

## **VI - Letter of discoveries through drawings**

### **More ways of looking at food stories**

Dear reader

Celebration feasts mostly represent the giving and receiving of more than one gift. Discovering the content of more than one gift is a journey in itself. The aim of this letter is to present further discoveries of the data analysis which include the self-expressions of four participants through drawing a self-portrait and co-constructed drawings of reflections upon four conversations with each participant in conjunction with the researcher-therapist.

Some of the discoveries through drawings presented are the researcher's account and some are the researcher-therapist and the participants' co-constructed accounts of their experiences of themselves in relationship with food in excess.

### **Series of drawings and discoveries**

Rather than being employed for objective diagnostic and interpretive purposes, both expressive arts therapy (Weller, 1993) and narrative therapy invite clients to make meaning of their own expressions. The therapist takes a stance of curiosity and facilitates the expansion of preferred meanings for the client, rather than offering an expert opinion on her artistic productions. The performance of a new meaning or story that includes other realms of expression solidifies the new experience (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997). Furthermore, Freeman et al. (1997) reason that one does not have to be an artist or be specifically trained to use the expressive arts in combination with narrative therapy. There are straightforward ways to broaden expression.

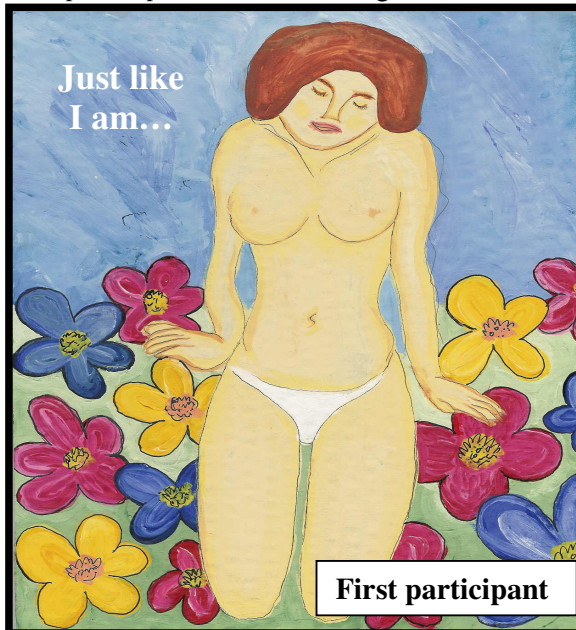
As stated above, the series of drawings used as projective means in communicating data in this study are presented as drawings and described as discussion of discoveries, as follows:

- self-expressions of four participants through drawing a self-portrait;
- co-constructed drawings of reflections upon four conversations with each participant in conjunction with the researcher-therapist.

### Drawings as discoveries: self-expressions of four participants through drawing a self-portrait

The first, third, fourth and fifth participant partook in drawing self-portraits. The second participant did not partake in drawing a self-portrait, but rather decided to write a story presented earlier in this study.

*First participant:* Her drawing is entitled: “Just like I am” which according to her depicts her



vulnerability as an adult survivor of sexual abuse in childhood. Being the most overweight (more than 70kg) of the participants, she finds it hard to be vulnerable before anyone. When telling the story surrounding her drawing, she talks about how often she has hidden herself away from others and that she finds it more comfortable to be with and by herself. This drawing represents her vulnerability during the therapeutic conversations as an adult and as a child, the difference being that the flowers surrounding her are very colourful, smell

wonderful and she feels at peace, as well as safe with another human being (therapist). Drawing herself in this way made her realise how beautiful she really is and after a discussion about this drawing she desired to experience her beauty more often in safe places.

