therapy? What can your mother, your father, and your brother do to support you in supporting your self?
- ◆ What practices (in your school, your family, your community) serve to strengthen the voice of self-doubt and weaken the voice of Abi?
- ◆ What practices have you and can you employ to keep your self as author of your own story?
- ◆ Would you say that the story of self that you are living now is the story of 'Both/and'? I.e. Abi who can be *both* social *and* academic, *both* individualistic *and* consensual relative to time and place? Was the story behind this story one of 'Either/or'? I.e. of *either* being academic *or* social? Which story is more liberating? Which story is preferred?
- ◆ What beliefs and assumptions did this childhood story encode? What enabled you to survive the story of Either/or?
- ◆ What external sources supported the old version of self? The Either/or story? As you envision and re-vision your story and self, what sources are you and can you draw on to support you?

**APPENDIX E**

**ABI'S WRITTEN RESPONSE TO THIS STUDY**



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I feel that your understanding and interpretation of my process of growth and self knowledge is very accurate.

Your research has pointed out, not only the desired goal, but ~~the~~ more importantly the process by which to arrive there - To enjoy and learn in the time spent in working towards that goal is as important as achieving it.

Participating in this research process has been on a incredible journey into myself.

The journey's outcome has been wonderfully uplifting and empowering.

It has provided me with a confirmed conclusion, that I am a unique and special individual.