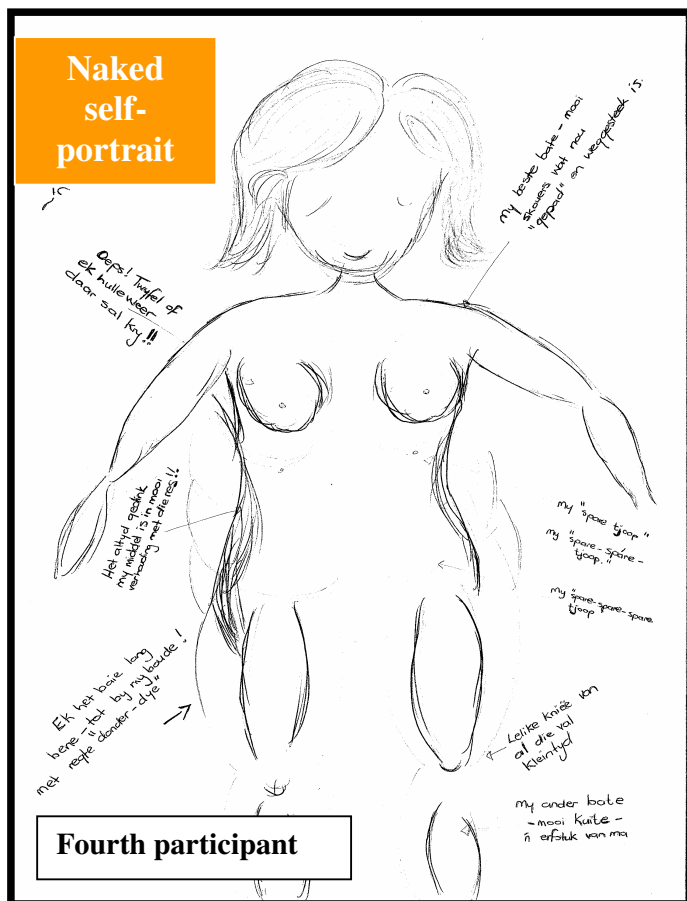
*Third participant:* Her drawing is entitled: “I like nice food and I invite everyone to come and



celebrate with me!” which according to her depicts her love for good and delicious food. It is interesting to note the circumstances in which she drew this drawing; it was at a nursery school where the children and the teachers made comments about her drawing. The children described her picture as a party or

feast. Some teachers said that it looked like the invitation to a romantic dinner. This discussion

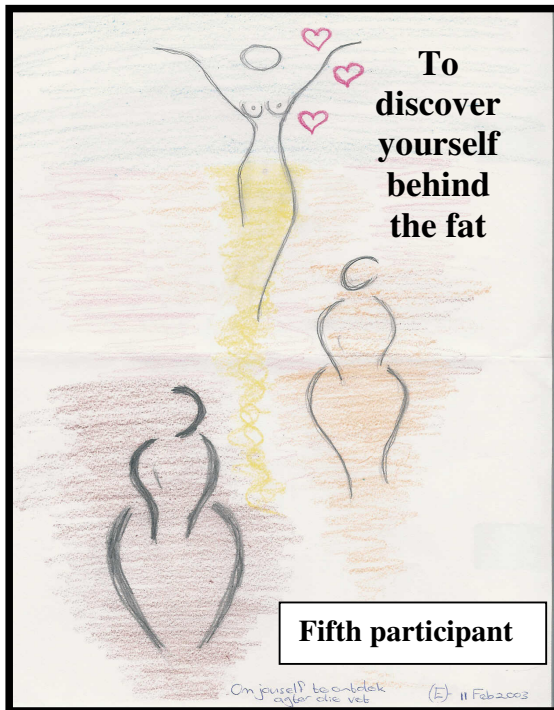
with children and teachers led her to believe that there are other overweight women that would really want to talk about their relationship with food in excess too. She also learnt that the thinner teachers could not understand why she would want to talk about her overweight experiences, because she just needs to control her eating habits and exercise plans. She came to the conclusion that she loves food and that she has the right to talk about her experiences and that there are other overweight women that feel the same way that she does, concluding that she is not alone in her struggle with overweight and that she is acceptable. Her self-portrait story specifically opened up more stories about socio-cultural and familial perceptions and the effect it had on her, such as “Other’s think that thin people have control over their lifestyle and eating habits, which make them more acceptable and successful in the workplace”, “Thin people think that overweight people must be ashamed of themselves and are not supposed to talk about their experiences with regards to their relationship with food in excess, because they are fat”, “I experience group pressure from other overweight women to be fat with them, so that we won’t be alone” and ; “I believe my mother-in-law when she says that we both need to lose weight before our husbands get other wives”.



*Fourth participant:* Her drawing is entitled: “Naked self-portrait” which according to her depicts her body-image at this point in time. When talking about her drawing she immediately described her physical strengths and weaknesses step by step. She wondered about the old expression that says “there is a thin woman inside of me, struggling to come out”, where she reasoned that she doesn’t struggle like this, because she is anyway inside of herself and she knows how to dress appropriately and feel good about herself regardless of her weight. She specifically stated that she did not want to draw eyes, because she struggles to draw eyes, but she did think about the

symbolic meaning of this and did not come up with a meaning. She decided to rather focus on drawing a mouth, because she wanted to draw a smile on her face. In talking about the reason why

she drew a mouth that smiles, she also explained that she has much more depth as a person than just being a happy and friendly person. According to her, her drawing is about a thin and a fat woman within the same space.



*Fifth participant:* Her drawing is entitled: “To discover yourself behind the fat” which according to her depicts her meaning making process regarding the loss of her mother in childhood and how her relationship with food in excess impacted on her becoming like her mother. She explained that she discovered that she could be a separate person from her mother if she discovers herself behind the fat. Thus she is more than just a person with a fat body. However, her drawing moves between a fat to a thin body-image in the process of her discovering herself behind the fat.

### **Discussion of discoveries: self-expressions of four participants through drawing a self-portrait**

As stated in literature, Wadison (1973), in discussing the techniques used in art therapy, offered two interesting ideas on its benefits. One is the idea that the art performed in therapy offers the client the ability to make a self-portrait. The second idea is that of permanence, therefore, the work that they do in therapy serves as a visual reminder to them. From the descriptions of the discussion involving each participant’s self-portrait, it is clear that a fuller and richer description in combination with the previous discourse and alternative story discoveries in this study emerged. Here the importance of data triangulation comes into play. As stated, triangulation allows illumination from multiple standpoints, reflecting a commitment to thoroughness, flexibility and differences of experience (Tindall, 1994). **Themes** that emerged from these drawings are listed as follows:

- Theme 1: In relationship to a traumatic experience with specific reference to sexual abuse
- Theme 2: In relationship to vulnerability on a bodily experience level
- Theme 3: In relationship to fear, rejection and loneliness

- Theme 4: In relationship to avoidance of experiencing her physical body, sensuality or beauty
- Theme 5: In relationship to experiencing love and nurturance when overeating
- Theme 6: Being connected to and experiencing group pressure to belong to a fat peoples' group
- Theme 7: Socio-cultural voices specifically from thin people toward fat people as being unsuccessful
- Theme 8: Contrasting relationship between sexual overtones found in the drawing itself of being naked and their bodily experience specifically with reference to body disparagement

These thematic discoveries through drawings could be linked to the previous integrated discourse discoveries from axial and selective coding, whereas theme 3 (in relationship to fear, rejection and loneliness) and theme 5 (in relationship to experiencing love and nurturance when overeating) overlaps and confirms previous themes. In theme 5 the participant's relationship to experiencing love and nurturance when overeating are linked to a celebration feast where everyone is invited, which implies the overeating of food happens during a social gathering with friends and family. In the Afrikaans cultural context this could be an indication of her hospitality and social overeating that take place. A fuller and richer description, complimenting previous data, could be found in theme 1 where the participant's relationship to traumatic experience is with specific reference to sexual abuse. This participant's drawing is physically revealing as well as depicting a sense of hopelessness and vulnerability in the stature of the self portrait.

A combination of similar themes (2, 4 and 8) emerged. These themes from the data through drawings are depicted in terms of the participants' bodily experience of themselves. In theme 2 the focus is on her relationship to vulnerability on a bodily experience level, with specific reference to sexual abuse in childhood where physical boundaries were overstepped by significant others in their adulthood. In theme 4 the construct of avoidance was specifically set within the context of participants' experiencing loss of a loved one or sexual abuse. Theme 8 emerged from the drawings itself, whereas the contrasting relationship between sexual overtones found in the drawing itself of being naked and their bodily experience specifically with reference to body disparagement found in the movement between fat and thin pictures of themselves. For example, participant experiencing while drawing her self-portrait a thin and fat person within the same space or excluding the eyes from her face in not wanting to see or deal with her body perception. In theme 6 specific references is made to participants being connected to and experiencing group pressure to belong to a fat peoples' group. According to Baron and Byrne (1997) groups often exert powerful



effects upon their members. Baron and Byrne (1997) construct belonging to a group or being a member of a group as being interdependent in some manner – what happens to one must affect what happens to others. In the narrative context these participants experience a sense of belongingness by being part of this study and having an opportunity to share their experiences of their relationships with food in excess with others. The danger in this is that the participants and researcher-participant could become too involved in their own ideas or meanings of their experiences that members of the fat group start assuming that the group can't be wrong, that all members must support the decision strongly, and that any information contrary to it should be rejected (Janis, 1982). In this theme there are many research possibilities in the social psychological field.

In theme 7, socio-cultural voices specifically from thin people toward fat people being unsuccessful, the participants experience thin people as discriminating against them. As stated, literature conveys that stigma produces prejudice and discrimination (Drury & Louis, 2002). There is a possible link between theme 6 and 7 where discrimination from thin people towards fat people could force fat people to stay in the fat group where they find acceptance but also to experience group anger towards society or thin people. This fat group anger could become a destructive power in families and society in perpetuating overeating behaviour as a rebellious act against others not experiencing obesity.

In conclusion, the self-portraits that the women drew opened some previously closed avenues to explore for researcher-therapist and each participant. As participants draw who they think they are, the therapist will get a good sense of the story of their identity. Within a narrative therapeutic context these self-portraits serve as a helpful tool to look back on (reflexive stance), as the client's relationship with the problem changes. Through their drawings, they were able to tell their story about their new identity and the changes they had made. This also served as a way for them to rehearse their new story and to tie their progress to the past, present and future story.

**Drawings as discoveries: co-constructed drawings of reflections upon four conversations with each participant in conjunction with the researcher-therapist**

Closure and reflection upon the narrative therapeutic process with individual participants were the primary focus of the co-constructed drawings. These co-constructed drawings add value to narrative therapy in practise with the aim of the termination of a narrative therapeutic process with a specific participant or client. Although these drawings don't directly add to the previous

description of discourses and alternative stories discoveries with regard to women's relationship with food in excess, the data from text and drawings depict that the narrative therapeutic process added value to each participant's life, for example: it was a means to freedom and growth; a walked through process; a learning experience; and a lesson in life.

This drawing activity has been developed for this study by making use of ideas with regards to the construct of "hope" in an article by Kathy Weingarten (2000). In this study the adapted instructions were as follows:

- Researcher-therapist and each participant dyad draw together in silence on a single sheet.
- Each one gets a turn to use a single colour and draw something about the topic.
- The topic being reflection upon four conversations and the meaning it had for each one in the dyad.
- Drawings may be separate entities or be responsive and add to previous drawings.
- Draw for about 15 minutes until all have had an equal number of opportunities.
- An individual gets an opportunity to explain what she drew and shares how it was experienced and voice the ideas evoked through drawing.
- The other member of the dyad then reflects upon the sharer's experience and the effect it had on this member.
- Each member of the dyad gets the opportunity to share and reflect.

As stated, a researcher's reflections of self in the research process needs to be explicitly linked to political practice and researcher reflexivity should address the interactional, relational and power dynamics of the research at hand, rather than focusing on a confession of emotional or discursive positioning of the individual researcher (MacLeod, 2002). It is important to note that the researcher-therapists' reflections are not mentioned in the following discoveries, notwithstanding the meaningful contributions the researcher-therapist made during this drawing and discussion process and that I was part of the process and not just an objective observer. From literature, the social constructionist perspective shifts from the therapist as primary mover to therapist as participant (Mills & Sprenkle, 1995). Furthermore, social construction theory posits an evolving set of meanings that emerge unendingly from the interactions between people. These meanings are part of a general flow of constantly changing narratives (Hoffman, 1990).

Due to a large volume of text on this matter the decision was made to include the participants' part of the reflections in this co-constructed drawing, because their focus is more on their relationship experiences with food in excess, whereas the researcher-therapist's focus and learning experiences

was more on being a therapist in relationship with each participant. Possibly by not including the therapists' reflections on the process could be valuable information lost to the process of reflection, deconstructing questioning and other therapeutic techniques in narrative conversations through art expressions. Furthermore, if this information were included more research possibilities in theory and practice in a narrative setting could be discovered. In the light of excluding the researcher-therapists' reflections the following reflections of the participants are described.

*First participant's description:* This co-constructed drawing is entitled: "Freedom". I was in a hole



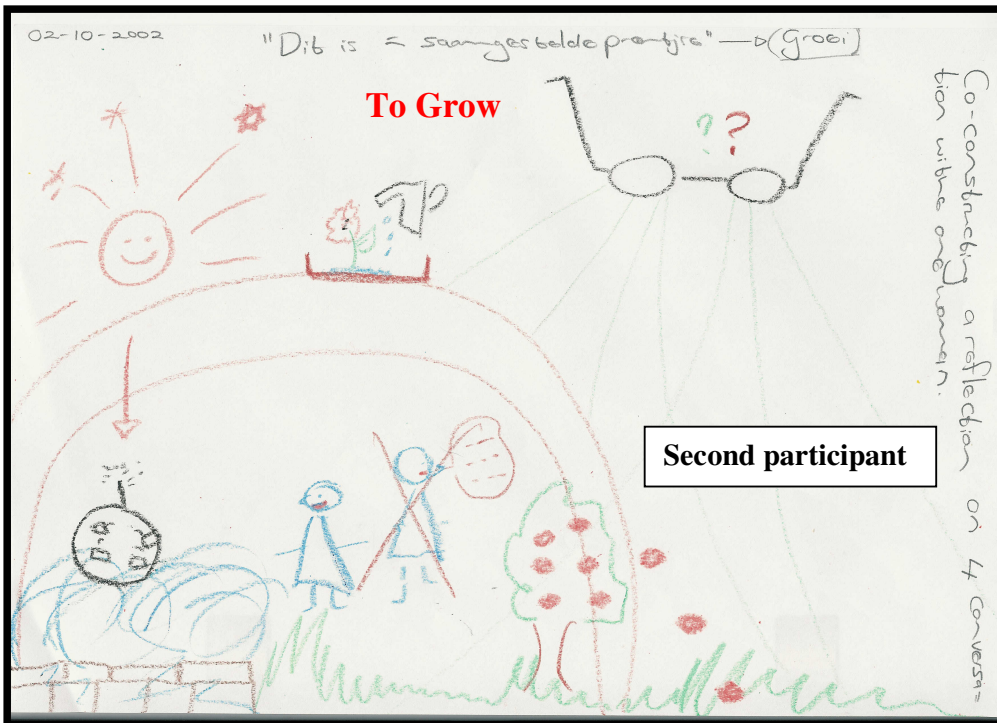
in my personal life, now I am out of this hole. I think I have found myself again. We are going on holiday to the coast and I feel that our family is being put first above

friends and my broader family. The meaning I have for your drawing of the shark is that a person always has some fears that bother you. I assume that this is a treasure chest that you drew? A treasure chest for me is my family and my children and here you ask me where the tornado is? Hopefully it is dead. I don't like the tornado! I don't want to have to do anything with it. Here you ask me where I am heading in life. This is all my fears and the rest is the time I spend with my family and my husband and children. I must say that my husband spends much more time with me and the children and we are both aware of how important family time is. Time will tell how we come together and spend time together as family, because it is still a problem, but we are aware of this. This is my parents who are always part of my family's life, but we try to make one another happy. I still feel that I don't always do what and how they want me to do things, but they were there for me always when I needed them. I strive for hope, happiness and I hope everything that is beautiful for all of us. The footprints represent our path to happiness. I feel that this process has clarified a lot for me. One thing that I want to highlight is that I don't hide away anymore from



others and from myself, I don't try to please others so much anymore. I will tell others what I want and why I want it. This drawing means freedom to me, because every person has their struggles in life and we as people need to make an effort to move towards freedom. I have a choice to walk the right way, but there are many roads and I don't always know what is going to happen, but this is what I strive for. At this moment in time I eat healthy and don't overeat. I can't remember when last I had a binging spree. I think it is because I am more mature now and take responsibility for my actions. These conversations were painful, but I am glad that we did talk.

*Second participant and researcher-therapist:* This co-constructed drawing is entitled: "To grow".

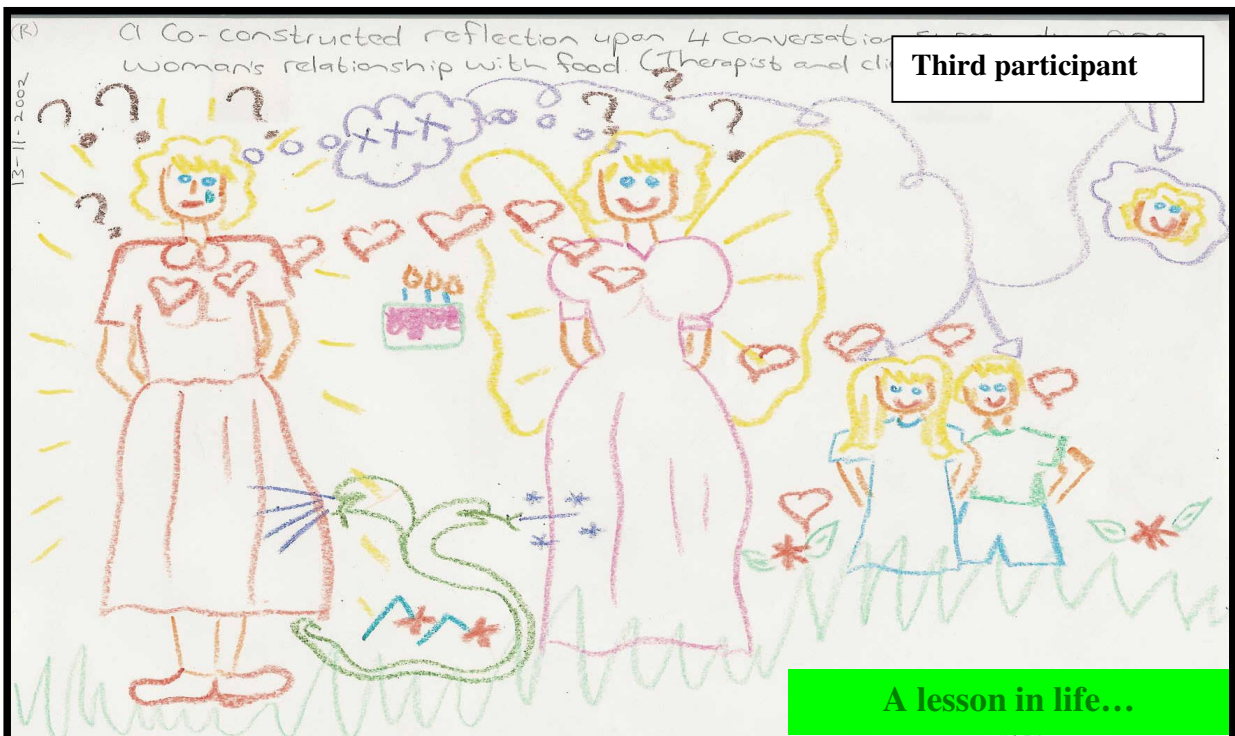


It was like a process of expressing myself so that I could grow. It felt like I was a time bomb in the beginning as if I needed to express myself and that through talking about

my experiences and feelings, the time bomb could explode (this is why I drew some stars) in a controlled and safe environment. So where it actually could have been destructive, it was like a breaking open of my experiences. There was growth in that flower with the water and with the grass that was growing there was also some growth. With this drawing I have decided that I am not going to allow other people to dictate to me, because I am on my own. What other people think does not matter anymore. This is a drawing depicting rest and growth. I wondered about the spectacles that you drew and I added some question marks, because why must I feel as if I am being watched. And your drawing of the fruit was precisely what I wanted to do next. I felt as if you understood. What did your drawing of the wall mean? O, yes, the explosion that the time-bomb had been a joyous event. I also think that the spectacles that you drew meant the perception that people are watching me, what am I going to do next, what am I going to eat next, she says that she

is going to lose weight and is she going to do this? The big brother effect; that everybody is watching you. I wanted to draw a cross through your spectacles, but I am careful not to hurt others purposefully. You know the media are going to stay, the perception of other people is going to stay, but it does not have to influence me so much anymore. The dome you drew helped me to put everything together. Another thing that I am thinking of the time bomb now is what would it be like if we take away the fuse? I think that I am bigger than this, that I can do it, without all these issues having an influence. I also think that there is a possibility to break down the wall you drew through talking about it. I think that this blue part you drew could mean water and portray growth. After drawing this picture I realize that I have grown as a person and how easy it is for me to forget what happened to me and I think that this picture just confirmed to me the important work we have done in my life.

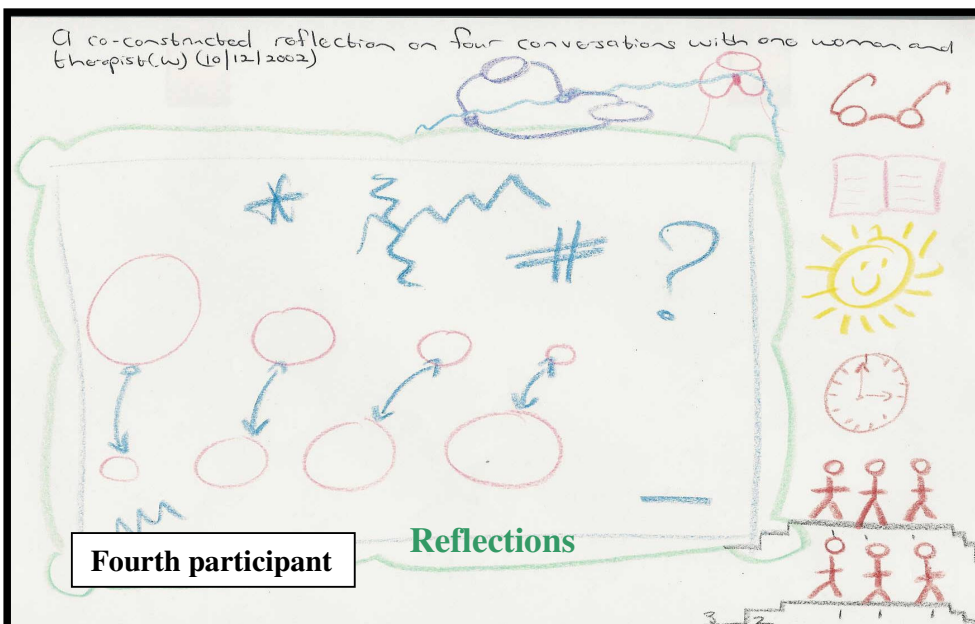
*Third participant and researcher-therapist:* This co-constructed drawing is entitled: “A lesson in



life”. I drew the first picture, where I felt very sad. Before we started with this whole story, I was very sad and unhappy. I did not see anything other than being fat, ugly and sad. And as we started this journey I realised so much more about who I am and I realised that I am more than being fat. I am a person that is pretty and I mean a lot to others and I live for my children and for my family. I must love myself. I moved from the one to the other and that food sometimes made me very sad and unhappy, but that I actually accepted myself later on. So even if the food is there and I eat it, I will still love myself. This is where I say that I am not such an ugly person. And the snakes I

would explain as that when I was so sad it felt like the whole world was spitting on me. And since I have accepted myself, there was still some critique against me, but it is like I have made peace with who I am. The first picture is like the dark side of this old life and the second picture is where I am happier and I have found out who I am. I interpreted your drawing of the snakes as the world's perception of me as a fat person. And with your drawing of the hearts I interpreted it as if you were saying that I am still the same person and I need to love myself and not just the new me, because the old self is still there. And the cloud over there makes me think that it is the same thoughts of both my selves. Therefore there will be times that I am still feeling sad and other times I will feel better about myself. With your drawing of the question marks I interpreted it as if you were asking me to see things from different angles. Everything boils down to the fact that I feel much happier. O, yes, this over here is two flowers that are dying. This is how I felt over there and here I feel so much prettier. I think that these beams wanted to show that it stood out that I was a sad person. Concerning the snakes, I would say, that the stripes could mean that the world wants to say you are bad because you are overweight and at the other snake there are still people that will say to you what they want and how they want. But now I have accepted myself, even though they are saying negative things. It is not poisonous anymore. In the first picture where I was sad it was like how I and the whole world saw me. In the second picture I see myself as a prettier person on an internal and external level, even though I am fat. I really feel like a better person and the wings symbolise that this is a journey that I have started with my Lord, not that I am angel, but I have grown in His word.

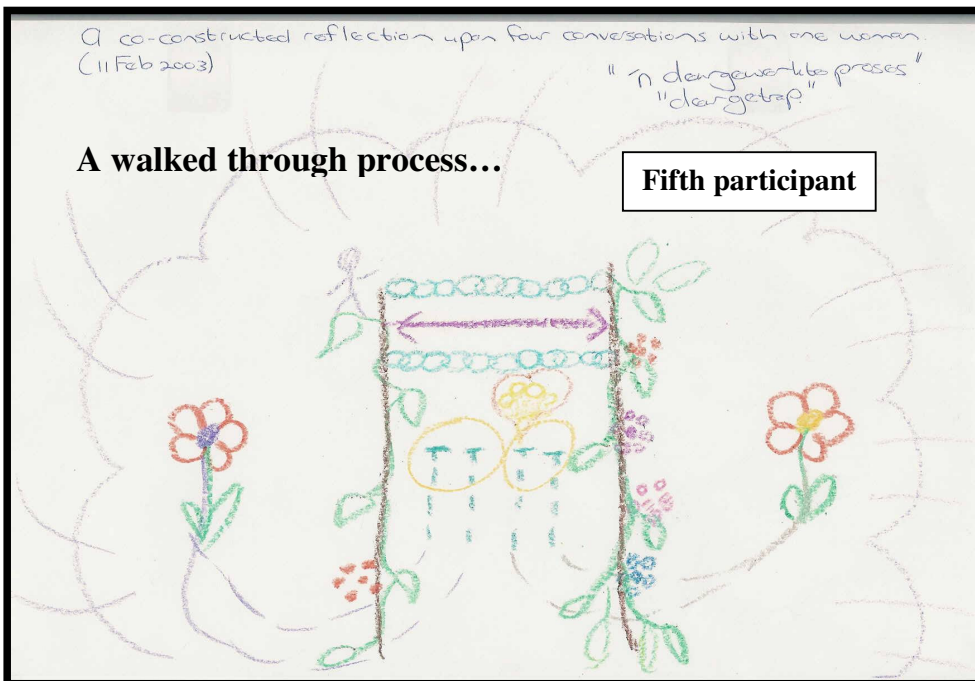
*Fourth participant and researcher-therapist:* This co-constructed drawing is entitled:



"Reflections". I think that the first drawing of the circles that I made meant that there was a process happening of things decreasing in my life like things that I have to give up; things

that I see differently. And on the other hand the circles that mean that I have grown. I have started to take things for myself and make them my own; things that I now take full responsibility for. It is like an equal becoming less and becoming more process in my life. And then I drew that it happened in this year within a certain context, where there were lightning, questions and difficulties that weren't always easy for me. What I am the most proud of is that I have decided at the end of this year to take action. This can mean that I am in relationship with the Lord, because I know that if He is not going to give me strength to do it, I cannot do it. I have made a commitment to myself to lose weight step by step. Here I pray alongside the water, because it is calm and peaceful. This part I interpreted as that each person does live their life in a certain way and this is ok. Everyone is a winner with his way of losing weight. In this frame I think everything comes together as a bigger picture, this is with the more and less things process. This is related to each other. I think it is this process that kept me from saying that there is a thin person that wants to climb out of a fat person. You see it is like this, if it isn't about health then I still do like my fat body. My body is not always equally pretty, but do you know some of my features are ok for me. It would be wonderful to have beautiful shoulders again, but I never had pretty knees. It won't become pretty all of a sudden, when I become thin again. I accept my body at this weight and accept myself for who I am.

*Fifth participant and researcher-therapist:* This co-constructed drawing is entitled: "A walked



through process". This was very difficult for me to do. I started by drawing those two lines. I actually wanted to draw a prettier picture of myself over there, but this is how it was for me. It is what we talked

about, how my life was is that I stood there at a distance away from others and at the one side of a deep hole. There was just a deep hole, something that was gone, something that I needed and how I tried to use chains to get to the other side and how I could not bring the links together to come to the



other side. In this time that it took me and it took me a long time and how I could finally take the links and put together the chain to get to the other side. This is why I drew flowers on this side. There were first flowers on this side, there wasn't flowers for me on the other side. Initially I wanted to draw leaves on the other side, on the side with the flowers and then you drew it and the timeframe it took me to get to the other side. This was a good experience; it helped me to grow, because if there was nothing inside of me I don't believe that I would have made it to the other side. When you drew the two faces with the tears I experienced it that you understood me. This is what it was all about, because for me to put the links into the chain was for me like working through the death of my mother and father. To work through it to finally find myself as individual. This took time and here I tried to draw corn seeds that are tied together and these circles within the corn seeds symbolises my family, because we are four in the family. The heart stands for my families support through my losses. And then off course the food, but I have not drawn anything about food, because I don't want to. I don't want to see food as an emotional aid anymore. This was a worked through process. This made me see my life from a different perspective. I tried the whole time to work through these losses, but I failed and now I feel so much better about myself and more empowered.

**Discussion of discoveries: co-constructed drawings of reflections upon four conversations with each participant in conjunction with the researcher-therapist**

The aim of this drawing activity was to co-construct the meanings in reflection of the therapeutic process as a whole, thus the principle of co-construction in understanding the therapeutic relationship (Carlson, 1997). Freeman et al. (1997) argues that the very process of drawing evokes a visceral sense of the problem as located for reflection outside of the self. The act of expression in this sense is often reported as beneficial in itself. From literature, the historical reflection on ourselves is answered in the question; what are we today (Foucault, 1988). Narrative therapy then calls to service that which is useful at a certain point in time. As stated, reflection and experimentation mean considering outcome and the ends to which therapy might be put (Amundson, 2001). From literature, narrative therapy emphasises unique outcomes as a way to help families realise times when they were able to decline the invitation to cooperate with the problem (White, 1993; White & Epston, 1990). Within the narrative therapeutic framework of this study the focus of these co-constructed drawings was to help participants realize times when they were able to decline the invitation to cooperate with the problem.



From the participants' explanations of their experiences of drawing together with the therapist it was clear that the drawing in itself and the discussion thereafter brought closure for them in their time spent during the narrative conversations and the meanings they could make out of their food experiences told. Giving a name to the co-constructed drawing and discussion of the experience at the end of this conversation brought a sense of courage and hope for them as individuals to live out their preferred stories in the future.

### **Concluding reflections upon the series of drawings and discoveries**

Possible implications for narrative conversations in this thesis-context arise when we consider the complexities of perceiving and making sense of these participants' food-story experiences. Freeman et al. (1997) explain that the map of verbal description does not fully represent the territory of lived experience, including the richness of visual symbolic processes, feelings, emotions and sensations. Expressive arts therapies directly engage auditory, visual and kinaesthetic senses, as well as emotions. When we pay attention to non-verbal cues and facilitate expression through a variety of arts that evoke different senses, new dimensions of experience arise that are aesthetically rewarding as well as effective in these narrative conversations (Freeman et al., 1997).

The main discovery in using expressive arts is that various new and creative narrative ways of exploring participant's relationship with food in excess emerged. Self-portraits gave a fuller description of an individual's identity at a certain point in time during and after therapy. Co-constructed drawings at the end of the therapeutic process served as reflection upon the process by all parties involved and brought closure to the research process with each individual. These various expressive drawings could be used as examples of narrative documents in future research and as a validation tool for participant's decisions in living preferred narratives as discoveries in this thesis and in their future life.

In reflected conclusion, these drawings added value in reaching a fuller description of the meanings these participants made of their experiences with their relationship with food in excess and to the description and discussion of the discoveries in the light of this thesis as a whole.

With added value

Co-author and researcher